
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Sighing



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Dan

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English – the programme where we bring you an interesting topic and six items of vocabulary. I'm Dan. And today we're talking about...

Catherine

Sighing. I'm Catherine.

Dan

Now – was that a real sigh – or just one to demonstrate the meaning?

Catherine

That one was just for educational purposes, of course, Dan.

Dan

We'll be looking at why we sigh, and learn how sighing keeps us alive!

Catherine

Yes, very interesting. And it's not just humans that sigh, is it, Dan?

Dan

Indeed, most mammals sigh. And that brings me to today's question. How many times does a mouse sigh in an hour, on average? Is it?

- a) Twice
- b) 10 times
- c) 40 times

Catherine

I'm going to say the poor little thing will sigh about 40 times an hour

Dan

OK. Let's find out if you're right later on in the programme. Now, what is a sigh, exactly?

Catherine

Let's hear from Dr Lynne Barker, a cognitive neuroscientist from Sheffield Hallam University in the UK.

INSERT

Dr Lynne Barker, Cognitive Neuroscientist, Sheffield Hallam University

It's a typically cardio-respiratory kind of **resetting** mechanism, and most mammals will engage in sighing of some kind. Because people who don't sigh would eventually die. It is a **survival mechanism**.

Catherine

So sighing keeps us alive.

Dan

Dr Barker called it a **survival mechanism**. To survive means to continue living, especially in difficult circumstances. A **mechanism**, here, means a system of behaviour.

Catherine

So, a **survival mechanism** is something the body does automatically in order to survive. But, Dan, why is sighing a **survival mechanism**?

Dan

It's because sighing can **reset** the lungs. To **reset** is to return something to its original settings. We often use this verb when talking about technology. You can **reset** a computer or a phone.

Catherine

OK, that's fine. But how does a sigh **reset** the lungs?

Dan

Well, scientists from UCLA, that's the University of California, Los Angeles, found that a sigh is a special kind of very deep breath that keeps the tiny sacs of air in our lungs, called alveoli, working properly.

Catherine

And without sighing, these alveoli would collapse and we would die. We need the alveoli to transfer oxygen from our lungs to our blood.

Dan

Thankfully, we don't have to think about this need to **reset** our lungs. Sighing is in fact a **reflex**.

Catherine

Boo!

Dan
Argh!

Catherine

There – you jumped! And that was a fabulous **reflex**, Dan! It's something our bodies do without thinking, something you do unconsciously or automatically.

Dan

...I meant ...argh....like a man. Thank you for that, Catherine.

Catherine

You're welcome.

Dan

Do you sigh a lot?

Catherine

Well, I sigh when I'm tired, and I sigh when I'm relieved. I **breathe a sigh of relief**.

Dan

To breathe a sigh of relief – that's a great expression. It means what you think it means – to sigh when you feel good that something bad has not happened – but it's often used metaphorically. It relates more to the feeling of relief than the act of sighing.

Catherine

That's right. Now, I **breathed a sigh of relief** when I found my mobile phone the other day. I thought I'd lost it. It was new. I was so pleased when I found it! What about you, Dan?

Dan

I tend to sigh to show **frustration**. And sometimes **resignation**.

Catherine

Now, **frustration** is what we feel when things aren't going well, when things are annoying us and they don't work. When things are **frustrating**.

Dan

And **resignation** is what we feel when we finally accept that something bad has happened, that we can't change. We feel **resigned** to something.

Catherine

So, relief, resignation, frustration, resetting our lungs. It sounds like we humans never stop sighing!

Dan

Well, actually, we humans sigh on average 12 times an hour. But what about... mice?

Catherine

Well, I said, I reckon they sigh about 40 times an hour.

Dan

Well, in fact, it is 40 times an hour. The hearts of mice beat faster – so they need to regulate their lungs more than humans.

Catherine

Let's review today's vocabulary.

Dan

We had the phrase **survival mechanism**. Something we do without thinking that keeps us alive.

Catherine

We often use this phrase, and the related phrase defence mechanism, when talking about what people do to cope with difficulties in life.

Dan

Next, we had **reset**. You can reset a computer, or a machine – to make it work again. This usually means switching it off and on again.

Catherine

And you can reset a password – this is a little bit different. It means to set – or choose - a new password.

Dan

We also had the word **reflex**. This is a physical action or reaction that you can't control. For example... Catherine?

Catherine

Yes?

Dan

There, you closed your eyes. Another **reflex**.

Catherine

And we had **to breathe a sigh of relief**. Which means to feel better after something bad doesn't happen. I breathed a sigh of relief when my friend recovered from her illness.

Dan

But we sigh for other reasons too. Two useful sighing words were: **frustration** and **resignation**.

Catherine

Frustration is the state of being **frustrated**. We can say something is **frustrating**. It's **frustrating** when my boss doesn't listen to me.

Dan

But let's say you move beyond feeling **frustrated** and start feeling **resigned**.

Catherine

Yeah, and that would be when I finally accept my boss will never listen to me. And that's when I'll **resign**!

Dan

To **resign** also means to voluntarily leave a job! Please, Catherine, tell me that's just another vocabulary example?

Catherine

Of course it is, Dan. I love my job! I only ever sigh, what, 12 times an hour?!

Dan

Which is perfectly average. And that's it for today's 6 Minute English. Please join us again soon.

Catherine

And we are on social media too. Make sure to find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

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Bye!