

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

15 November, 2012



Pain

Callum: Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English, I'm Callum and with me today is Jennifer. Hello Jennifer.

Jennifer: Hello Callum

Callum: Now Jennifer, would you like to help me with a little experiment?

Jennifer: Sure, what do you need me to do?

Callum: Just stay there, don't move.

(Sound of slap)

Jennifer: OW! Why did you do that?

Callum: Did it hurt?

Jennifer: Of course it did!

Callum: All in the name of science and learning English Jennifer because today we're talking about pain! And I wanted to find out if you have a high pain threshold.

Jennifer: Well you could have just asked – you didn't have to hit me!

Callum: Ah, yes, I suppose I could have. Sorry about that. Anyhow, moving on, here's today's question.

An anaesthetic is a drug or gas used to stop pain, particularly during medical procedures, but which language does the word come from?

Greek, Latin or Old Norse? What do you think Jennifer?

- Jennifer:** Well I think there are a lot of words from the Greek language when it comes to medicine and things like that so I'll say Greek.
- Callum:** OK, we'll find out if you're right at the end of the programme. Now Jennifer, do you think pain is a good thing.
- Jennifer:** Well, I'd rather not have it, but I suppose it does tell us that something is wrong.
- Callum:** Do you think it would be better not to be able to feel pain.
- Jennifer:** Well I think that would be great, particularly after the introduction to this programme!
- Callum:** Steve Pete from Washington State in the United States was born with a rare condition which means he has never been able to feel physical pain. He was interviewed on BBC radio about his condition. When was it first diagnosed?

Steve Pete

Well I was diagnosed with it at a young age. I was a toddler when I began chewing pretty much the whole front portion of my tongue off.

- Callum:** So Jennifer, when was it diagnosed?
- Jennifer:** Steve says that it was diagnosed when he was a toddler – which means when he was very young and just starting to walk, so he's maybe 12 months, 18 months old, something like that.
- Callum:** Children that age love to chew on things, don't they?
- Jennifer:** Yes, they do, and in Steve's case it was his own tongue that he chewed on!
- Callum:** Ouch! His parents then took him to a paediatrician, which is a children's doctor. Listen now to what this doctor did to test Steve.

Steve Pete

My parents took me to my paediatrician where he took a lighter, placed it underneath my foot, held it there for a moment until my skin began to blister and then he had a pretty good idea of what it was that my condition was.

- Callum:** So what did the doctor do?

Jennifer: He used a lighter to put fire under the toddler's foot until it started to burn.

Callum: And because the child didn't react in any way he was able to figure out that he had this rare medical condition which is called Congenital Analgesia.

Steve's brother shares this condition, so what kinds of problems did it cause them when they were growing up?

Steve Pete

We were always getting into trouble, we kind of pushed things to the extreme. We'd always end up with broken bones, we'd be visiting the hospitals frequently, wearing casts throughout most of our childhood. So it was quite difficult.

Callum: Jennifer, what was his childhood like?

Jennifer: He says it was difficult. They made regular visits to hospitals and spent a lot of time wearing casts – a cast is the thick plaster protection that is put on to broken arms and legs. They got lots of broken bones because they didn't feel pain.

Callum: So they didn't know when to stop doing something which could be damaging their body. Have you ever had to wear a cast?

Jennifer: Luckily I've had no broken bones so no, I've never worn a cast.

Callum: I've never had a cast either, but I did have a major operation this summer and there was a lot of pain after it. But because of the pain I wasn't able to move around very much, but that was good, because it meant it gave my body time to heal. If I hadn't had that pain, I would probably have caused even more damage.

Jennifer: I find it hard to imagine what it must be like to never feel physical pain.

Callum: I know, and in the same way Steve Pete finds it hard to imagine what it must be like to feel pain.

Steve Pete

I've never really tried to imagine what it would be like to feel physical pain. I do understand the emotional pain part though. But when it comes to empathy which is kind of interesting it is

hard for me to feel sorry for an individual who's going through a painful situation when it's regarding physical pain. I do have difficulty with that.

Callum: He talks about the difficulty he has with empathy. What's empathy Jennifer?

Jennifer: Empathy is the ability to understand someone else's feelings and appreciate what that they are experiencing. Because he can't feel physical pain, he doesn't really feel sorry for people in painful situations.

Callum: After hearing about the problems of this condition, do you think you'd still like not to feel pain?

Jennifer: Well I still don't like feeling pain but I think after hearing this I realise that it's very useful. What about you?

Callum: I agree with that. Sometimes I would like the pain to be less but I think on balance it's good to have it.

Well just about time to go but before we do the answer to today's question, which was about the language origin of the word anaesthetic.

Which language does the word come from? Greek, Latin or Old Norse? Jennifer, you said?

Jennifer: I thought it was Greek.

Callum: And you were absolutely right, well done, congratulations with that.

That's all from us today. Thanks very much Jennifer.

Jennifer: Thanks.

Callum: And I should say in case anyone was worried, no presenters were harmed during the making of this programme. Goodbye.

Jennifer: Goodbye.

Vocabulary and definitions

to have a high pain threshold	to be able to tolerate a high level of pain
an anaesthetic	a drug or gas used to stop pain, particularly during medical procedures
a toddler	a small child who is just learning to walk
a paediatrician	a doctor who specialises in treating children
a lighter	a small device used to produce fire for lighting cigarettes, for example
a cast	a hard, thick covering placed on a limb with a broken bone to protect it while it heals
empathy	the ability to understand other people's feelings because you can imagine what it is like to be in their situation

More on this story:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-20186492>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-20239836>

Read and listen to the story online:

http://www.bbclearningenglish.com/general/sixminute/2012/11/121115_6min_pain.shtml