
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Animal phobias



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Neil...

Sophie

And I'm Sophie. Neil, what are you afraid of?

Neil

I'm not keen on anything with wings, but I particularly hate moths. They're disgusting, with their fat hairy bodies and... fluttery wings!

Sophie

Oh, Neil. Moths are completely harmless. They aren't something to be scared of.

Neil

Yes, they are... They get in my face... and my hair. It makes my flesh creep just thinking about them.

Sophie

If something **makes your flesh creep** it makes you feel very frightened. Well, I hope you're going to survive the show today, Neil, because it's all about animal phobias – and a **phobia** is a strong and **irrational** fear. That's a fear not based on reason.

Neil

OK – I'll try. Do you have any animal phobias, Sophie?

Sophie

I can't stand dogs.

Neil

Man's best friend? How can you not like dogs – they're cute and loveable. They protect you. They can do tricks!

Sophie

Look, for you it's moths – and that's pretty ridiculous, by the way – and for me it's dogs. And that isn't ridiculous. Dogs can be aggressive – they have sharp teeth, they bear their teeth and bark.

Neil

What, like this? [sound of dog growling and barking]

Sophie

Yes – and please turn that off, it's upsetting me. It's time for today's quiz question. Can you tell me, Neil, what's the word that describes an irrational fear of insects? Is it...

a) entomophobia?

b) thanatophobia?

Or c) pogonophobia?

Neil

I'll say thanatophobia.

Sophie

Well, we'll find out if you got the answer right later on in the show. But now let's listen to Dr Dean Burnett, neuroscientist at Cardiff University in the UK, talking about what causes phobic reactions in us.

INSERT**Dr Dean Burnett, neuroscientist at Cardiff University, UK**

The sensory information is just relayed directly into your brain. One part of it is routed into the cortex, where it's sort of thought about: 'that's that thing, I know that from last time I experienced this', and you can kind of rationalise your way through it. But it also sends a message directly to the amygdala, which immediately triggers the 'fight or flight' response – bang, fire alarm, off it goes, flood the body just in case. It's a survival mechanism.

Neil

Dr Dean Burnett there. So, the sensory information for me is a moth fluttering around, getting in my hair.

Sophie

That's right – Or for me, it's a dog getting anywhere near me! Anyway, this information goes into our brains and is processed in two different parts of the brain – the central cortex and the amygdala.

Neil

And the information sent to the central cortex triggers a rational response, like, oh it's only a harmless moth – and the stuff that goes to the amygdala triggers an instinctive reaction – the fight or flight response – like, aaarrggghhh! It's a disgusting moth! Get away from me!

Sophie

The **fight or flight response** is a normal response to stress or danger, and it involves the hormone adrenaline being pumped quickly round the body. The problem is this response can get triggered when there isn't any danger. And this is at the heart of what a phobia is.

Neil

So, that's the moth flying in my face while I'm reading in bed, and I feel my heart beating so fast I think I'm going to pass out and I nearly die from anxiety.

Sophie

Poor Neil! **Pass out** means to faint or lose consciousness, by the way. Well, we're going to hear from Stephen and Reena now, two self-confessed arachnophobes. They have strong emotional reactions just like you, Neil. Can you identify which animal they fear?

INSERT

Stephen and Reena, arachnophobes

'So when I see a spider, I feel like I've been punched in the chest.'

'Complete fear – it's absolutely paralysing. They've never been OK with me. I've always hated them.'

'I've spent a lot of time driving around in the car afraid to go home while my husband worked in London.'

'All rationality goes out the window, and it's... my emotions completely take over.'

'I just.... I just run.'

Sophie

So **arachnophobes** have a strong fear of spiders. And it's the most common animal phobia apparently.

Neil

You could understand that if you were living in Australia – where a bite from a spider might kill you. But the little spiders you get here in the UK don't seem threatening at all.

Sophie

Yes, but recent research has shown that we have a **reflexive awareness** of spiders – whether we fear them or not – which means we can spot them automatically without thinking about it. And we don't have the same reflexive awareness of houseflies – or moths – for example.

Neil

I expect this awareness is to do with our ancestors. It would've been extremely useful to spot a spider as an early human on the plains of the African Savannah. A bite might kill you – or make you vulnerable to attack from other animals.

Sophie

You're right, Neil! But do you think you were right about today's quiz question? I asked: What's the word that describes an irrational fear of insects? Is it... a) entomophobia, b) thanatophobia or c) pogonophobia?

Neil

I said thanatophobia!

Sophie

That's the wrong answer. It's actually a) entomophobia. Entomophobia (also known as insectophobia) is a specific phobia characterized by an excessive or unrealistic fear of one or more classes of insect. Thanatophobia is the fear of death and pogonophobia is the fear of beards or bearded people.

Neil

Well, moths are kind of hairy... Let's remind ourselves of some of the words we heard today:

make your flesh creep

phobia

irrational

fight or flight response

pass out

arachnophobes

reflexive awareness

Sophie

And that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Don't forget to join us again soon!

Both

Bye!

Vocabulary

make your flesh creep

make you feel very frightened

phobia

a strong and irrational fear

irrational

not based on reason

fight or flight response

the body's response to stress or danger which involves the hormone adrenalin being pumped quickly round the body

pass out

faint, lose consciousness

arachnophobes

a strong fear of spiders

reflexive awareness

being automatically aware of something, without thinking about it