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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute English

### Yawning



This is not a word-for-word transcript

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**Georgina**

Hello. This is 6 Minute English, I'm Georgina.

**Rob**

And I'm Rob.

**Georgina**

What do you do when you're tired, Rob?

**Rob**

Mm, I go to bed.

**Georgina**

Before that?

**Rob**

Erm, I clean my teeth?

**Georgina**

But what does your body do to tell you you're tired?

**Rob**

Right, well these days I just kind of fall asleep in front of the TV.

**Georgina**

Yes, but, OK – what am I doing now?

**Rob**

Oh yes, hang on – yes, you've set me off - **yawning**, yes **yawning** is a sign that we are tired! Or bored!

**Georgina**

Are you tired or bored now?

**Rob**

No, not particularly.

**Georgina**

So, why did you just **yawn**?

**Rob**

Well, because *you* did! That's the thing about yawns. They are **contagious** – they can spread from one person to another.

**Georgina**

And that's what we're looking at in this programme. But first, today's question. What biological function does **yawning** have? Essentially, why do we **yawn**? Is it:

A: To take in more oxygen

B: To get rid of carbon dioxide from our body

C: No one really knows

What do you think, Rob?

**Rob**

Ah – I know this. We **yawn** to take in more oxygen. I'm pretty sure that's it.

**Georgina**

OK. We'll see if you're correct at the end of the programme. John Drury is a researcher from Sussex University. On the BBC Radio 4 series All in The Mind he spoke about **yawning** and why it is **contagious**. Which animal does he mention will also catch a **yawn** from its owner?

**John Drury**

**Yawning** is actually a difficult case when it comes to these **contagious behaviours**. It is the most contagious behaviour – it's meant to be automatic, it's something that you can't stop. Dogs **yawn** when their owners **yawn**, animals **yawn** to each other. It happens whether you want to or not. These kind of effects have been found for other kinds of behaviour, so really, we were trying to push it as far as we could and see if there is a **cognitive** element to this influence behaviour.

**Georgina**

Which animal might **yawn** when its owner does?

**Rob**

Dogs! Dogs can catch a **yawn** from their owners.

**Georgina**

Yes, **yawning** is a very **contagious behaviour**. The use of the word **behaviour** here is interesting. Normally it is an uncountable noun to describe the way we act – either in a good or a bad way. We talk about, for example, dogs' or children's behaviour being good or bad.

**Rob**

But it's also used as an uncountable noun when we are talking about a particular action that, for example, an animal makes in particular situations. These **behaviours** are often not conscious, but are an automatic response to a situation.

**Georgina**

And the researchers were looking to see if there was a **cognitive** side to the behaviour. Which means they are looking at the mental process – what is happening in the mind to make us **yawn**, particularly when someone else **yawns**. Let's listen again

**John Drury**

Yawning is actually a difficult case when it comes to these **contagious behaviours**. It is the most **contagious behaviour** – it's meant to be automatic, it's something that you can't stop. Dogs yawn when their owners yawn, animals yawn to each other. It happens whether you want to or not. These kinds of effects have been found for other kinds of behaviour, so really, we were trying to push it as far as we could and see if there is a **cognitive** element to this influence behaviour.

**Georgina**

The research discovered that **contagious yawning** is connected with our social group and how close we feel to the people in it. Here's John Drury again.

**John Drury**

So, the more that you **identify** with the in-group target, the more likely you are to copy their behaviour. What we do when we see a **behaviour** is that at some level, we are making a judgement about whether the person **exhibiting** that behaviour, whether it's an emotion, or a scratching behaviour, or anything, is relevant. Does their behaviour **indicate** to us how we should behave?

### **Georgina**

So, essentially, yawning is more **contagious** if we **identify** with the person who yawns first. If we feel close to, and belong in, the same group as the person who **exhibits** the **behaviour** – the person who does the **yawning** – we are likely to **yawn** too.

### **Rob**

So, you are less likely to yawn if a stranger yawns than if someone in your close family or circle of friends yawns.

### **Georgina**

Let's listen **again**.

### **John Drury**

So, the more that you **identify** with the in-group target, the more likely you are to copy their behaviour. What we do when we see a **behaviour** is that at some level, we are making a judgement about whether the person **exhibiting** that behaviour, whether it's an emotion, or a scratching behaviour, or anything, is relevant. Does their behaviour **indicate** to us how we should behave?

### **Georgina**

Right, before we review the vocabulary, let's have the answer to our quiz. Why do we **yawn**? Is it:

- A: To take in more oxygen
- B: To get rid of carbon dioxide from our body
- C: No one really knows

Rob, what did you say?

### **Rob**

Well, I was pretty sure it's A - to take in more oxygen.

### **Georgina**

There is, in fact, no clear biological reason for **yawning** that is agreed upon. So no one really knows.

### **Rob**

We've been talking about **yawning**. The action of opening our mouths wide open and stretching our eardrums when tired or bored.

### **Georgina**

**Yawning** can also be **contagious**. This means it can pass from one person to another.

**Rob**

And a **yawn** can be described as a **behaviour** – a particular kind of automatic action in response to a particular situation.

**Georgina**

The word **cognitive** is related to our mental processes - the way our minds work.

**Rob**

If you **identify with** a particular group – you feel close to that group and feel that you belong in that group.

**Georgina**

And finally, to **exhibit a behaviour** is to actually do that particular **behaviour**.  
And before we all start yawning, it's time for us to go. Do join us again soon and you can always find us online, on social media and on the BBC Learning English app. Bye for now.

**Rob**

Bye!

## VOCABULARY

### **a yawn / to yawn**

breathe in and out with our mouth stretched open

### **contagious**

can be spread from one person to another

### **a behaviour**

an action, often automatic, in response to a particular situation

### **cognitive**

connected to mental processes and the way our minds work

### **to identify with (a group)**

to feel close to and have a sense of belonging to (a group)

### **exhibit (a behaviour)**

do, show (a behaviour)