TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 217

Why Is Yawning Contagious? | Curious English

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

73 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Julia, I have a small challenge for you.

I am listening.

For the next few seconds, try not to yawn.

Martin, you have already made me think about yawning.

And that is the interesting part.

Have you ever seen someone yawn and then wanted to yawn yourself?

Today we are asking why a yawn can seem contagious.

Welcome to Curious English, from Your English Toolbox.

First, let us make one word clear.

A yawn is the action of opening your mouth wide and taking a deep breath, often when you are tired.

The verb is to yawn.

I yawn when I am sleepy.

Or I yawned during a long meeting.

You may yawn for other reasons too, so a yawn does not always mean a person is bored.

Now imagine that you are on a train.

A passenger across from you opens their mouth wide and yawns.

A moment later, you feel the need to yawn too.

That is an example of contagious yawning.

Here, contagious means that one person's action can trigger the same action in another person.

It does not mean that yawning is an illness.

You might also feel the urge when you hear someone yawn.

Even thinking or reading about yawning can make some people want to yawn.

An urge is a strong feeling that you want or need to do something.

For example, I felt the urge to laugh, but I stayed quiet.

Or I had the urge to check my phone.

So, why does one yawn sometimes lead to another?

Researchers have studied how people respond when they see or hear a yawn.

Some studies have explored how the brain responds when we see another person yawn.

One idea links the response to how we imitate, or copy, other people's actions.

Imitate means to copy an action.

If I smile when you smile, I might be imitating your expression.

But the complete explanation for contagious yawning is still being studied.

Some people have suggested a connection with empathy, but it is not a simple test of how caring a person is.

Not yawning when someone else yawns does not tell us that you lack empathy.

There is another popular explanation that needs care.

You may have heard that a yawn simply means your brain needs more oxygen.

That is not an established explanation for why yawns happen.

Scientists have proposed different ideas, and there is still no single agreed answer.

So the mystery is not completely solved.

And different people may respond differently to the same yawn.

In one experiment, researchers asked people to watch videos of other people yawning.

They also asked some participants to try to resist the urge.

Those instructions increased the urge to yawn in that study.

An experiment can tell us what happened in that setting, but it does not answer every question about every person.

And being susceptible means being likely to respond in a particular way.

Someone who is susceptible to contagious yawning may yawn after seeing another person yawn.

But an urge and an action are not quite the same thing.

You may feel the urge to yawn and still try to keep your mouth closed.

In the experiment, the instruction to resist did not change the participants' overall tendency to catch a yawn.

So researchers looked separately at what people felt and how they expressed it.

That distinction is useful outside science too.

You can feel the urge to interrupt someone and decide to wait.

The feeling arrives first, and your response may come afterwards.

Of course, yawning can be difficult to control, even when you are trying.

That gives us a useful phrase for talking about science.

We can say, researchers are still studying it.

For example, researchers are still studying why yawns are contagious.

Now let us try a quick challenge.

You see your friend open her mouth wide and take a deep breath because she is sleepy.

What is she doing?

She is yawning.

Next, you feel a strong need to do the same thing.

What word describes that strong feeling?

An urge.

You feel the urge to yawn.

And if seeing her yawn triggers a yawn in you, we can call it contagious yawning.

One last question, Martin.

Did our little challenge make you want to yawn?

I wanted to yawn when you asked me not to.

On our website, you can choose your listening speed and listen again at a pace that suits you.

The link is in the episode description.

Thanks for listening to Curious English.

See you next time.