

BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

1 Minute English

The Human Library

Neil

Hello. This is 1 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

If you browse through a library, you'll find a variety of different books, from fiction to crime to romance.

Sam

And if you walk through a city you'll see a variety of people of different ages, body shapes, skin colours and genders.

Neil

In this 1 Minute English, we'll be hearing about an unusual library where the books are people, made of flesh and bone instead of paper. It's called The Human Library and the 'books' are individuals who have faced prejudice – which means an unreasonable dislike of certain types of people.

Sam

Readers may borrow these 'books', who are people from all walks of life, for a thirty-minute conversation. The book titles are short and to the point - titles like 'transgender', 'former criminal' or 'immigrant'.

Neil

The human books are volunteers, and visiting readers are encouraged to ask those awkward or embarrassing questions they've always wondered about.

Sam

This means the Human Library needs to be a safe space – a place where people feel protected from danger and harm.

Neil

It's a fascinating idea but before we find out more, I have a question for you, Sam.

The Human Library started out in Denmark but soon spread across Europe and the world. So how many countries have a Human Library now? Is it:

a) 10?

b) 10? or,

c) 90?

Sam

Well, everyone likes to hear a story – so I'll guess c) 90.

Neil

OK, Sam, we'll find out if that's right later in the programme.

Sam

The first Human Library was founded in Copenhagen by Ronni Abergel. Here he is telling BBC World Service programme People Fixing the World about the inspiration behind his original idea:

Ronni Abergel

We don't have time on the street to stop and get to know everyone, so we drop people in little boxes... so it's instinct that's guiding us, and we never get beyond the instinct if we don't get to know the person... so in our library, we recommend sitting down and meeting some of the people that you normally might actually not feel interested in sitting down with because there's something about them that you may feel a little bit uncomfortable about. You learn tremendously not only about them, but also about yourself.

Neil

When we meet someone new, we often already have ideas about what they are like. Ronni says we put someone in a box – an expression meaning to judge what kind of person someone is based on their appearance or on a limited understanding of who they are.

Sam

He recommends meeting people who you wouldn't usually spend time with, even if this makes you feel uncomfortable – feel slightly worried or embarrassed in a social situation.

Neil

So, the main idea of the Human Library is to challenge the assumptions and stereotypes that we all have about other people.

Sam

Ronni uses social media to find volunteers who are willing to talk about their lives at public meetings, which anyone can attend.

Neil

As the Human Library spreads around the world, more money is needed to keep the project going. This mostly comes from hosting events for private companies, including famous businesses like Google.

Sam

Transgender volunteer Katy Jon Went is a regular host for the Human Library's business events. Listen to this clip of her introducing the project to a group of Dutch businessmen from BBC World Service programme, People Fixing the World:

Katy Jon Went

When we're in the workplace or on social media, what we often find is we're walking on eggshells around diversity and difference, and many people don't want to get it wrong, quite understandably. The important thing to remember is that you can ask them anything – they're never going to make to feel wrong for the question you ask today, which is an incredibly rare offer.

Neil

When meeting someone with completely different life experiences, people can be worried about saying the wrong thing or asking embarrassing questions. Katy says they are walking on eggshells – an expression which means to be very careful about what you do and say because you don't want to offend or upset

anyone.

Sam

But in fact the human 'books' are rarely offended. The event is all about celebrating people's difference and diversity – a term which describes how many different types of people are included together.

Neil

Exactly. It's a celebration for everyone regardless of race, age or gender...

Sam

Or nationality... and that reminds me – what was the answer to your question,

Neil?

Neil

Oh yes, I asked how many countries today have a Human Library. What did you say, Sam?

Sam

I guessed it was c) 90 countries.

Neil

Which was... the wrong answer, I'm afraid. The correct answer was b) 10 countries, from Norway and Hungary all the way to Australia and Mongolia!

Sam

Wow! I bet that makes a lot of interesting stories! OK, let's recap the vocabulary for this programme about people sharing their experience of facing prejudice – the unreasonable dislike of certain groups of people.

Neil

A safe space is place where you feel protected from danger and harm.

Sam

When we put someone in a box, we judge them based on their appearance or a limited understanding of them.

Neil

If you feel uncomfortable, you feel slightly worried or embarrassed in a social

situation.

Sam

The expression walking on eggshells means being very careful about what you do and say because you don't want to offend anyone.

Neil

And finally, diversity is a term describing many different types of people being included together.

Sam

Well, it's time to return these human books back to the library shelves because our six minutes are up!

Neil

Join us again for more real-life stories and topical vocabulary here at 1 Minute English from BBC Learning English. Goodbye for now!

Sam

Bye!

## **VOCABULARY**

### **prejudice**

unfair and unreasonable dislike of a particular group of people

### **safe space**

place where you feel protected from danger and harm

### **put someone in a box**

judge what kind of person someone is based on their appearance or a limited understanding of them

### **feel uncomfortable**

feel slightly worried or embarrassed, not relaxed, in a social situation

### **walking on eggshells**

being very careful about what you do and say because you don't want to upset or offend anyone

### **diversity**

many different types of people being included together  
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