

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sam

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Sam.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Sam

Have you heard this joke, Neil? Question: what's a rat's favourite game?

Neil

I don't know, Sam, what *is* a rat's favourite game?

Sam

Hide and squeak!

Neil

Ha-ha-ha! Very funny!

Sam

Well, I'm glad you're laughing because, as we'll be finding out in this programme, laughter is good for you! In fact, laughter is often called 'the best medicine'.

Neil

And it seems that's really true, medically speaking. Laughing releases anti-stress endorphins into the body and there's evidence that people who laugh recover more quickly from illness, including Covid.

Sam

Laughing is an essential part of what makes us human. Babies cry straight from birth but the next sound they make, often as young as two or three months, is laughter.

Neil

And who can hear a baby laugh without laughing themselves? Laughter is catching.

Sam

But before we start tickling our funny bones, I have a quiz question for you, Neil, and it's no laughing matter. Laughter can be a serious business. In fact, there's a scientific field of study into laughter and its effects on the human body. But what is this study called? Is it:

- a) giggology?
- b) gelotology? or
- c) guffology?

Neil

Did you make those words up, Sam? They sound a bit funny to me! I'll say the study of laughter is called b) gelotology.

Sam

OK, Neil, but you'll be laughing on the other side of your face if you're wrong! Anyway, we'll find out the correct answer later in the programme.

Neil

Someone who's an expert in the study of laughing – whatever it's called – is cognitive neuroscientist, Professor Sophie Scott. Here she explains to David Edmonds, presenter of BBC World Service programme, The Big Idea, exactly how a laugh is produced.

David Edmonds

Laughing is a variation of breathing. Like breathing, it involves the **rib cage**.

Prof Sophie Scott

When you laugh you get these very, very large, very fast contractions of the **rib cage**. And it's a very **primitive** way of making a sound, so you're really just squeezing air out in big bouts. Each of those individual squeezes gives you a 'ha' sound.

Sam

The 'ha-ha' sound you make when you laugh comes from your **rib cage** - a structure made of bones, called ribs, inside your chest which protects the heart and lungs. The rib cage works like a drum to amplify a laugh.

Neil

It's the reason why jokes are sometimes called 'rib-tickers'.

Sam

Professor Scott calls this a very **primitive** way of making sounds because it's simple, natural and essentially human.

Neil

The word **primitive** can be used to describe anything relating to the basic way humans lived in their early stages of development, before money, machines or writing were invented.

Sam

Primitive human noises, like crying and laughing, link to a universal human experience, and this can be seen in the large number of words we use to talk about them. In English, 'chuckle', 'giggle', 'chortle', 'cackle' and 'guffaw' all describe different types of laughter.

Neil

Right, so how would you describe a 'giggle', Sam?

Sam

I'd say a **giggle** is laughing in a quiet but uncontrolled way, like a child who finds something very funny or feels embarrassed.

Neil

Unlike a **guffaw** which is when you blast out a very loud laugh, often at something stupid or rude someone has said.

Sam

But humans aren't the only animals to laugh. We belong to the same family as other primates like chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans, all of whom laugh.

Neil

Even rats tickle each other and make squeaky noises like laughter when they play. Here's Professor Scott again to take up the story for BBC World Service programme, The Big Idea.

Prof Sophie Scott

Play is a very important behaviour for **mammals** – all mammals play when they're **juveniles** and some mammals play their whole lives, and laughter is a sort of an invitation to play, it's a sign that you're playing.

Sam

Professor Scott says that laughter is an important social tool for all **mammals** –

animals, including humans, dogs and whales, which give birth to live young, rather than laying eggs, and who feed their young with milk.

Neil

By laughing, young mammals - sometimes called **juveniles** - signal that they want to play, and young rats who don't laugh back are more likely to get a bite than a giggle. And a rat bite is nothing to laugh about.

Sam

What a lot of facts we've learned about laughter, Neil!

Neil

Yes, we could almost be experts on laughter... 'Guffologists', isn't that what you called them, Sam?

Sam

Ah yes, in my quiz question I asked you to name the scientific study of laughter and its effects on the body.

Neil

I'm almost certain it's not 'giggology' or 'guffology'! So, the answer must be...

Sam

Gelotology! The correct answer! Well done, Neil, I knew you were good for a laugh!

Neil

OK. Let's recap the vocabulary from the programme before you think up any more terrible jokes! First, we had **rib cage** – the structure in your chest which is made of ribs, and produces the sound of a laugh.

Sam

The adjective **primitive** relates to the simple, natural way humans lived in their early stages of development.

Neil

There are different types of laughter, including **giggles** - childlike laughter in a quiet but uncontrolled way.

Sam

And **guffaw** is when you laugh out loud, often at something someone has said.

Neil

Mammals are animals, including humans, which give birth to live young and feed them with milk.

Sam

And finally, a young animal which is not fully grown can be called a **juvenile**.

Neil

Well, it's been a laugh a minute, Sam, but unfortunately our six minutes are up.

Sam

Join us again soon for more trending topics, useful vocabulary, and, who knows, maybe some terrible jokes, here at 6 Minute English. Bye for now!

Neil

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

rib cage

structure in the human chest made of bones called ribs which protects your lungs and heart

primitive

relating to the simple, natural way humans lived in their early stages of development, before money, machines or writing were invented

giggle

a quiet, childlike but uncontrolled way of laughing

guffaw

laugh out loud, often at something stupid or rude someone has said

mammals

animals, including humans, dogs and whales, which give birth to live young, rather than laying eggs, and who feed their young with milk

juvenile

young animal which is not fully grown