BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Why does heartbreak hurt so much?

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil
Hi Georgie.

Georgie
Hi Neil.

Neil
Now, I want you to think back to the last time you had your heart broken. How did it feel?

Georgie
It was a couple of years ago. And I just remember a really intense, sad emotion. But it also sometimes feels like a physical pain in your stomach, doesn't it?

Neil
It does. It's like real pain, isn't it? And today, in 6 Minute English, we're talking about **heartbreak**. Now, **heartbreak** is the feeling of sadness we get when we lose someone we love. And that pain you feel, it's not just imaginary. In this podcast, we'll be understanding how our brains change when we fall in love and asking the question, why does **heartbreak** hurt so much?

Georgie
And as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary. You can find the full list and the definitions at bbclearningenglish.com.

Neil
Georgie, we're going to start with a quiz question. Are you ready?

Georgie
I am very ready.

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Neil
So, in the 1950s, psychologists noticed a link between children's early bonds with their parents and their romantic relationships as adults, but what is this theory called? Is it:

a) contraction theory,
b) attachment theory, or
c) superstition theory?

Georgie
I think it's b) attachment theory.

Neil
OK. Well, we will find out at the end of the programme.

Georgie
What's going on in our brains when we fall in love?

Neil
Well, scientists have scanned people's brains while they're looking at a photo of their romantic partner. And they found that looking at someone you're in love with activates a part of the brain that also reminds us to eat and drink.

Georgie
And do scientists know why being in love impacts our brain in this way?

Neil
So, it's all about survival. Our brains have evolved to be this way. Dr Lucy Brown explains more to the BBC World Service.

Dr Lucy Brown
This is a survival system. Nature gave us these systems to be **addicted to** each other – for reproduction, for protection. You're **oriented** completely **toward** the other person. It's like hunger or thirst.

Georgie
Lucy says our brains make us **addicted to** our romantic partners. If you're **addicted to** something, you want more of it. You can literally be **addicted to** things like drugs or alcohol, but we also use it metaphorically to talk about things we love.

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Neil
She says that romantic partners are **oriented to** each other, which in British English we say **orientated**, and it means they are pointed towards each other. They think of each other before other people.

Georgie
Neil, is there anything else scientists have discovered from scanning the brains of people in love?

Neil
Well, being in love doesn't just change the way we think. It changes our whole identity. A 2013 study showed us more about this. People were shown statements about themselves – for example, Neil is kind – and the part of the brain we use to think about ourselves lit up. When showing the same statements about their partner, the same part of the brain was active – not the part of the brain we generally use to think about others.

Georgie
So, Neil, are all of these brain changes that come with being in love actually good for us?

Neil
Well, studies suggest that good social connections help manage stress and support our immune system. Professor Zoe Donaldson explained more to the BBC World Service.

Professor Zoe Donaldson
Having really strong **social bonds** increases your likelihood that you'll survive from just about anything, whether that be cancer, depression, etc. And it overall is the number one predictor of **longevity**. So, if you are lonely and you don't have **bonds**, then your mortality risk goes up in a way that's equivalent to being obese or smoking.

Georgie
So, having strong **social bonds** or close relationships with other people makes you more likely to survive disease, according to Zoe.

Neil
Yes, it's an important factor in our **longevity**, which means how long we live. In fact, Zoe says, being lonely and not having good **social bonds** increases your mortality risk, your risk of dying, by as much as being obese or smoking.

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Georgie
OK. So, what happens when these **bonds** are broken, when we experience **heartbreak**?

Neil
Well, scientists have been looking at this by asking people to look at photos of their **exes**, their former partners, and scanning their brains. They found that **heartbreak** activates parts of the brain we use when we're in danger or in pain. Professor Zoe Donaldson explains more.

Professor Zoe Donaldson
It's literal pain in your brain. So, if you look at the parts of the brain that light up, they overlap with the same brain regions that are activated when you feel visceral pain – when you feel actual, you know... like you get a burn, or you break a... you break a bone.

Neil
OK. So, now it's time for the answer to the quiz question I asked you. It was about a theory developed by psychologists in the 1950s, which says that children's early relationships with their parents impact their relationships as adults. What's the name of the theory?

Georgie
I was quite confident about this, wasn't I, Neil? I said attachment theory.

Neil
Well, you had a reason to be confident because you are correct.

Georgie
Yay! OK. Let's recap the vocabulary we learnt in this programme, starting with **heartbreak**, which is the feeling you experience after you lose someone you love.

Neil
If you're **addicted to** someone or something, you want more of it all the time.

Georgie
Oriented or **orientated towards** is used metaphorically to mean that someone or something is your main focus.

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Neil
Social bonds are the close relationships we have with family, friends and romantic partners.

Georgie
Longevity means how long you'll live.

Neil
And an **ex** is a past romantic partner that you are no longer in a relationship with.

Georgie
Once again, our six minutes are up, but you can test what you've learned with the worksheet on our website. Go to bbclearningenglish.com.

Neil
Thanks for joining us and goodbye.

Georgie
Goodbye.

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VOCABULARY

heartbreak
feeling of intense, painful sadness after the end of a relationship

addicted to
unable to cut a connection with someone or something because you depend on it or want more of it all the time

orientated/oriented towards
focused on someone, so that you think about them before others

social bonds
close relationships between family, friends and romantic partners

longevity
length of time you will live

ex
previous romantic partner

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