Episode Book

EPISODE #6122

Explaining Misophonia to the People You Love

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SYNOPSIS

The neuroscience is settled — misophonia has a measurable signature in the brain. The hard part is the dinner table. This episode works through the people problem: the three-part script for explaining sound sensitivity without it landing as fussiness, the spotlight effect that makes earplugs feel louder than they are, and the clinical warning that over-protecting your ears can make the underlying sensitivity worse. Then it gets harder — sharing a home and a bed with a partner who triggers you, managing a toddler who has no quiet mode, and what you can reasonably ask for at work under the UK's Equality Act. Plus the Jerusalem layer: construction noise, Israeli law, and how to talk to a neighbour before it becomes a dispute.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The biology is the easy part.



Herman

Always has been. You can point to a brain scan, you can show someone the anterior insular cortex lighting up like a Christmas tree when they hear a chewing sound, and they'll nod. Then you sit down at the dinner table and it doesn't matter at all.



Corn

Daniel's prompt this week is about that gap. We've done the neuroscience, we've done the gear. What he wants now is the people part. How you explain sound sensitivity to family, friends, coworkers so it lands as a real thing and not fussiness. What happens when you show up to a social event wearing earplugs or earmuffs. How two partners share a home when one is far more noise-sensitive than the other, with a toddler in the mix. What you can reasonably ask for at work. And the whole Jerusalem layer — construction noise, what Israeli law actually allows, and how you talk to a neighbour before it becomes a dispute.



Herman

He's right that this is the hardest part. The gear question has an answer. The people question has a negotiation.



Corn

And the thing that makes it brutal is that the people you can't walk away from are the ones least likely to accommodate.



Herman

There's a stat from a UK study that sets the whole thing up. Vitoratou and colleagues, seven hundred and seventy-two adults, published in PLOS ONE. Eighteen point four percent met the threshold for significant misophonia. Thirteen point six percent had ever heard the word.



Corn

So most people you're explaining this to have literally never encountered the term.



Herman

Never. You're not just asking them to understand your specific reaction, you're introducing a word they don't have. And you're doing it at a dinner table, or at a desk, or in bed.



Corn

We covered the brain basis when we did the three ways sound intolerance breaks down. The Swedo consensus definition came out in twenty twenty-two, the Kumar paper in Current Biology was twenty seventeen. You can show someone that misophonia has a measurable neurological signature. The anterior insular cortex, the hardwired trigger response. It's real in the brain.



Herman

None of that matters in the room, though.



Corn

No.



Herman

The person across the table doesn't see your brain. They see you flinching when they eat.



Corn

The advice that comes up consistently is a three-part script. Name the specific sound. Frame the reaction as yours, meaning your nervous system, not their behaviour. And make one small concrete ask. Bollsen puts it as: chewing sounds set off a strong reaction in me. It isn't about you. Could we put some music on while we eat?



Herman

That middle piece is the critical one. It isn't about you. Because the natural read when someone winces at your chewing is that you're doing something wrong. You're eating too loudly, you have bad manners, you're being criticised. The reframe is: my nervous system is doing something unusual. You're fine.



Corn

Timing, though. You can't deliver that script while the trigger is happening.



Herman

No. Bollsen says it comes out sharper than you mean mid-meal. Psychology Today says the same thing. Both people need to be calm and not currently triggered. You raise it beforehand, or in a completely separate conversation.



Corn

Because if you say it while the chewing is happening, it's not a script. It's a complaint.



Herman

And the ask has to be about the situation, not the person. Background music, a seat swap, muting on calls, stepping out for five minutes. Saying be quieter doesn't work because the reaction fires at almost any volume.



Corn

That's the part I think most people get wrong. They think the solution is the other person changing how they eat. It isn't. The solution is changing the acoustic environment.



Herman

One more piece from the research. Family is flagged repeatedly as the hardest audience. Not strangers, not coworkers. Family. The relationships are most intense, the exposure is most frequent, and family members are often least understanding. Misophonia International has ready-made scripts for the dismissive responses. It's not real. You're



Herman (continued)

overreacting. You're just being difficult. Teasing.



Corn

The teasing one is particularly lovely. Your own brother mocking you for something your brain is doing.



Herman

I wouldn't know anything about that.



Corn

I'm sure you wouldn't, Herman.



Herman

The point is that family requires repeated explanation and patience. One conversation usually isn't enough. Which is exhausting, but it's the reality.

L

Larry

Hey, listeners. Larry here. Ever wish your earplugs came with a monthly bill? Introducing EarBox, the world's first subscription ear protection service. Each month we ship you a fresh pair of foam earplugs in a branded tin you'll never open. Three tiers. Silver gets you five pairs and a newsletter about silence. Gold gets you ten pairs, the newsletter, and a lapel pin that says I'm Listening, which is ironic because you specifically are not. Platinum gets you unlimited pairs, a private Discord where nobody is allowed to type in all caps, and a certificate of acoustic achievement suitable for framing. Cancel anytime by mailing a handwritten letter to our P.O. box in Haifa, including your original tin, the lapel pin, and a notarised statement confirming you no longer wish to be silent. We charge you for the return shipping.



Corn

Does it come in a smaller tin? I don't need ten pairs a month.



Herman

You are not subscribing to earplugs.



Corn

I'm just asking about the tin size.



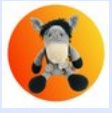
Herman

No. Moving on. The visible gear question. You've had the conversation, or you haven't, and now you're the person putting in earplugs at a family dinner. What happens?



Corn

There's a first-person account from someone who wore musician's earplugs to a wedding. Old friends, people he hadn't seen in years. He was embarrassed to put them in. Spent the whole reception obsessing over whether people could see them. His conclusion afterward: in hindsight, no one cared at all. Most people probably didn't even notice.



Herman

The spotlight effect. You think everyone is looking at you because you are looking at you.



Corn

He diagnosed his own stigma as three things. Association with old age and hearing loss. Feeling singled out as different. And vanity. Earplugs aren't fashionable. Then he caught the contradiction, which is that he wears glasses without a second thought.



Herman

Glasses are normalised. Earplugs aren't. Yet.



Corn

As he put it, if everyone who needed to wear earplugs actually wore earplugs, no one would ever feel singled out.



Herman

The practical line from Bollsen for de-stigmatising in the moment is the same structure as the explanation script. I'm wearing earplugs for the meal. It's not about you. Keep them for chosen moments, take them out afterwards. Don't wear them the whole time. Signal that this is situational, not a wall.



Corn

Although there's a real tension there with device choice. Earplugs are subtle, mostly inside the ear. Headphones or earmuffs are visible but easier for people who can't tolerate something in the ear canal. So the visibility question partly depends on what your ears can physically handle.



Herman

My DJ years taught me that the in-ear monitor question is the same one. Some musicians can't stand the feel of IEMs and go with over-ear cups. It's a comfort trade-off, not just a vanity one.



Corn

There's a clinical counterpoint that has to sit alongside the comfort argument. UCSF's EARS program warns against over-protection. Wearing earplugs in quiet rooms can trap your auditory system in higher sensitivity. They call it central gain. The brain turns up the internal volume to compensate for the reduced input, and you end up more reactive, not less.



Herman

That's the difficult trade-off. Protect yourself in the moment and risk worsening the underlying condition over time. UCSF's guidance is to protect only in loud noise and use gentle background sound enrichment otherwise. Not silence, not earplugs in a quiet room. Low-level ambient sound to keep the auditory system calibrated.



Corn

So the person who wears earplugs to every family meal because the chewing bothers them might be feeding the problem.



Herman

Might be. It depends on the severity and the setting. A loud restaurant is different from a quiet living room.



Corn

The family dinner is one thing. The person you sleep next to is another.



Herman

That's where it gets most complicated. Psychology Today's guidance for romantic partners is built around the fact that partners trigger each other frequently. The breathing, the eating, the morning routine. You can't just avoid the person. So the advice is to agree on trigger-free zones and non-verbal cues for when space is needed. Bollsen suggests a private signal. A tap on the table, a look. Something the partner recognises in advance so the moment doesn't become a confrontation.



Corn

You need the signal to be pre-agreed, though. A tap on the table means nothing if you haven't had the conversation about what it means.



Herman

Right. The signal is shorthand for a plan you've already made together. It only works if both people know the plan.



Corn

What about the toddler piece? Daniel's got Ezra, he's fifteen months. That's a kid who makes noise as a basic condition of existing.



Herman

This is where the research has a genuine gap. No dedicated study surfaced on the specific scenario of one noise-sensitive partner plus a toddler. The closest evidence is on family accommodation in misophonia generally. Storch and Guzick had a paper in Behavior Therapy in twenty twenty-three, and Guzick followed with a qualitative study in Psychopathology in twenty twenty-four. Both document how the condition reshapes household routines and family life. But neither is toddler-specific.



Corn

So what does the adjacent evidence suggest?



Herman

The family accommodation research shows that households end up restructuring around the sensitive person's triggers. Routines shift, spaces get designated, the family develops its own informal set of rules about when and where noise is acceptable. With a toddler, that restructuring is going to collide with developmental reality. A fifteen-month-old doesn't have a quiet mode. You can't negotiate with a toddler the way you can with a partner.



Corn

So the signal system works between adults. With Ezra, the question is more about what the noise-sensitive parent does to manage their own reaction. Stepping out, using protection during the overwhelming moments, leaning on the other parent for coverage during the worst windows.



Herman

And that's generic couples-communication advice, not misophonia-specific protocol. The research just hasn't caught up to this scenario yet.



Corn

Let me ask you something, Herman. Daniel has ADHD alongside the sound sensitivity. When focus breaks, he gets irritable and snappy. We talked about that before. How much of the family friction is the sound itself versus the ADHD irritability spiral that the sound sets off?



Herman

I think you can't fully separate them. The sound triggers the physiological response, the physiological response disrupts whatever the person was doing, and the disruption hits the ADHD regulation system particularly hard. The irritability isn't a separate problem. It's downstream of the sensory hit. But the family experiences it as mood, not as sensory overload. They see the snap, not the trigger.



Corn

So the explanation to a partner has to cover not just the sound but the cascade. It's not just that the chewing bothers me. It's that the chewing sets off a reaction that takes me twenty minutes to recover from, and during those twenty minutes I'm not myself.



Herman

That's a harder sell. The chewing is concrete. The cascade is abstract. But you're right that it's the more honest picture.



Corn

The same negotiation happens at work, but with a power dynamic and a legal framework attached.



Herman

In the UK, the Equality Act twenty-ten requires employers to consider reasonable adjustments where a disability puts someone at a disadvantage. But misophonia isn't automatically classed as a disability. Bollsen cites ACAS on this. Treat any adjustment as a request, not a guarantee.



Corn

What about the US side? The ADA defines disability as an impairment substantially limiting major life activities.



Herman

Right. And the ADA explicitly lists hearing, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working. Daniel Fink argued in The Hearing Journal back in twenty nineteen that moderate-to-severe auditory disorders fall squarely within that definition. He frames it as a disability-rights issue.



Corn

So in the US there's a stronger legal hook than in the UK.



Herman

On paper, yes. In practice, you still have to approach your boss prepared, explain that it affects your concentration and function, and know your rights if the response is unsupportive. The legal framework gives you a floor, not a ceiling.



Corn

The concrete asks that work are familiar. A quieter desk. Earplugs or headphones during focus blocks. A desk away from the shared lunch table. Muting while eating on calls. Bollsen's colleague script is good. It's a me thing. Would you mind if I took the end desk for focus work?



Herman

Same structure as the family script. Name it as yours. Make a specific ask. Don't accuse the environment of being wrong.



Corn

And then there's the noise you can't negotiate with at all. The construction site next door.



Herman

Israeli noise law is actually quite specific here. The governing rules are the Abatement of Nuisances Prevention of Noise Regulations from nineteen ninety-three. They're made under the nineteen sixty-one Abatement of Nuisances Law.



Corn

What do they actually prohibit?



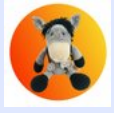
Herman

Repairs, renovation, and construction in a residential building are prohibited between twenty hundred and oh-seven hundred on weekdays. And from seventeen hundred on the eve of a day of rest until oh-seven hundred the day after. So effectively all through Shabbat and holidays.



Corn

Daniel's construction site shuts down on Saturdays. That tracks.



Herman

The machine rule is even tighter. Construction, excavation, or demolition machines in a residential area are prohibited between nineteen hundred and oh-seven hundred, and from seventeen hundred on rest-day eves through oh-seven hundred after. Unless it's urgently needed for public safety or health.



Corn

So drilling and jackhammering stop an hour earlier than general renovation work.



Herman

Loading and unloading containers is banned twenty-two hundred to oh-six hundred and on days of rest. Carpet beating, interestingly, has its own rule. Banned fourteen hundred to sixteen hundred and nineteen hundred to oh-seven hundred.



Corn

Carpet beating has its own regulation.



Herman

It does. And that's where the midday myth comes from. Many Israelis believe renovation is banned between two and four in the afternoon. Nationally, it isn't. That midday restriction applies to music and sound devices and carpet beating. Not renovation.



Corn

But local by-laws can differ.



Herman

Municipal by-laws, chok ezr, and building committee rules, takanon habayit hamishtatf, can set their own restrictions. So the honest answer is: check your municipality. Don't assume the national rule is the final word.



Corn

What about noise levels?



Herman

The Ministry of Environmental Protection has a dataset covering four building types and eleven intensity bands. Forty-four combinations total. The most protective category, building type A, forbids night noise above fifty decibels and daytime above eighty.



Corn

Fifty at night. That's a conversation-level restriction.



Herman

It's strict. And the penalty for violation is serious. Up to six months imprisonment and or a fine under Section forty sub-two of the Penal Law.



Corn

Six months for noisy renovation.



Herman

That's the statutory maximum. In practice, enforcement goes through municipal channels, not criminal prosecution.



Corn

There's something else in the law that I think matters more than the hours. Unreasonable noise is banned even during permitted hours.



Herman

That's the piece most people miss. The clock isn't the whole story. A neighbour can be within permitted hours and still in violation if the noise is unreasonable. A long renovation in a shared building requires consideration. Notifying neighbours in advance. Cleaning the stairwell. Avoiding especially loud work when it can be deferred.



Corn

So the law has a courtesy layer built in.



Herman

It does. The escalation path that's recommended starts with the softest option. Approach the neighbour politely. Often the contractor simply doesn't know the hours. If it continues, contact the municipal hotline or municipal enforcement, pikud ironi. For repeat cases, document with dates, times, and recordings, and approach the building committee, netzigut habayit.



Corn

I should say, the Jerusalem-specific complaint mechanism wasn't something we could confirm from a primary municipal source. The general escalation path comes from a contractor's guide, not from the Jerusalem municipality directly. The hotline number people cite, one-oh-six, we couldn't verify.



Herman

So treat the path as sound but the specific local number as unconfirmed. Check the Jerusalem municipality's current channels directly.



Hilbert

The carpet beating regulation is wrong.



Hilbert

Fourteen hundred to sixteen hundred and nineteen hundred to oh-seven hundred. That's Reg. Nine. The hours are right but the framing is wrong. It doesn't ban carpet beating entirely during those hours. It bans it in shared residential courtyards. On your own balcony, freestanding, the restriction doesn't apply. I checked this in ninety-eight because I had an arrangement with a neighbour in the Nahlaot building about it. Yehuda, third floor. He was beating his carpet every Friday at one in the afternoon. Full force. The dust came through my kitchen window like a sandstorm. I went down to the records office on Jaffa Road. The clerk there, Miriam, pulled the actual regulation text. She said it only covers shared spaces. So I went back to Yehuda and told him, and he said his balcony wasn't shared. Which was true. His balcony was freestanding on the back of the building. Mine wasn't. So the regulation protected me and not him, but we were beating carpets at



Hilbert (continued)

each other from different legal positions. He moved his carpet to the front balcony, which was shared, and I called municipal enforcement on a Tuesday. They sent someone on the following Thursday. By then Yehuda had switched back to the rear balcony. I bought four carpets of my own that year. To block the window.



Herman

You bought four carpets to use as sound baffling.



Hilbert

Dense Persian. Three from the shuk, one from a man named Effi who sold them out of a storage unit on Agrippas. The thick ones absorbed more than the foam panels I'd tried first. Miriam at the records office agreed with that assessment. She had relatives in the rug business.



Corn

Miriam from the records office had opinions on acoustic absorption.



Hilbert

She was very thorough. The point is, Herman, you said the regulation bans carpet beating in those hours. It bans it in shared spaces during those hours. The distinction matters if you're living in Nahlaot in ninety-eight with a man named Yehuda who treats his balcony like a testing facility.



Herman

I'll take the correction. The shared-space qualifier is real.



Hilbert

Effi's storage unit had no lighting. He showed me the carpets with a torch. The torch was his. He wouldn't let me hold it.



Corn

How much were the carpets?



Hilbert

Forty shekels each for the three from the shuk. The one from Effi was sixty-five because it was thicker. He said it came from a hotel in Tiberias that closed in eighty-three. I believed him because the tag was still on it.



Herman

And you still have them.



Hilbert

Three of them. The fourth I gave to Yehuda as a peace offering in ninety-nine. He used it to cover his compressor. Which he ran on Saturday mornings.



Corn

Of course he did.



Herman

Interesting detail buried in that research. Carpet beating has its own dedicated regulation in Israeli noise law. Fourteen hundred to sixteen hundred and nineteen hundred to oh-seven hundred. Carpet beating specifically. Someone drafting regulations in the early nineties decided that carpet beating was enough of a societal problem that it needed its own line item.



Corn

It tells you something about what Israeli residential life sounded like in nineteen ninety-two.



Herman

It tells you everything.



Corn

Where I keep landing is this. The social cost is anticipated far more than it is experienced. The person at the wedding obsessing over whether people can see their earplugs, and nobody noticed. The worker agonising over asking for a desk move, and the boss says sure. The family conversation that feels impossible to start, and the response is... actually fine. The research is clear that family is the hardest audience and that dismissive responses are common. But the dread of the conversation is often worse than the conversation.



Herman

And the people you can't walk away from are the ones where the conversation has to happen most often. A coworker you can avoid. A neighbour you can escalate to. Your partner, your toddler, your brother at the dinner table. Those are the relationships where the explanation has to be repeated, and where the patience runs thinnest.



Corn

The gap between the internal reality and the external perception is the whole story. Eighteen percent of people have this, and barely thirteen percent have heard the word. As more people learn the vocabulary, the social landscape does shift. But the direction matters.



Herman

And the tension between protecting yourself and habituating doesn't go away. UCSF's warning about central gain is real. You can't just armour up and call it solved.



Corn

No. You have to choose your moments. Protect in the loud, enrich in the quiet, explain in the calm, and accept that the people closest to you are the ones who'll need the most repetitions.



Herman

That's the episode.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping the desk running and the carpets accurately sourced.



Herman

If you enjoyed this one, try episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To; episode fifty-seven, From Lawyers in Limousines to Developers in Their PJs; and episode nine forty-nine, Three Ways Sound Intolerance Breaks Your Brain. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you're enjoying the show, a review on your podcast app helps more people find us. You can also find us at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

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