

Greetings, everyone! My name is Laurence, and this is *English in Practice*!

## MUSIC

Welcome to the sixth episode of *English in Practice*. Our protagonist on this occasion is the American swimmer Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time. Don't worry though, the clip I have chosen is not about swimming, but mental health. It's a subject close to my heart, and Michael Phelps has some important insights to offer on the topic.

Before we start, I'd like to thank the newest people to like the *English in Practice* Facebook page. They are Alina, who's Romanian but lives in London, Inga from Moldova, and David Batteiger from the USA – welcome to the family. Of course, David Batteiger is the author of the short story *Nerve*, which was the focus of last week's episode, so have a listen to that if you haven't yet.

Also, *English in Practice* now has over 1000 downloads, so thank you to everyone who listens to this podcast. I'm really enjoyING seeing it grow, and hopefully some people's language skills have improved as well.

On another note, a friend of mine has recently started a YouTube channel for poetry readings. So, if you have written a piece of poetry or a short story in English and wish to read it out, then follow the link in the description and take a look at Vanity Pneumatic. If you wish to contact the channel, then address your message to Filip. He'd be excited to hear from you.

As always, I would also be keen to hear from you, especially if you have some feedback or wish to tell me a bit about yourself – those are the messages I enjoy receiving most. Once again, the email address is [englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com), and the Facebook page is called 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.' A 'like' there would also be greatly appreciated, as would a 'like' on whichever podcasting platform you use.

For those who wish to download the transcript, simply visit my website: [www.jamesfable.com](http://www.jamesfable.com). James Fable is my penname – an invented name that I use for writing.

Good, enough self-advertising. Let's learn about the protagonist of this episode, Michael Phelps!

## MUSIC

Michael Fred Phelps II was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1985, making him 35 years of age. He is of English, German, Irish, Scottish and Welsh descent and is the youngest of three children. His parents divorced when he was nine years old, and Michael recalls that this experience had a severe negative impact on him and his sisters.

At the age of seven, Michael's mother decided that he should learn how to swim; and he and his siblings instantly fell in love with the sport. Michael was also diagnosed as a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and he says that swimming provided him with an excellent outlet for his energy.

By the age of 10, Michael already held a national record for his age group, namely in the 100m butterfly. And under the coaching of Bob Bowman, he quickly turned into a swimmer of international quality. He qualified for the 2000 Summer Olympic Games at the age of 15. And a year later, at the World Aquatics Championships, he broke the world record in the 200m butterfly, becoming the youngest male ever to set a world record in swimming.

A path of gold lay ahead of Michael Phelps. In the 2004 Olympics in Athens he won six golds and two bronze medals, tying him for the record of most medals of any colour at a single Games. Then in 2008 in the Beijing Olympics he won every single race he took part in, a record-breaking eight gold medals. Overall, he has won 28 medals in the Olympic Games, 23 of which are gold, making him the most successful Olympian of all time. He has even overtaken the record of Leonidas of Rhodes, who had held the title of most gold medals in Olympic Games since 152BC.

Michael Phelps announced his retirement from professional swimming in August 2016, and since then he has dedicated a large portion of his time to philanthropic causes. The Michael Phelps Foundation focuses on growing swimming and promoting healthy lifestyles; and, perhaps ironically, Michael has worked with the toothpaste company Colgate to promote water conservation.

Most significantly, however, Michael Phelps has recently becoming an important figure in raising the awareness of mental health disorders – and that is exactly what the following audio clip concerns. It comes from the Today show with Megyn Kelly and was uploaded to YouTube in October 2017. Michael Phelps has just disclosed that he has suffered greatly in his life from depression and that he even contemplated committing suicide after the 2012 Olympics. In response, the interviewer has essentially asked him to explain how someone so successful can suffer from depression. Here's his answer:

**'But – I mean, it's... it's – we all go through things. We... We all go through struggles, right? There's – probably everybody in this room that goes through struggles the same exact way, and I think that's what... that's what we all have to realise.**

**'It's like, yes, I've been successful in what I've done, but it doesn't make me superhuman. It just makes – you know, for me, I was very goal-oriented and very passionate about what I was doing and wanted to be the best. So, you know, for me, I was able to do that.**

**'But, I mean, I put my pants on just like everybody else does. So it's like, you know, like, it's... it's ... it's just something that every single person goes through.**

**'And... And, you know, for me, I was sick and tired of compartmentalising things that I didn't want to talk about. And... And... I just opened up. And, honestly, since then my life has become easier.**

**'Umm, I... I always make the joke: I was like, yeah, I learned to communicate at 30. And I was like, "great."**

**'He's 32 now.'**

**'It's better late than never, right?'**

It is usually better late than never, that's true. I was pleased to find this interview, particularly this excerpt, because it breaks down a few misconceptions regarding mental health. As Michael Phelps emphasises, no one is immune to depression, and communication can greatly help people suffering from the black dog – as we sometimes call it in the UK.

As you may have noticed, our protagonist 'likes' rather a lot of things in this clip, by which I mean that he frequently uses the filler word 'like.' He also repeats the prepositional phrase 'for me' on several occasions. Essentially, this means 'in my case', and it also functions a bit like a filler word, meaning that the sentence would make sense without it. Also, when someone says 'right' at the end of a sentence, like Michael Phelps does, it means they are appealing for agreement. In this regard, it's similar to ending a sentence with 'you know?', as David Attenborough often did in the fourth episode.

Good. Let's start with the analysis of the first fragment, in which Michael Phelps begins to explain why even successful sportspeople are susceptible to mental health disorders:

**'But – I mean, it's... it's – we all go through things. We... We all go through struggles, right? There's – probably everybody in this room that goes through struggles the same exact way, and I think that's what... that's what we all have to realise.'**

*'But – I mean, it's... it's – we all go through things. We... We all go through struggles, right? There's – probably everybody in this room that goes through struggles the same exact way, and I think that's what... that's what we all have to realise.'*

Let's start with the verb *to go through*. This has several meanings, literal and figurative. An example of the former would be: 'Shall we go through town or round it?' You could also go through a tunnel by car, for example.

In this excerpt, *to go through* means ‘to endure something difficult or unpleasant.’ For example, ‘Everyone goes through tough periods in life.’ Or, ‘Ben has been very depressed since his wife left him. I don’t think he’s ever gone through such a traumatic experience before.’

Michael Phelps says, ‘We all go through struggles,’ meaning that we all experience times of personal hardship. The word *struggle* often implies the use of physical force or resistance, such as: ‘There was an armed struggle between the police and the robbers;’ or, ‘The struggle for equal rights continues all over the world.’ However, our protagonist is simply using *struggles* as a synonym for ‘difficulties.’ He could also have said, ‘We all go through difficulties.’

Michael Phelps then specifies what he means here by saying, ‘There’s – probably everybody in this room that goes through struggles the exact same way.’ He actually should have missed out the relative pronoun *that* and said: ‘Probably everyone in this room goes through struggles the exact same way.’ I expect he was initially going to say, ‘There are probably a lot of people in this room that go through struggles the exact same way,’ but he changed his mind after beginning the sentence with ‘there’s’, and this led him to conflate the two sentences and make a grammatical mistake.

Now, our protagonist is technically saying here that everybody experiences mental health problems, which isn’t actually true. It’s more likely that he meant to say that plenty of people do suffer from mental health disorders at some point in their lives, even if you would not expect them to because they are successful. However, this is the thing, Michael Phelps says, that we all have to realise: even people whose lives appear to be wonderful, people who are literally the best in the world at what they do, can suffer from depression, anxiety and other disorders. Put differently, whether or not someone experiences psychological difficulties, and perhaps even considers taking their life, is not dependent on how successful they are. It’s a common misconception, and I don’t think this can be emphasised enough.

In the second fragment, Michael Phelps goes into this idea in greater depth:

**'It's like, yes, I've been successful in what I've done, but it doesn't make me superhuman. It just makes – you know, for me, I was very goal-oriented and very passionate about what I was doing and wanted to be the best. So, you know, for me, I was able to do that.'**

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So, Michael Phelps says that being a successful sportsperson doesn't make you superhuman. That means, success doesn't turn you into some sort of superior being; even sports stars aren't immune to mental illness.

Our protagonist then explains that he was 'goal-oriented' and 'passionate' about swimming, which gave him the motivation to achieve his dreams. I imagine the size 14 feet also helped, but that's a whole other topic. Anyway, *goal-oriented*, there is a hyphen between the words, means 'focused on one's goal,' 'determined to achieve one's aim.' Remember, a *goal* is someone's aim or target; that's why the net you have to kick a football into is called the *goal*.

*Oriented* is the past participle of the verb to *orient*, which means 'to turn towards' or 'align oneself to something.' It originally meant 'to build in an easterly direction,' since we refer to East Asia as the *Orient*, but this meaning of the verb has all but disappeared. You will, however, sometimes hear people say that they have to 'orient themselves,' which means 'to get one's bearings,' such as when they are somewhere for the first time. For example, imagine you are on holiday in London. You have just come out of the Underground station and want to find the British Museum, but you aren't sure which road to walk down. At this point, you might check Google Maps *to orient yourself, to work out which direction to go in*. Well, if you are in England then you are more likely *to orientate yourself*, as we British tend to say. Americans, however, prefer the shorter form of the verb, *orient*.

Sportspeople and also artists describe themselves as being passionate about what they do rather often. That means they are enthusiastic about their profession; they love it; it

means a lot to them. Being goal-oriented and passionate about your work is a good combination, and it led Michael Phelps to 23 gold medals. In his words, it enabled him ‘to be the best.’

Let’s move on to the third fragment:

**‘But, I mean, I put my pants on just like everybody else does. So it’s like, you know, like, it’s... it’s ... it’s just something that every single person goes through.’**

*‘But, I mean, I put my pants on just like everybody else does. So it’s like, you know, like, it’s... it’s ... it’s just something that every single person goes through.’*

If you listened to the podcast on Adele two weeks ago, you will know that *I mean* has a *concessional* sense, as the speaker confesses the validity of another point of view. Here, Michael Phelps is effectively saying: ‘I may be the best swimmer in the world, but I put my pants on just like everybody else does.’

This is my favourite line in the entire interview. *Pants* is the American term for ‘trousers’, but more on that in a minute. Michael Phelps is reiterating, reemphasising, what he said in the second fragment about not being superhuman. ‘Sure,’ he is saying, ‘I have enjoyed great success in my profession, but I’m an ordinary person too. I still have to do the mundane, everyday things that everyone else does – such as getting dressed in the morning.’ This is a metaphor for what he was saying earlier – mental health can affect anyone; even the rich and famous aren’t immune. Everybody goes through difficult patches.

From Michael Phelps’ profound words, let’s bring the conversation down several notches, to underwear. In British English, *pants* are ‘underwear’, ‘y-fronts’, not trousers. I remember as a child that I used to giggle when Americans talked about their pants, but I seem to have matured – or perhaps I have just got used to hearing American English.

In the fourth fragment, Michael Phelps speaks about his own experience with mental health:

**‘And... And, you know, for me, I was sick and tired of compartmentalising things that I didn’t want to talk about. And... And... I just opened up. And, honestly, since then my life has become easier.’**

*‘And... And, you know, for me, I was sick and tired of compartmentalising things that I didn’t want to talk about. And... And... I just opened up. And, honestly, since then my life has become easier.’*

So, what does *compartmentalise* mean and how does it relate to mental health? Well, a *compartment* is a separate, enclosed part of something. For example, aeroplanes have a luggage compartment. A rucksack also has different compartments for you to put your things in, and normally there is a zip to close each one.

*Compartmentalise*, therefore, means ‘to divide into compartments.’ Michael Phelps is saying that he was sick and tired of dividing his life into different parts, of hiding away the topics he did not wish to speak about. By this he means, for example, that he would speak to the press about swimming, but not about his struggles with depression and anxiety. He kept these personal aspects of his life separate – he compartmentalised them – even though his mental health had an impact on his swimming.

Because he was sick of this compartmentalisation, if you want to use a particularly unwieldy word, Michael Phelps decided to *open up*, to speak candidly, to speak frankly about his emotions. That means that he spoke to journalists about his depression and anxiety, that he made this information public.

And ever since doing so, he says, his life ‘has become easier.’ Remember, the *present perfect* – which is formed from *have + the past participle* – shows that something *remains true today*. In other words, speaking openly about his mental health problems did not only make Michael Phelps’ life easier a few years ago, when he disclosed these issues publicly for the first time; his life is easier now as well because he opened up in the past.

In the fifth and final fragment, Michael Phelps sums up this point by making a joke:

**'Umm, I... I always make the joke: I was like, yeah, I learned to communicate at 30. And I was like, "great."'**

**'He's 32 now.'**

**'It's better late than never, right?'**

*'Umm, I... I always make the joke: I was like, yeah, I learned to communicate at 30. And I was like, "great."'*

*'He's 32 now.'*

*'It's better late than never, right?'*

In case you were wondering, yes, I am going to explain the joke – that's the sort of person I am. People sometimes speak about cultivating good communication skills, or of the importance of communication when you are suffering from a mental illness. However, *to communicate* can simply mean 'to speak,' so Michael Phelps is joking that he only learnt to talk at the age of 30, that he said his first words when he was 30 years old. That's why he says 'great' sarcastically: "great" that it took me so long to learn to talk.'

After the interviewer then jokes that Michael Phelps is 32 now, he replies: 'it's better late than never, right?' This is a common phrase, so I'll just give you one more example. Imagine you're at school and you hand in your maths homework late. Your teacher says, 'You should have given this in two days ago.' You might reply, 'Better late than never, right?' And then your teacher would probably give you detention for being so cheeky.

So, feel ready to hear the whole clip again? Very well, here comes Michael Phelps' explanation of why someone as successful as him can still suffer from anxiety and depression:

**'But – I mean, it's... it's – we all go through things. We... We all go through struggles, right? There's – probably everybody in this room that goes through struggles the same exact way, and I think that's what... that's what we all have to realise.'**

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**'Umm, I... I always make the joke: I was like, yeah, I learned to communicate at thirty. And I was like, "great."'**

**'He's thirty-two now.'**

**'It's better late than never, right?'**

It certainly is better to learn to communicate late than never at all, I agree fully. And speaking of communication, it's been a while since I've heard from any of you. *English in Practice* is growing nicely, but staring at a bar chart is not nearly as satisfying as receiving feedback from my listeners and learning a bit about them – where they live, why they are learning English, etc. Remember, you can also ask me any questions you might have about the English language.

If you do wish to get in contact, simply send me an email to the following address: [englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com), or contact me via the Facebook page: 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.' And if you have enjoyed the podcast or found it helpful, tell your friends about it, share the Facebook page on social media, etc.

In the description you will find the link to the interview with Michael Phelps, should you wish to watch the entire thing.

That's all from me for today. I hope you have enjoyed this episode of *English in Practice*. Look out for an episode on sayings next week. All the best. Over and out.

Watch the whole interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao4fEgIWqms>

*Se Habla Español*: <https://www.facebook.com/sehablaespanolpodcast/>