



THE WORD 'FINE' IS NOW SO PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE IT'S BECOME THE NEW F-WORD. LIZZIE POOK INVESTIGATES THE FALLOUT OF OUR ONE-WORD-FITS-ALL POLICY

leaving you to figure out what the problem is.

For recipient and receiver the word has so many different meanings yet at no point does it ever serve a proper emotional purpose. "Fine" is a social lubricant," says Fisher. "The English language is based on trade and commerce; it's the way we do business. Feelings and emotions don't even come into our relationships with each other – it's very light and superficial."

It's true. It's not as if we ask each other how we're *feeling*, we ask each other how we *are*. So it's no surprise us Brits are often described as somewhat lacking in emotion. In fact, a recent study published in science journal *PLOS ONE* found that literature from Britain in the last 50 years has used a significantly lower amount of emotional language compared to books in the American canon, for example. So the lacklustre content of our bookshelves could be reflecting a nosedive in the depth of our emotions, which explains why we are prone to catch-all descriptions like 'fine'.

The funny thing is, the word fine used to be a good and clear description. "The adjective 'fine' entered English as a loan word from Old French in the mid-13th century," says Josephine Livingstone, a researcher in the history of English at New York University. "That word, 'fin' meant something totally perfected," she adds. "But now 'fine' has a lot of meanings. In this sense, we use it to mean

'good', but really we mean 'distinctly average.' And there are a lot of words that work this way, like 'fair', or 'good' itself. We call this a 'weakened use' – and the weakened use of fine was actually only added to the Oxford English Dictionary as a draft entry in 1993."

It's an example of how social evolution can shape a word. "We now use it a lot in workplaces and situations where politeness is important – but the slight passive aggressive aspect of the word is probably a result of *having* to be polite when we don't feel very polite. This is meaning derived

from the social life of the word, not from its etymology."

TRUE BRITS

This is all, of course, a very British way of behaving. Heaven forbid we should make a fuss about our feelings. "In the UK, when you say to someone, 'How are you?' you want and expect them to say, 'I'm fine,'" says Kenny. "We don't want them to launch into a spiel about how they're having a crap time. There's a very British etiquette around using the word that makes us forget it's alright to mention we might not be OK."

That said, men and women's relationships with the word are

very different. "Women are more likely to use the word 'fine' than men because we deal with conflict in relationships in a very different way," says Kenny. "Women squirrel away our partner's misdemeanours until we can throw them all back in one go. It's a very female way of 'teaching someone a lesson'. Whereas men are immediate creatures, they are more likely to deal with an emotional issue in the moment."

Our counterparts in other countries show differences too. A 2012 study of the depth of emotional experiences of people

in 150 countries placed the UK 58th, behind the United States, Canada, Finland, France and Spain, among others. According to the polling firm Gallup, who conducted the study, Latin America leads the world when it comes to describing how they're feeling in a positive way, with Panama, Paraguay and Venezuela at the top."

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If these studies are to be believed, other countries are not only more in touch with their emotions, but more in touch with the means of communicating these emotions, too. It may be a cliché, but if a Spanish woman is having a hard time, she will say

it. If your Russian friend thinks her boyfriend is being a git, she'll probably tell him. Theories suggest this could be down, in part, to semantics – there is no word for 'fine' in Spanish, only 'bien' for 'well' as in "estoy bien" ("I am well"); nor in Russian, where if you want to convey a so-so sort of emotion you use a word meaning 'normal'. On the flip side, there are certain specific feelings that just cannot be described using English, but there are plenty of non-English words for them. Take 'pena ajena' (Mexican Spanish): the embarrassment you feel watching someone's humiliation, or 'litost' (Czech): a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery. Without such emotionally precise language is it any wonder we resort to words like 'fine'?

So while it might be alien, and terrifying, we'd suggest banishing the f-word from your vocabulary. It might be painful, it might be awkward and you might get an odd look when you tell the girl in *Iitsu* you feel "vulnerable" today, but it will do your emotional health the world of good.

"Describing our feelings in a more eloquent way would ultimately be healthier," concludes Knowles. "What's wrong with saying, 'I'm happy today because this is going right or I feel good, I've got this to look forward to?' We can expand our vocabulary, but to do that, we have to expand our self-awareness."

So, let's start again, how are you today?

"BOTTLING UP VOLCANIC LEVELS OF STRESS AND TRYING TO DOUSE THEM WITH THESE FOUR LETTERS IS THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT WE SHOULD DO"

"FINE": A MAN'S PERSPECTIVE

JONATHAN PILE, EDITOR OF DAILY DIGITAL MR HYDE, EXPLAINS WHY THE WORD 'FINE' FILLS HIM WITH FEAR

"I'm fine." Are there any two words more likely to summon dread in the pit of a man's stomach? At least, "It's over," moves past the dread into

other, more manageably concrete emotions.

The problem with "I'm fine" is the false hope it instils in us: the brief moment when you pray it might be followed by a "...I'm just tired" or "...Mum just hasn't texted me back yet", or "...Sorry, did I seem distracted? I was just thinking how wonderful you are." When these qualifiers don't come (and we'll

wait longer than is reasonable on the off-chance they might), that's the moment we know we're in trouble.

How are we, creatures who learned to express our emotions with banter (and the occasional wrestle) supposed to pick up on the nuances of "fine"? That word is the same whether you're actually alright or desperately unhappy. More often

than not it's the latter.

Then we have a decision: put up with the curt conversation and long silences until it works itself out, or face it head on in the hope we can charm our way to an easy solution, but knowing that a full row in the toilet roll aisle of the supermarket is the more likely outcome.

You see, with those seemingly innocuous words, you've put us in

an impossible situation.

Fight with you or be miserable with you. I think I can confidently speak for all men when I say we really, really don't want to do either.

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JONNY HAS CLEARLY JUST HEARD THE WORD 'FINE'