

Catch Word #241 – Take the plunge

Episode description

Life is full of important decisions, and some of them cannot be undone. You have to carefully navigate the world of decisions. In this Catch Word episode, Andrew and Jeremy discuss expressions that revolve around the major choices we make.

In this episode, our hosts talk about life-altering decisions, like marriage and when to change jobs, as well as those really uncomfortable ones, like euthanizing an animal. So get ready to take the plunge and work your butt off while studying with us!

Fun fact

To bite the bullet is one of the expressions studied in this episode. Andrew's description of the visual image in his head is pretty close to the original imagery of the expression. The expression was coined by Rudyard Kipling in his novel *The Light That Failed*, and it describes someone having to bite down on an ammunition cartridge to help deal with the pain of a difficult medical procedure.

Expressions included in the study guide

- To take the plunge
- To take [something] lightly
- To pop the question
- To put [an animal] down
- To bite the bullet
- To work [one's] butt off



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello, everyone. I'm Andrew.

Jeremy: And I'm Jeremy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Hey there, friends. Welcome back to Culips. Today we have a Catch Word episode for you. Now, Catch Word is the series where we teach you idioms, phrasal verbs, and expressions that will help you improve your English listening and speaking.

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And today I'm joined by my cohost, Jeremy. Hey there, Jeremy. What are we covering in this episode?

Jeremy: Hey, Andrew. In this episode, we will be teaching everyone two expressions about decision-making.

Andrew: Yeah, decision-making, and more specifically about making a tough or difficult decision that requires a lot of thought and consideration. And I like these two expressions, Jeremy, they're fun ones and very commonly used in everyday conversation. So they're great to know.

Now, why don't we just get right into it. Today's first expression is **take the plunge**. **Take the plunge**. And plunge is spelt P-L-U-N-G-E, plunge. **Take the plunge**. So what does it mean **to take the plunge**, Jeremy?

Jeremy: The first thing that comes to mind for me is getting married.

Andrew: Getting married, **take the plunge**. So, yeah, choosing to get married or deciding to get married is a big life decision, right? You shouldn't **take this lightly**, this decision, you should think about it very seriously because, you know, once you're married, that's a big commitment and you should try to stay married for the rest of your life, if possible. Try your best, right?

Jeremy: Yeah, so we could say that **take the plunge** means to do something important or difficult after giving it some serious thought. So, in general, marriage is known to be that kind of thing where we need to really think about it before we do it. It's not something we should do on a whim or impulsively. So after some serious thought, if you still decide, OK, I'm going to do it, then you can say, I'm going to **take the plunge**.

So this expression does indicate marriage a lot. And when it is used to mean marriage, it's usually used between men, it sounds like, two men talking about one of them getting married. So for example, if Andrew and I were bachelors, and Andrew said he's going to get married soon, then he might say, hey, dude, I'm going **to take the plunge**. Right?

Andrew: Yeah. Hey, dude, I'm going **to take the plunge**, I'm going to make this big decision. And, you know, maybe we should break down this word plunge for everyone. Plunge means to jump in some water, like you can **take a plunge** in a lake, you could hop into the lake. You could plunge into the ocean, you could jump into the ocean. So I imagine, at least in my mind, standing on the edge of a cliff and debating should I jump off this cliff and into the ocean to go swimming? It's kind of a cliff diving image that I have. And, you know, you're up high on the cliff, so making the jump and plunging into the ocean, these are not easy things to do. It's, like, scary. So you debate it for a long time and think it over and eventually if you jump, then you **take the plunge**. So I think this is the imagery behind this expression and that is why we use it.

Jeremy: Yeah, it does seem to always relate to water. And another word that is connected to this is plunger. A plunger is the thing that you use to unclog a toilet. If a toilet ever gets clogged for some reason, that little rubber thing with a stick on the end of it, and you stick it in the toilet and move it around, that, that motion of something plunging into the water, pushing into the water very strongly, all at once, that is plunge. So we call that thing in English a plunger.

Andrew: Jeremy, you're right that the tool that we use to unclog the toilet is called a plunger and the verb and the action of unclogging the toilet with that tool is to plunge. And then in the expression, we hear the noun **take the plunge** or a plunge. So we heard lots of different forms of this word. And I hope now that our listeners can understand exactly what it means. And I think we can even make this more clear by listening to some conversation examples with the expression **take the plunge**. So why don't we do that right now?

Jeremy: Let's do it.

Friend 1: I've got big news.

Friend 2: What is it?

Friend 1: I'm getting married.

Friend 2: Wow, congrats, dude. So you finally decided **to take the plunge**?

Friend 1: Yeah, you know, I've been thinking about **popping the question** for, wow, over a year now. But I finally realized she's the one for me.

Friend 2: That's great, man. I'm so happy for you.

Andrew: OK. So, in this conversation example, we heard about a guy who's getting married soon. He **popped the question** to his girlfriend and now they are engaged. So **pop the question** means to ask someone to marry you. So he **pops the question** and asks her to get married with him because he realized that she's the one. She is the special woman in the world that is the perfect fit for him.

And, Jeremy, just like we were talking about earlier, you know, marriage is a big, important decision. And when you finally decide to get married, that's the perfect context to use this expression **take the plunge**, because it communicates that you have made an important decision and decided to do something after giving it some very serious thought.

Jeremy: Exactly. So should we listen to another example conversation here?

Andrew: Yeah, let's do it.

Friend 1: How's work these days?

Friend 2: It's sucks, man. I hate my boss. He's such a jerk all the time.

Friend 1: Oh, that's such a bummer. Have you thought about quitting? Why don't you open that coffee shop that you've always dreamed about?

Friend 2: I don't know. I mean, that would be awesome and everything. But I'm just not sure if I'm ready **to take the plunge** and quit my job.

Jeremy: In this example conversation, one friend asks his friend about his job. He says he hates his job, but he's still a bit nervous about quitting. He says he is not sure if he's ready **to take the plunge** and make the big decision, **to take the plunge** and open a coffee shop.

Andrew: Exactly. So this is another way that we use this expression often is we say I'm not sure if I'm ready **to take the plunge** or I'm not ready **to take the plunge** yet. Meaning that we're not ready to take action and make a life-altering, life-changing decision, like quitting a job or moving or breaking up with someone even. You know, these are big decisions, big actions that require a lot of courage. And sometimes people are just not ready to do them. They're not ready **to take the plunge**. So it's a common expression for this context.

Jeremy: And you know what, Andrew? I think that the reason we say plunge is because once you jump into water, you are wet, you can't go back to being dry. You are fully affected by that thing. So this kind of decision is one in which you can't go back easily. So when you get married, you know, normally, you can't go back on that. It's for the rest of your life. If you jump in a bunch of water, you can't get dry immediately. And if you quit your job, you probably can't go back and get it again.

Andrew: Yeah, that's a great point. So the nuance here is that you're making a life-changing, life-altering decision that can't easily be reversed, right? So you wouldn't say, like, I **took the plunge** and decided to drink tea this morning instead of coffee. Because, you know, after you finish your cup of tea, if you really wanted coffee, you could just drink a cup of coffee. But once you quit your job, once you break up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, there's no going back from that. It's kind of final and irreversible. Cool. That's a good point to make.

Jeremy: So our second expression for this episode is **bite the bullet**. **Bite the bullet**.

Andrew: **Bite the bullet**. So of course, a bullet is the thing that you load into a gun, right? It's the ammunition in a gun. So, wow, **biting the bullet**, this is a really strange idiom, Jeremy, could you break it down for us?

Jeremy: Yeah. So let's start with the meaning of this one. So this one means to make a difficult decision and force yourself to do something you don't want to do because the outcome is less than ideal. So that's kind of complicated. And I think our example conversations will help it to make more sense. But a bullet is a dangerous thing, right? Bullets can kill people. So if you are **biting a bullet**, it seems like you are in a dangerous situation, doesn't it, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah to me, I mean, the imagery is different for everyone. And, Jeremy, I always love how we have varying images in our heads about these expressions. For me, when I think of **biting the bullet**, you know, like you said, you have to make a difficult decision. And you don't want to do this, right? Because you know that what is going to happen as a result is not good. This is the context where we use **bite the bullet**.

OK, the imagery that I have in my head is also related to guns. But let's say you got shot, OK? And maybe not with a bullet, but with an arrow back in the medieval days, OK, you got shot with an arrow on the battlefield. And you need to have a kind of emergency operation to remove the arrow from your leg, let's say. What would you have to do in that situation? Well, I've seen on movies before that they put something in the person's mouth when they are in that extreme amount of pain. So they can bite down very firmly on it and just sort of tense up while the arrow is removed. So I kind of think of the bullet as being this kind of thing that you can bite down on while you have to do something painful.

So here, of course, it's not like a painful, physical pain, it's like an emotional pain. You have to bite down on something very firm and hard while you make this difficult decision. And so a bullet is small, it's hard, and it can fit in your mouth. So I think of somebody kind of, ah, I don't want to do this. I'm just sort of, like, biting down to endure the pain of making this difficult decision. That's the image that I have in my head. I know it's kind of complicated, but that's what it is.

Jeremy: No, that makes much more sense to me now that you say it. I never really thought about this one, actually.

Andrew: Yeah, like so many of these expressions, we just say them without really thinking of the deeper meaning. But with that being said, guys, the key thing that you need to know is that **bite the bullet** means to make a difficult decision and force yourself to do something that you don't really want to do.

So I think now we can listen to some conversation examples. And here is the first one.

Friend 1: I've got some sad news to tell you.

Friend 2: Uh-oh, what's up?

Friend 1: We had **to put my dog down** last week.

Friend 2: Oh no, man. I'm so sorry to hear that.

Friend 1: Yeah, you know, she was old and her health was deteriorating quickly. And it just broke my heart to do it. But we had **to bite the bullet** and **put her down**.

Friend 2: Well, she'll be missed. She was such a good pup.

Friend 1: Yeah, she was. I sure will miss her.

Andrew: OK, so this was a very sad conversation example about a pet dog that had **to be put down**. So **put down** means to kill in a very humane way. Usually we **put down dogs or cats or pets** that are old and suffering, right? And it's usually through a kind of injection that ends their life painlessly. And so the dog in this example had **to be put down**, because it was old and sick and suffering. So, you know, making the decision **to put down your pet** is not easy at all. And it can be very heartbreaking having to do this. So the owner had **to bite the bullet** and make the decision. He wanted the best for his dog to end her suffering. But at the same time, you know, he's got a very strong emotional connection to the animal and it's tough to do. So this is the perfect kind of context where we can use **bite the bullet**.

Jeremy: All right, Andrew, should we have a listen to our next conversation example?

Andrew: Yeah, let's do it.

Friend 1: Hey, what are you doing tomorrow? You want to hang out?

Friend 2: Sure. What time? I'm supposed to meet with my boss in the morning, but I'm free in the afternoon.

Friend 1: Yeah, that'll work. Why are you meeting with your boss?

Friend 2: Well, I finally decided **to bite the bullet** and ask for a raise. You know, I've been working at the shop now for over 6 years but I've never had a raise. So I think it's about time I asked for one.

Friend 1: Yeah, good for you, man. You **work your butt off**. You deserve a raise for sure.

Friend 2: Well, wish me good luck, OK?

Friend 1: All right. Good luck. And I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, all right?

Jeremy: In this example, two friends are talking and one of them mentions that he is going **to bite the bullet** and ask for a raise. Asking for a raise can be an awkward thing to do sometimes, because usually you're afraid that the boss might say no. And this fear of whether they will say no or get angry because you asked is the reason we use this expression, **bite the bullet**. Even though he is afraid of what his boss might say, he still decided **to bite the bullet** and do it anyway. And the other friend uses some encouraging words here, and he says **you work your butt off**. **To work your butt off**, this is another idiomatic expression. That means that you work very hard. The imagery for this one is kind of funny. But I guess if you work really, really hard, your butt might fall off. That is the implied meaning of this expression. But we do use it all the time in English. So it's important to know.

Andrew: Yeah, **work your butt off** means to work really hard. Be careful with this one, everyone, because, you know, you don't want to compliment your boss and say, hey, boss, you're **working your butt off**. Great job. That sounds strange. But to your close friends or close coworkers, then it's OK to use. And it's especially very common to use when talking about yourself. Like, I **work my butt off** for this company, right? I work really hard for this company. But don't use it in an important business meeting. It's way too casual for that situation.

Jeremy: So, everyone, we hope that this episode was a good one for you guys. And we hope that you **work your butt off** in your English studies going forward.

Andrew: That's true, guys. **Working your butt off** is one way that you can ensure success with English. So that brings us to the end of today's episode. Thanks for listening, everyone. To recap what we studied today, we learned two important expressions for talking about decision-making, specifically difficult decisions. And the first expression was **to take the plunge** and the second one was **to bite the bullet**.

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If you have a question or comment for us, you can message us. Our email address is contact@Culips.com. So we'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye.

Jeremy: Bye, everyone.

Detailed Explanations

To take the plunge

Idiom

The first key expression discussed in this episode is **to take the plunge**. **To take the plunge** is to make a life-altering decision. This expression is commonly associated with men and how they talk about deciding to get married. However, you can use **to take the plunge** in any situation where you are going to make a major change in your life.

To plunge is to immerse something into water. The imagery behind this expression is that once you **take the plunge**, you are fully wet and you cannot get dry quickly. Similarly, a major life decision cannot easily be undone. You also have to prepare yourself before you plunge into water, just like you would to make a major decision.

Here are a couple more examples with **to take the plunge**:

Ari: How long have you and Sherry been dating?

Paul: It's been about 4 years now.

Ari: Wow. So when are you going **to take the plunge**?

Paul: Soon. Don't tell anyone, but I'm thinking of asking her to marry me next month when we go on vacation.

Jill: Are you still thinking of moving to Hollywood? You've been talking about starting your movie career for years.

Barbara: I know, but I'm not sure I'm ready **to take the plunge**. I still enjoy doing theatre here.

Jill: OK. My only suggestion is to not wait too long.

Barbara: Yeah, I know.

To take [something] lightly

Idiom

When talking about the decision to get married, Andrew says that the decision should not be **taken lightly**. **To take [something] lightly** is to not consider it to be very important. Big life decisions such as getting married and buying a house are very important, so you shouldn't **take them lightly**.

The opposite of **to take [something] lightly** is to take [something] seriously.

Here are a couple more examples with **to take [something] lightly**:

Monique: I'm worried about my dad.

Laura: Why do you say that?

Monique: I find he **takes his health too lightly**. He's getting older, so he should pay more attention to exercise and nutrition.

Laura: You know a lot about those topics. I hope you're helping him out on that front.

Monique: I am. Getting him to listen to me is the hard part.

Harry: Who are we playing against tonight?

Doug: The Wolves.

Harry: Oh, good. They're close to last place in the division, right?

Doug: Yes, but don't **take them too lightly**. They're still a dangerous team. Anyone can win on any given night.

Harry: That's true.

To pop the question

Idiom

In the first example dialogue, one friend says he has been thinking of **popping the question** for a long time. That means he has been thinking of asking his girlfriend to marry him. You can use **to pop the question** without having to explain which question you mean, because everyone knows it is about getting married. You can also say **to pop the big question**.

Even though **popping the question** had long been done mostly by men, this expression is open to anyone who proposes marriage.

Here are a couple more examples with **to pop the question**:

Patty: You look nice.

Michael: Thanks. Tonight is the big night.

Patty: What do you mean?

Michael: I'm going **to pop the question**.

Patty: Really? Where?

Michael: On the Ferris wheel, overlooking the city. Wish me luck!

Paula: I heard you just got engaged. That's so cool.

Jennifer: I know. Thanks.

Paula: How did he **pop the question**?

Jennifer: Actually, I was the one who asked him. I surprised him in front of his entire family.

Paula: Wow. How did they react?

Jennifer: They burst out cheering before he could even answer!

To put [an animal] down

Idiom

In an example conversation during this episode, one of the friends announces the sad news that he had **to put his dog down**. This means he had his dog euthanized. To euthanize an animal is to end its life, usually in a humane way. Even though humans may also be euthanized, the expression **to put down** applies only to animals.

To put [an animal] down is a euphemism. It is a kinder way of talking about death, especially because this is often a very emotional situation, both for children and adults. A common variation is **to put to sleep**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to put [an animal] down**:

Nathan: Are you OK? It looks like you were crying.

Yann: I was. It's been a rough day.

Nathan: Do you want to talk about it?

Yann: We had **to put our cat down**. He was pretty sick.

Nathan: I'm so sorry to hear that.

Yann: Our children took it really badly. They didn't go to school today.

Olly: Did you hear what happened at the horse races yesterday?

Priya: No, I didn't. Tell me.

Olly: In one of the afternoon races, a horse stumbled badly and broke its leg.

Priya: That's terrible. What did they do?

Olly: They had to quickly **put the horse down**. It's sad, but apparently horses rarely recover from broken legs. That's why they euthanize them.

To bite the bullet

Idiom

The second key expression discussed in this episode is **to bite the bullet**. **To bite the bullet** is when you force yourself to make a difficult decision that will make your life uncomfortable. It is often a decision that you have been delaying, precisely because it is unpleasant.

This expression is different from to take the plunge. **To bite the bullet** speaks of an unwanted situation, whereas to take the plunge is about a major change, usually a positive one.

Here are a couple more examples with **to bite the bullet**:

Jinny: I'm going car shopping this weekend. Do you want to come with me?

Felix: Car shopping? What's wrong with the car you have now?

Jinny: It's getting pretty old and it's kind of dangerous to drive. I have **to bite the bullet** and get rid of it.

Felix: That's too bad. You love that car.

Jinny: I know. It's tough, but it's a good decision for the family. We'll be safer.

Sandy: Are you still sick?

Lex: Just a little.

Sandy: You need to see a doctor.

Lex: I hate going to the doctor. I'll be fine soon enough.

Sandy: That's not how it works. You have **to bite the bullet** and go. Look, I'll make an appointment for you.

To work [one's] butt off

Idiom

In one of the examples dialogues, a person agrees that his friend should get a raise because he has been **working his butt off**. **To work [one's] butt off** means to work very hard. This is an informal expression.

Common variations includes **to work [one's] ass off** and **to work [one's] tail off**. However, the first one is considered vulgar, so be careful to whom you say it. **To work your fingers to the bone** is a similar expression that also means to work very hard.

Here are a couple more examples with **to work [one's] butt off**:

Kirk: I'm so angry.

Ben: Why? What happened?

Kirk: I was just told that my master's degree isn't good enough to be considered for a promotion.

Ben: That's crazy.

Kirk: I know. Do they mean that I **worked my butt off** for all those years for nothing? It doesn't make sense.

Ben: You should look into it some more. There must be some kind of miscommunication.

Chris: Are you still available to help me build the boys' tree house on Saturday?

Ivan: Of course. I'm looking forward to it.

Chris: Are you sure? We're going to be **working our butts off**. You know that, right?

Ivan: Yup. That's why I'm looking forward to it.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is NOT similar to work [one's] butt off?

- a) to work one's tail off
- b) to work one's ass off
- c) to work your hair off
- d) to work your fingers to the bone

2. True or false? To bite the bullet is usually said about a fun situation.

- a) true
- b) false

3. What is the opposite of to take [something] lightly?

- a) to take it home
- b) to take it hardly
- c) to take it solidly
- d) to take it seriously

4. Which of the following is a good example of popping the question?

- a) will you marry me?
- b) do you want to move in together?
- c) do you want to buy a dog?
- d) will you visit me if I move away?

5. What does to put [an animal] down mean?

- a) you put it on the floor
- b) you are mean to it
- c) you end its life in a humane way
- d) you have it cleaned

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. When is the last time you took the plunge? When was the last life-changing decision you had to take?
2. What's the most romantic story you've heard about someone popping the big question?
3. Are you the type of person who likes to take things lightly? Why or why not?
4. Who is someone you know who really works their butt off?
5. Have you ever had to put an animal down? How did you react, or how would you react in that situation?

Quiz Answers

1. c 2. b 3. d 4. a 5. c

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