

Catch Word #247 – Spread too thin

Episode description

Are your days so busy you find you don't have any time for yourself? English has many ways to express this crazy busy state you're in. In this Catch Word episode, Andrew and Kassy explain two key phrases so that you can let people know you're too busy.

Culips' Catch Word series teaches idioms, phrasal verbs and expressions so you can improve your English vocabulary. This audio English lesson features a natural conversation between two native English speakers. While you improve your listening skills, you'll also learn new ways to express just how busy you are every day.

Fun fact

One of the expression studies in this episode is to run around like a headless chicken. Did you know there was a famous case of a chicken that continued to live for 18 months after it had its head chopped off?

Expressions included in the study guide

- To spread [oneself] too thin
- To run around like a headless chicken
- Time's running out
- Rite of passage
- Fam
- Downtime



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 there, everyone. My name's Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Hello, everyone. Welcome back to Culips. This is a Catch Word episode. Now Catch Word is the series where we teach you idioms, phrasal verbs and expressions that will help improve your English listening and speaking. And in this episode, we're going to teach you two idiomatic expressions about being crazy busy. And I'm joined today by my co-host, Kassy, who actually has been pretty crazy busy herself lately. Hey, Kassy, what's up?

Kassy: Hey, Andrew, and hey, listeners. Yes, that is very true. I'm super crazy busy. But before we get into this episode, and talk about phrases about being busy, we have a shout-out. One of our listeners from Canada with the username Van Mango left us a five-star rating and a nice review on Apple Podcasts. Van Mango, who has a very cool name by the way, wrote, "Super recommended. If you're looking for materials or whatever to improve your English, you should try the Culips English Podcast, thumbs up."

Andrew: That is a great review. Thank you so much Van Mango for leaving that for us. And listeners, if you'd like to get a shout-out in an upcoming Culips episode, then please do just what Van Mango did. Leave us a five-star rating and a positive review on Apple Podcasts or whatever platform you use to listen to Culips. Doing this will help more English learners from around the world learn English with us. I also wanted to let you know that there's a transcript and study guide for this episode that's available for all Culips members. Following along with the guide while you listen is one of the best ways to study with us and we highly recommend it. Plus, when you become a Culips member, you'll get access to lots of special bonuses, like invitations to our monthly live streams and access to our members only series, the Fluency Files. So to sign up, become a member, and get the study guide and transcript, just visit Culips.com. So with that being said, I think we're ready to start this episode. And Kassy, our expressions for today are about being crazy busy. And as a result of being so busy, you don't really do anything well. You know, when you're trying to multitask and do so many things at the same time, I mean, if you're like me, then usually the result is not very good. And today's expressions are all about this exact topic. So maybe you could introduce the first idiomatic expression that we'll teach to our listeners now.

Kassy: OK. So the first expression today is **to spread yourself too thin, to spread yourself too thin**. And this expression means that you're doing too many things at once, and as a result, nothing's really going well. I don't know about you, Andrew, but when I think of this expression, I think of, you know, you want to eat some peanut butter toast, but you're at the very end of the peanut butter jar. And so you have just a little bit left and you try to make it last, you try to spread it as thinly as possible on your toast. But as a result, there's no flavour.

Andrew: Exactly, that is exactly the same imagery that pops into my mind. I actually was thinking of a bagel and cream cheese, but pretty much the same thing, right? So to spread, maybe some of our listeners don't know this verb, to spread, it means to take something like jam or cream cheese or peanut butter and place it evenly over a piece of bread usually, right? Like toast or a bagel or could be even a muffin, you could spread butter on a muffin, just to place it evenly over the whole surface of the bread that is to spread. And so if you spread, not the peanut butter or not the jam or not the cream cheese, but yourself too thin, well, it's kind of like you're trying to put yourself in all places at once and do all things. But as a result of that, you don't do anything well, just like when you try and spread only a little bit of peanut butter over the whole surface of the toast. Well, the end result is that you don't taste the peanut butter at all, because the peanut butter is spread too thin.

Kassy: So if you're **spread too thin** the end result is, you know, not completing everything correctly or not completing everything that you set out to do to the best of your ability.

Andrew: Exactly. Kassy, have you ever **spread yourself too thin**?

Kassy: Many times.

Andrew: Yeah, me too. You know, we're doing our day jobs, and we're doing the Culips podcast. We also have our personal lives when we need to hang out with our loved ones and our friends. And also we need to have time for our hobbies and interests. So when you have a crazy busy schedule, and you're trying to do everything really well, well, it's bound to happen that some things don't get done perfectly. So in fact, in the last few years, I really felt like I spread myself too thin. I was trying to do too many things at once. In addition to work and Culips and my personal life, I was also trying to be an amazing Korean speaker, and a very good chess player and a very fast runner. I was concentrating on these three hobbies. And it turns out that I wasn't doing any of them really amazingly. So I've cut back on the running. I mean, I still run, but I'm just not trying to go fast anymore. And I cut back on the chess. I still play, but I'm not trying to be a world champion, or anything. So I think it's going better. I think focusing on a little is a way to get a lot of results.

Kassy: I agree, that last sentence is good. Focusing on a few things is much better than focusing on too many things and not having enough time to do it all.

Andrew: I agree. And how about now we listen to our first example with this expression?

Kassy: Sounds great.

Friend 1: So softball season is starting up again soon. Are you gonna play this year?

Friend 2: You know, I love playing softball and all, but I'm going to take a break this season.

Friend 1: Really? Oh, that's too bad. You're such a good player.

Friend 2: I know. And it's so fun to play with everyone. But I've just been **spreading myself way too thin** lately, with my job and CrossFit class, and now I'm volunteering every week at the community center too.

Friend 1: Ah, yeah, that's no problem. I understand. Just make sure you come out and cheer us on some time, OK?

Friend 2: Of course.

Andrew: So in this example conversation, we hear two friends talking about softball season. Now softball is a really fun game that is really, really similar to baseball, except the ball is larger. And usually it's played more casually, it's not really a competitive sport. I know in Canada, and in the USA as well, a lot of adults will join a softball team and play just recreationally for fun. So these two friends are talking about this sport and the upcoming season that is starting. And one friend says that she's not going to play this year. And that's because she feels like she's been **spreading herself too thin** lately. She's been doing too many things, working, taking a CrossFit class, volunteering at the community center as well. So adding another activity, playing softball onto this, would just be too much for her. She would probably fall apart and not be able to do any of these commitments well. So instead of joining the team, she just decided to pass and not play this year.

Kassy: It sounds very similar to what you said earlier, Andrew, you know, cutting back on your running and your chess playing.

Andrew: Kassy, did you ever play softball?

Kassy: I played in gym class.

Andrew: Played in gym class. OK, very good. Let's move on to example conversation number two.

Friend 1: Did you hear about Mark?

Friend 2: No, what happened?

Friend 1: He resigned from his job.

Friend 2: As the school principal?

Friend 1: Yeah, exactly.

Friend 2: Why did he do that?

Friend 1: He said he just couldn't keep up with all the things he had going on in his life. I guess he just **spread himself too thin**.

Friend 2: So what's he going to do now?

Friend 1: I heard he's planning to go back to university and is going to train as a graphics designer.

Friend 2: Wow. So he's completely changing fields?

Friend 1: Yeah, but I think it'll be good for him. He's always been interested in art.

Friend 2: Well, if you talk to him again soon, tell him I say hey, and good luck with the course.

Kassy: So in this example, we hear about a guy Mark, who used to be a school principal, but he recently quit his job to go back to university and become a graphics designer. And he did this because he had **spread himself too thin**. He felt like his job was just taking up too much of his time and not giving him enough joy to pursue the things he really wanted to in life. Andrew, I think this happens to a lot of people when they hit, you know, their late 40s, early 50s, or maybe even a little bit before that. We call it kind of like a midlife crisis. You know, you, you've been working one job for a while, or you know, you have kids and family and you realize that you're kind of stuck in a routine and you realize, you know, **time's running out**. Not exactly, there's lots of time left, usually, but you feel that way. So a lot of people make changes during this time, just like this guy, Mark.

Andrew: Yeah. I mean, I'm not quite at midlife yet. At least I hope I'm not at midlife yet. I just turned 37 recently. But I almost had a mini midlife crisis just last weekend. And I started researching on the internet what I would have to do to enter med school and train as a doctor. I was curious about that.

Kassy: Really?

Andrew: Yeah, I thought if I wanted to do something new, like a big career change like that, I would have to do it ASAP, as soon as possible. And I was reading all about it and thinking about all the ways that my life would change if I went back to being a student, and what it would be like to retrain and become a doctor. I don't know if I'll do it or not. But I was thinking about it, is interesting.

Kassy: Wow, that's crazy. If you do it, I'll support you. Go, Andrew.

Andrew: We'll see, we'll see. But one of the main things that I would worry about is **spreading myself too thin**, Kassy, if I became a med student, because I love doing Culips. And don't worry listeners, I'm not going to give it up. So for now, I'll just keep teaching. And speaking of which, let's teach everyone our second expression for today, which is **to run around like a headless chicken**. This one is kind of a funny and gross one at the same time, **to run around like a headless chicken**. Now, Kassy, you asked me about the imagery from the first expression, so I have to ask you about the imagery for this expression. What pops into your head when you hear this phrase?

Kassy: Well, I think it's pretty straightforward. I imagine a chicken with his head cut off just running around a little farm field and being like, oh my god, oh my god, I'm dying.

Andrew: Yeah, now actually, I have never had to do this. I know it's a **rite of passage** in some places. In fact, lately, I was watching a TV show on Netflix called Master of None. And in the first episode, the main character or one of the main characters, he has to cut the head off of one of his pet chickens, so that they can eat the chicken for dinner. It was very traumatic. But what happens when you do this, at least what I understand because I've never actually done it or seen it myself, is that when you cut the head off a chicken, it doesn't die instantly, right? The nerves are, it might be technically brain dead, but the nerves are still active. And the chicken can run around for a few minutes before passing out and stopping its movement. So we often use this imagery in English as a metaphor for being crazy busy and just running around and doing so many things in a hectic-like fashion. And if you think of **running around like a headless chicken** because you're so busy, you can't even stop to concentrate on anything, then you're probably not going to be doing a very good job, right? If you're dashing here, dashing there, doing this, doing that. You're just not going to be efficient at doing all of the things you want to do. So this expression means to do too many things at the same time, and in an ineffective way.

Kassy: Yes. And Andrew, I actually do have a question. In Canada, is this usually the way you say that expression, **to run around like a headless chicken**?

Andrew: Yeah, I would say **to run around like a headless chicken** or **to run around like a chicken with its head cut off**. There are two ways to say it.

Kassy: Yeah, usually, I hear it as **to run around like a chicken with its head cut off**, which is longer.

Andrew: Yeah, that's a good point, Kassy, I never thought of that. But there are two ways to say this expression. And they mean the same thing. So perhaps **to run around like a headless chicken** is more of the UK style English. And UK English still has a pretty big influence in Canada. So that's probably why we use both of these expressions, one from the UK, one from the USA. Canada is kind of stuck in the middle of these two countries linguistically. I think we're ready to listen to our first example with this expression. What do you think?

Kassy: Yeah, let's do it.

Pam: Hello.

Reg: Hey there, Pam. It's Reg.

Pam: Hey, Reg, what's up?

Reg: Wow, not much. Just wondering if you and the **fam** want to come over for a barbecue tonight. Interested?

Pam: That'd be awesome. But today's not a good day. I've been **running around like a headless chicken** trying to get ready for next week's conference. I think I just need to chill tonight.

Reg: Ah, it's all good. No worries. We'll do it some other time.

Pam: Absolutely. Talk to you later.

Reg: Bye.

Andrew: So in this conversation, two friends are talking on the phone. One guy, Reg, calls his friend Pam to invite her for a barbecue party at his house. And Pam says thanks, but no thanks, I'd like to, but I'm just too busy. I've been **running around like a headless chicken** trying to get ready for a conference. So we can imagine that she's just doing so many different things, trying to get all of the preparations ready for this conference that's happening next week. And because she's so busy, she just wants to chill and relax. And because of this, she says no, sorry, I can't go to your barbecue.

Kassy: That's right, Andrew. And let's reinforce this expression with conversation number two.

Friend 1: What did you do today at work?

Friend 2: I had to run errands all day for my boss.

Friend 1: Errands? What kind of errands?

Friend 2: Let's see. First I had to deliver a bunch of documents to the downtown office. Then I had to dash back to the office to help him get ready for a lunch meeting. Then after that, I had to go back to the downtown office to pick up some new products. I was **running around like a chicken with its head cut off** all day.

Friend 1: Sounds like you had a crazy busy day.

Friend 2: Yeah, it was crazy. I'm ready to go home and chill.

Kassy: OK, in this conversation, we hear about an office worker's day and how crazy busy it was. She was going between the downtown office and the other office, moving documents, preparing lunch meetings, all sorts of crazy stuff. It was causing her **to run around like a chicken with its head cut off**. She had no **downtime** and no time to even like process what was going on. She just had to go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Andrew: Sounds terrible.

Kassy: Yes. I see this a lot on TV shows in New York, you know, interns at their first job trying to impress their boss by running errands as quickly as possible.

Andrew: Yeah, photocopy this, bring me some coffee, go send these emails, doing all these little jobs. And by the end of the day, you're just exhausted from running around all day, just like a headless chicken.

Kassy: Exactly.

Andrew: Well, everyone that brings us to the end of today's episode. We hope you enjoyed it, and we hope you learned something new. Don't forget, there's a study guide that goes with this episode on our website Culips.com, and it's available for all Culips members. If you want to support Culips because you like us and you learn a lot with us and were helpful for improving your English, well then please support us. The best way to do that is to sign up and become a Culips member on our website. Again, it's Culips.com. But that's not the only way. We'd also really appreciate it if you tell your friends who are learning English to check us out. If you followed us on social media, especially Instagram and YouTube. Or you could also leave us a five-star rating and a nice review on Apple Podcasts or wherever get your podcasts. If you have an idea or a suggestion for an upcoming episode, then we'd love to hear from you. Our email address is contact@Culips.com. We read all of your emails and reply as soon as we can. Sometimes we are also **spread too thin** and it takes us a little while to answer our emails. We'll be back soon with another brand new episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye.

Kassy: See ya.

Detailed Explanations

To spread [oneself] too thin Idiom

To spread [oneself] too thin means to do too many tasks at the same time. When you're spread too thin, you can't give any of your tasks the attention or time they need to be done well. Essentially, **to be spread too thin** means to be incredibly busy. You are so busy that you're overwhelmed, exhausted and unable to complete anything.

As Kassy and Andrew explain in this episode, this idiom comes from the action of smearing something, like peanut butter on bread, with such a thin layer that it doesn't cover the surface at all.

Here are a couple more examples with **to spread [oneself] too thin**:

Sadie: Have you seen Pamela lately?

Frank: Not lately. It's like she's disappeared.

Sadie: I know. The last time I spoke to her, she told me how she's signed up for the school basketball team and the student council. And she's also working at her father's store. It sounded like a lot when she told me.

Frank: Yikes! She's definitely **spreading herself too thin** then.

Sadie: That's what I thought! I'm worried about her.

Katsu: You look exhausted.

Minako: I am. What with work, my volunteering, my secretary job, my daughter's dance lessons and all the parties, I'm **spreading myself way too thin**!

Katsu: Sounds like it. Do you have a break coming up any time soon?

Minako: Not really. But they've hired an additional secretary. She'll be starting soon, so that'll take some work off my plate, at least.

To run around like a headless chicken

Idiom

To run around like a headless chicken means to be frenzied, distracted and rushed. People who **run around like headless chickens** move very quickly because they're trying to do too many things in a short period of time.

Native English speakers also use this idiom when someone is panicking, nervous or upset. This state of mind makes some people act frenzied, distracted and erratic. So, **they run around like a chicken with its head cut off**.

As Andrew mentions in this episode, this idiom refers to decapitated chicken or poultry, which sometimes continue moving after their heads are removed.

Here's one more example with **to run around like a headless chicken**:

Lewis: Did Gary find you earlier today?

Terry: No. Was he looking for me?

Lewis: Yeah. You and a lot of other things. Why is he **running around like a chicken with its head cut off**?

Terry: Oh, I know why. That big board meeting is this weekend and he's probably trying to get everything ready.

Lewis: Did he really wait until the last minute to get ready?

Terry: You know Gary. He procrastinates with the best of them. I'll go find him and see how I can help.

Fred: The holiday season is coming up. Are you excited?

Sandra: Not at all. I really don't like this time of year.

Fred: How come?

Sandra: I always end up **running around like a headless chicken**. There are way too many things for me to do.

Time's running out Expression

Time's running out means there is not much time left to do something. It can also mean that your allotted time for a certain task is almost over. This expression is often used in a serious and urgent situation. You can also say you're **running out of time**.

In this episode, Kassy mentions how people get stuck in a routine and often feel like their **time's running out**. However, there are other situations where you can use this expression. For example, if someone is near death, you could say their **time is running out**. When a school project worth half your grade is due in an hour but you're not done, you could say **time's running out**.

Here are a couple more examples with **time's running out**:

- Min:** Did you register for the marathon this summer?
- Theo:** No, not yet. I'm not sure if I want to run it. It was a lot of work to train last year. I don't think I'll have time this summer.
- Min:** Well, you need to decide soon. **Time's running out**. Registration closes this weekend.
- Theo:** This weekend? Already? OK, I'll decide tonight and let you know.

- Kaori:** I watched a really good documentary last night.
- Steph:** About what?
- Kaori:** The North Atlantic right whale. They were the most hunted whales in the 18th and 19th centuries. So now, they're almost all gone.
- Steph:** That's terrible! Are they going to be OK now that whaling isn't much of a thing anymore?
- Kaori:** Apparently not. They're susceptible to ship collisions and getting tangled in fishing gear. **Time's running out** if we don't do something soon.

Rite of passage

Phrase

A **rite of passage** is an event marking an important stage in someone's life. It is usually a major life event that involves a ceremony, such as a birth, a wedding, a graduation, or a specific birthday. Well-known birthday **rites of passage** are the North American sweet sixteen, the Spanish quinceañera, and the Jewish bar mitzvah.

Rites of passage represent very significant personal changes in many cultures. The person who undergoes a **rite of passage** passes from one social group to another. For example, if you get married, you join the social group of married people.

You often see this term in anthropology and in the arts. In this episode, Andrew talks about a Netflix show where a farmer undergoes a **rite of passage** by cutting a chicken's head off for the first time. It was a **rite of passage** because that is a very important moment in the life of a farmer.

Here are a couple more examples with **rite of passage**:

Gene: How did your first practice go?

Josh: It was rough, man. We did so many sprints. I think my legs have been replaced with jelly.

Gene: Ha! That sounds about right. I remember feeling that way after my first practice. I won't say it gets easier, but your body will get used to it. Consider this first practice your **rite of passage**, man!

Josh: Thanks, I think.

Felix: My little girl starts school tomorrow. I'm so nervous for her.

Riko: Ah, the first day of school!

Felix: What if I don't pack a big enough lunch? What if she doesn't make any friends? What if...

Riko: Try not to worry too much about all that. This is a time-honoured **rite of passage** for us parents. She'll be fine and you'll get to enjoy a little bit of time at home on your own.

Fam

Noun, slang

Fam is an abbreviation of family. This slang term is not just relatives but also close friends or members of a specific group. It can be used to refer to a single individual or multiple people. In order to consider someone as **fam** when they are not related to you, they need to be someone you're very close to. They have to be someone you consider like family.

In an example dialogue from this episode, the man wonders if the woman and her **fam** wants to come over for a barbecue. He is asking if she and her actual family want to be there.

Here are a few more examples with **fam**:

Chi: Do you know what the answer to question five is?

Giang: I don't know, **fam**. I've been stuck on it for, like, forever.

Chi: Ugh! How are we going to pass this course if we can't even answer the practice questions?

Bella: How's it going with your new boy?

Misaki: It's going really well. I brought him home to meet my **fam** on the weekend. I was so nervous.

Bella: I would be too.

Misaki: It went really well though. Everyone liked him. And he seemed to like them too. My grandma was even there!

Kelly: Yuri! Just the girl I wanted to see.

Yuri: Hey, Kelly, what's up?

Kelly: Remember when I told you about the people I've been jamming with? Well, here they are! Yuri, meet my band **fam**. Band **fam**, meet the best co-worker I've ever had, Yuri.

Downtime

Noun

Downtime is a time of relaxation and rest. When you have downtime, you are not working or busy with responsibilities. You usually do things you enjoy, rather than things you have to do or that someone else is asking you to do. **Downtime** can also be a period of inactivity, like when you're watching TV or reading a book.

Downtime originally used to refer to the time when a machine or vehicle is turned off or unavailable for use. In this sense, your **downtown** is when you are unavailable for work.

Here are a couple more examples with **downtime**:

Tasha: Want to get together for coffee sometime soon?

Lin: I'd love to! But I don't think I'll be able to get away.

Tasha: Are things really so busy at home?

Lin: With three kids? Oh yeah. **Downtime** is very scarce.

Chris: I'm so annoyed!

Ismail: Why? What happened?

Chris: Our quarterback got injured last night. He was the team's only chance to win the season.

Ismail: That's definitely not good. An injured athlete needs months of **downtime** to recover.

Chris: Yeah, and his injury is really bad. He won't be back for the rest of the season.

Ismail: Maybe the second string quarterback will surprise everyone with his skill.

Chris: One can hope.

Quiz

1. Which of the following would you say when you realize a project is due very soon?

- a) time's running out
- b) time's swimming around
- c) time's climbing up
- d) time's coming in

2. Your friend just called you fam. What does that mean?

- a) they think you're famished
- b) they think you're like family
- c) they think you look familiar
- d) they think you're famous

3. Which of the following means to be so busy you can't accomplish everything well?

- a) packed too full
- b) packed too tightly
- c) spread too thin
- d) spread too thick

4. What might Susie be doing if she has some downtime?

- a) calling a client
- b) running to her meeting
- c) working and stressing
- d) resting and relaxing

5. Which of the following is an event or celebration marking an important event in someone's life?

- a) rite of passage
- b) rite of life
- c) passage of rites
- d) passage of time

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt like you were spread too thin? When was it and why did you feel that way?
2. When you feel like time's running out on a project, do you run around like a headless chicken or do you become more productive? Why or why not?
3. Describe a rite of passage you experienced growing up.
4. Which of your friends do you consider your fam, and why?
5. What is your favourite thing to do when you have downtime?

Quiz Answers

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

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