

Catch Word #283 – Off the cuff (ad free)

Episode description

In this episode of Catch Word, Andrew and Indiana teach you two useful English expressions: "knee jerk reaction" and "off the cuff." These expressions describe spontaneous reactions, one for quick emotional responses and the other for acting without preparation. Through fun conversations and clear examples, you'll learn how to use these expressions naturally in daily life!

Fun fact

The expression "off the cuff" is thought to originate from the 20th century when speakers, like politicians and comedians, would jot down quick notes on their shirt cuffs before giving a speech. Without a formal script, they would deliver their remarks "off the cuff", making it sound spontaneous!

Expressions included in the study guide

- Knee jerk reaction
- Off the cuff
- Constructive criticism
- To jump to conclusions
- It happens to the best of us
- It can't hurt (to...)



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: Catchword number 283, "Off the cuff." Featuring Andrew and Indiana.

Joining me now is my co-host, Indiana. Indiana, how's it going?

Indiana: I'm good. How are you today, Andrew?

Andrew: I'm doing pretty well as well. And I'm excited for this Catch Word episode. It's one of my favorite series. I love diving in and getting our hands dirty with these expressions and really picking them apart. It's, it's very interesting for me. And we have two good expressions that we're going to teach everybody today, Indiana. They are "**Knee jerk reaction**" and "**Off the cuff**." OK. We're going to tell you guys all about these expressions and what they mean, how you can use them in your own English speaking and Indiana, could you just tell us how these expressions are connected? Like what's our theme for this episode?

Indiana: So, the theme would be an instant reaction or response to something. Both of these expressions are related to a response or reaction that doesn't have any prior thought. It's just happening in the moment.

Andrew: So, when you react to something or when you do something and it's extremely spontaneous, you weren't planning on doing it, but it just happens. And I think we've all been in that kind of situation before where we just do something, then maybe later on we reflect on that moment and we're like, what was I thinking? But it was just instinct almost. In this kind of situation, we can use these two expressions, "**Knee jerk reaction**" and "**Off**

the cuff." So, let's take a look at our first expression for today, which is **knee jerk reaction**.

So, our first expression for today is "**Knee jerk reaction**." **Knee jerk reaction** and knee spelling K-N-E-E is our body part, right on our leg, we have our knee kind of helps us bend our leg. And "jerk" is a very sudden movement, right? A jerk is a sudden movement. So, a knee jerk, I think we've all experienced this at some point in our life when you go to the doctor and they check your reflexes, the doctor will tap on your knee with a little hammer. Indiana, do you remember this? I mean, I haven't had this since I was a child, but I'm sure you went to the doctor and at some point, the doctor wanted to check out your reflexes and tapped on your knee. And what did your knee do after being tapped on with that little hammer that they use?

Indiana: So, it reflexively moves, and you kick your leg out. Yeah, it only happened to me a couple times growing up. But exactly. It's always in the movies, right? You, you, you know, a child gets tapped on the knee by a doctor and then checks the reflexes.

Andrew: You have a reflexive reaction to getting tapped on the knee, right? Your leg automatically jerks out. And this is how we use this expression. So, if you have a **knee jerk reaction** to something in your life, just like how the doctor taps you on the knee and your leg jerks. Well, without thinking about it, right? Because when the doctor taps you on the knee, you're not like, "OK, I'm going to feel the tap and then I'm going to consciously move my leg." It's all unconscious. It's reflexive and it happens just in an instant. So, in its idiomatic sense, when we use this expression, when we say something is a **knee jerk reaction**, it means we're reacting in a way to something in an extremely fast, instantaneous way without taking time to think about it deeply. It's just an instant reaction, just like how the doctor taps you on the knee and your leg flies up. Indiana, do you think you could give us a kind of example from a daily situation that would help everyone to understand how English speakers use this expression?

Indiana: Yeah, I think a good example of this could be your response to something negative, especially when you're maybe not in your usual state of mind. So, I'm thinking, you know, if you come home after a long day of work, you're really tired and a little burnt out and your spouse was supposed to do a chore, something that you asked your spouse to do. And then you find out, "Oh, sorry, honey, I didn't do it." You might have a **knee jerk reaction** of getting angry and saying, "Why didn't you do that?" And just getting unnecessarily upset. Of course, it doesn't really make sense to have that kind of response normally, but you just have this **knee jerk reaction**, this very strong negative response, and you get upset at your spouse. That could be a **knee jerk reaction**. If you were in a different state of mind, you might just say, "OK, I'll do it." Or "Could you do it?" But you're instead you're having this very negative, strong reaction that you're not even thinking about.

Andrew: So, I'm wondering, Indiana, can you clarify this for everyone? Can we use this expression for negative situations and positive situations? Or is it usually more of a negative connotation that we use this expression in?

Indiana: Yeah, I have not really heard this expression used in a positive way. So, I would say generally it's meant for these instinctive, impulsive, negative reactions to things. So, you're being a little bit irrational, and you make a choice or a decision or have a response that is not what you would normally choose.

Andrew: And I think that we use this expression often when we're apologizing for something, right? Like, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that. It was just a **knee jerk reaction**." Meaning like you just had this intense emotional response to something and maybe you acted in a way that wasn't rational or wasn't logical or wasn't kind, right? Sometimes inside our feelings are rather unkind and we need our brain to kind of calm us down and mediate our emotions. But when you just go with your gut, go with your emotions, sometimes that means that we end up actually being mean or unkind. So, when

we're apologizing for that, after we've calmed down and we've thought about it. "Ahh it was just a **knee jerk reaction**. I'm sorry. I should have taken some time." So, when we're apologizing, we use it. Or when we're expressing regret or telling stories about the past, how we acted in some situation, that kind of situation is perfect for using this expression, **knee jerk reaction**.

Indiana: Definitely.

Andrew: OK, Indiana, do you think there's anything else we should add or are we ready to jump into some examples?

Indiana: No, let's get right into it. Let's see a few examples.

Andrew: All right, let's do it.

Coworker 1: Did you hear that Jamie quit his job right after his boss gave him some critical feedback?

Coworker 2: Wow, that sounds like a **knee jerk reaction**. Maybe he should have taken some time to think about it instead of quitting on the spot.

Coworker 1: Yeah, I think he's probably going to regret making such a big decision so quickly.

Andrew: Let's break down this example. So, in that example, it sounds like we heard two co-workers discussing a third co-worker named Jamie, and Jamie got some critical feedback from his boss. And "Critical feedback" is when somebody tells you some feedback about how you're doing, but they do that in it's usually like a negative way. Would

you agree, Indiana? Critical feedback is usually not, oh, "You're doing such a good job. Keep up the good work!" It's more like, you know, "If you could change this or change that, then I think you'd be more effective." Right? It's usually pointing out how you're not doing something very well and there's some room for improvement. But Indiana, maybe this is a little bit off topic, but good to talk about anyways. What would be the difference in your opinion between critical feedback and criticism?

Indiana: Hmm. So, I also call it "**Constructive criticism**," and I think that could give it a more helpful and positive connotation. Of course, it's still criticism, but critical feedback, **constructive criticism**. These could be feedback and I guess a response from a supervisor or a teacher about your performance, what you were doing, but also tips on how to improve. It's not just an insult to your work. But then just plain criticism just sounds quite negative and you're just getting a lot of negative comments about your performance or your work, what you've produced.

Andrew: Exactly. So, I could understand if this guy, Jamie, if he quit on the spot after getting some criticism from his boss, especially if his boss was a real jerk, but it was just critical feedback. But some people are sensitive, and I guess Jamie here was sensitive. And so, he got that critical feedback. He didn't like it. And he had a **knee jerk reaction**, which was to quit his job immediately. So, he got that critical feedback from his boss, and he was like, I'm out of here. I quit. And he left. And then the two co-workers were saying like, "Hmm, maybe he shouldn't have made that decision so quickly. Maybe he'll regret it in the future." But what's done is done and Jamie's gone. So, there's a job opening now at that company.

Indiana: Exactly. Due to a **knee jerk reaction**. Yeah.

Andrew: Let's take a listen to our second example now. Here we go.

Friend 1: The company announced some changes, and everyone had a **knee jerk reaction**, assuming it would mean layoffs.

Friend 2: But did they actually say that layoffs were going to happen?

Friend 1: No, not at all. People just **jumped to conclusions** without knowing the full story.

Andrew: All right, Indiana, here we heard another example from the workplace about some employees that had a **knee jerk reaction**. Could you break this example down and explain it to us?

Indiana: Of course. So, there were some major changes announced at this company and people read between the lines or assumed that, oh, this means layoffs, and everybody is now freaking out and having this negative **knee jerk reaction** to this announcement. But it wasn't said that it was layoffs. It could be a lot of different things. But everybody assumes and is having these strong negative feelings. Oh, this has got to be layoffs. It's the worst-case scenario. And that's what's going on here.

Andrew: When I lived in Canada, I was living in Montreal and I was doing some corporate English teaching at a company, so I would go to their head office, and I would do some business English classes with the employees there. And one day I remember I went to the class and all of the... I called them students, but really, they're just employees. They were older than I was in their like forties and fifties, and everybody was upset, and nobody could focus on the class. And all they were talking about was this rumor that was going around the office. And it was this kind of situation. Everybody was worried because the company was set to have like a meeting, and they were going to make a big announcement. Everybody was worried that they were going to be laid off or that there would be some layoffs in the company. And so, we spent the whole class just talking about this rumor and

it was kind of interesting from an outsider's perspective because I was just like a contract worker that would go there once a week to teach them English. So anyways, in the end, everybody got worried and had this **knee jerk reaction, jumping to conclusions**, thinking that the worst-case scenario was going to happen. But actually, what ended up happening was that the head office just moved, and it moved to a better location. And so, it was actually good news in the end, and nobody got laid off. But yeah, this example, it reminded me of that story. So, I thought I'd share.

Indiana: Yeah, sounds like moral of the story is be prepared. But yeah, don't jump to the worst-case scenario. Don't have a **knee jerk reaction** if you can help it. It's not like we choose to have this reaction, but.

Andrew: Yeah, there's a great expression there as well. **Jump to conclusions**. And that just means that you think you know what's going to happen before there's actually maybe an official announcement or before the situation plays out and unravels and unfolds, right? So, if you're **jumping to conclusions**, you're assuming that something is going to happen when, in fact, you don't have enough information in the present to really know what will happen in the future. So, another good expression for everyone to add to their vocabulary.

Indiana: All right. So, Andrew, our next expression is "**Off the cuff**." **Off the cuff**. And we can use this as an adverb to describe how you do something. So, this means that you are doing something without any preparation. It's sort of a spontaneous decision or maybe a spontaneous comment. You're doing something without preparing. So, I think a good example of this would be on a movie set. Of course, actors, actresses have their scripts, they're practicing their lines. But sometimes somebody comes up with either a line or a reaction, something in a scene without any prior practice. They just think about it, and they choose to do it while filming that scene. And you could describe that spontaneous choice as **off the cuff**. So that is one example of where you might hear this one.

Andrew: In my personal life, like you mentioned, actors speaking **off the cuff** or delivering lines **off the cuff** in this kind of improvised way. I like to do that, too. So, I don't really think necessarily that I'm a funny person. I'm not a great storyteller. I'm not like one of those people that can just have everybody in stitches with some stories that I'm sharing. But I do make my friends laugh from time to time. And it's usually when I speak **off the cuff** or give an **off the cuff** comment to somebody else's story. So maybe somebody else is telling a story and then I throw a little line, improvised line in reaction to what they're saying. Then sometimes I can crack my friends up. So, yeah, I wouldn't say that I'm like stand-up comedian level funny or anywhere near that. But from time to time, I have an **off the cuff** comment that can make people laugh. I guess that's my comedy strength. Would you say, Indiana, that we could use **off the cuff** for positive and negative things, like **knee jerk reaction** was just negative, right? What about **off the cuff**? We use it in a slightly different way than **knee jerk reaction**.

Indiana: Yeah. On its own, I think it's just neutral. It's just describing that you did something without preparation. But I think maybe more often than not, it could be, oh, "Yeah, I made an **off the cuff** speech and it went really well." And maybe it's more often a little bit positive, but fundamentally just **off the cuff**, it's neutral. You might apply it to something that ended up having a positive conclusion where, oh, I made an **off the cuff** remark at the conference and actually nobody laughed. Everybody thought it was a bit rude. Actually, that, you know, that could also happen. So, yeah, fundamentally neutral, but could have a positive or a negative outcome.

Andrew: I'm getting secondhand embarrassment just imagining that situation when you say an **off the cuff** comment and you're trying to be funny, and nobody laughs, or you get a bad reaction. It's not very fun. Anyways, I think some examples would really help explain how we can use this in our daily life. So, we've got two examples prepared for everyone here. And Indiana, let's get started with the first one now. Here we go!

Friend 1: During the interview, the reporter asked me a really unexpected question and I had to come up with an answer **off the cuff**.

Friend 2: Ooh, that's always challenging. Did you feel like your answer was good?

Friend 1: It wasn't perfect, but I think I handled it pretty well for something **off the cuff**.

Andrew: All right. So, in this example, we hear from two friends who are talking about an interview that one of the friends did. I'm not exactly sure what kind of context it was in. Maybe it was an interview with the news or an interview with a magazine. But one of the friends was being interviewed by a reporter and the reporter asked that person a question that they weren't expecting. So, it was a question that they hadn't prepared for, and they didn't really know how to answer. And so, they had to answer **off the cuff**. It was an **off the cuff** question, meaning that it was spontaneous and unexpected. And then the answer, because the question was unexpected, also had to be **off the cuff**. And yeah, this could happen in this kind of situation. I also think, Indiana, that in many job interviews, this happens all the time, right? When you're going into a big job interview, if you're well-prepared, you'll do some practice and you'll do your homework so that you're ready to do well in the interview. But it doesn't matter how much you prepare. Sometimes you get asked questions that you're not expecting and then you have to answer **off the cuff**. Another expression that we use for that kind of situation is you have to wing it. You have to improvise. You don't have any preparation to fall back on. So, you just have to wing it and try and answer as best you can in that moment.

Indiana: Yeah. You know, **it happens to the best of us**. I've been there. It's not fun to deal with those kinds of unexpected questions. But anyway, let's look at our next example for **off the cuff**.

Andrew: All right. Let's take a listen to it now. Here we go.

Coworker 1: I didn't plan to say anything at the meeting today, so I ended up speaking completely **off the cuff**.

Coworker 2: Sometimes that can actually make you sound more natural and authentic, don't you think?

Coworker 1: True. But next time, I think I'll probably make some notes in advance just to feel more confident.

Andrew: OK, Indiana, would you do the honors and break this one down for us?

Indiana: So, in this dialogue, a friend or a coworker is talking about some regrets that they had for not preparing anything during the meeting that held today. So, you know, sometimes **off the cuff** is describing a good thing, right? Actually, I had this meeting, and I didn't prepare anything, and it went really well. I was able to cover all the topics, and everybody was focused. But in this case, this speaker is regretting doing the meeting **off the cuff** and wishes that he or she had prepared a little bit more and had some notes.

Andrew: Now, here's an interesting question for you, because we're both English teachers and because all of our listeners out there are English learners. Indiana, we both teach the small-group conversation classes for our Culips members. And I don't know if you've noticed this in your classes, but in my classes, I noticed that some members prefer to just speak **off the cuff**. So maybe they take a look at the questions briefly before we start the session, but they like to speak in the moment, and they don't prepare anything too much in advance. But then other people really like to prepare their answers. They like to write out their answers and they don't like speaking **off the cuff**. They like to have their preparation. And I think both approaches are fine, to be honest with you. **It can't hurt to prepare**, but it's also nice to get some spontaneous speaking practice in as well. Did you

have any thoughts about that? Just sort of popped into my mind as we were listening to that example.

Indiana: Yeah, I think, you know, when students or listeners, they want to use particular vocab that came up in an episode that we're discussing in one of these small-group sessions, then I think, yeah, preparing an answer or having a few notes at least is a great way. But, you know, after a while, the conversations move into unexpected directions and some really interesting topics that weren't a part of the episode or the discussion questions that were prepared. So, yeah, I think it can... it can be great to just have an **off the cuff** discussion and our listeners get that practice in the group sessions anyway.

Andrew: They absolutely do. Every time that... I do my classes every Thursday and I'm always shocked every Thursday because we'll start the session talking about one topic and by the end of the session, we've completely changed our topic. We've wandered all over the place. But this is the beautiful thing about language and about interacting with people is that it's unpredictable. And of course, it's great to prepare. I don't think there's anything wrong with that at all. But you do get a lot of these **off the cuff** speaking opportunities in our Culips small group classes as well. So, if you're out there listening and you're not a Culips member yet and you'd like to join us for one of these classes, I really highly recommend signing up and becoming a member. We'd love to have you join us. And they're a lot of fun. I just finished mine, so it's on my mind. But yeah, Indiana, I guess that's going to bring us to the end of today's episode. Maybe you could just wrap up one more time the two key expressions that we studied with today and their meaning one more time for us.

Indiana: Of course. So, the first expression we went over was "**Knee jerk reaction.**" And that's going to describe an instinctive, sudden reaction to something almost always negative. For example, you know, you find out that your spouse didn't do the chore they were supposed to do and you're unnecessarily angry. Like you said, it's often used when

we're apologizing for something. "Sorry, that was just a **knee jerk reaction**. I didn't really mean to do or say that." The second expression is more neutral, "**Off the cuff**," and that's just describing doing something, perhaps giving a presentation, or making a comment in an interview without any preparation. You're just suddenly whatever pops into your mind, what you think is appropriate, that's what you're saying or that's what you're doing. So "**Off the cuff**" is a great expression to be using in business contexts or like you mentioned, an **off the cuff** comment or joke with your friends, those kinds of situations it's great to use in.

Andrew: That brings us to the end of this lesson. Talk to you next time, bye!

Detailed Explanations

Knee jerk reaction

Expression

A **knee jerk reaction** is when someone reacts to something very quickly without thinking. It is an immediate response, often emotional, that happens without taking time to consider the situation. In the episode, Andrew explains that this expression comes from a physical reflex—when a doctor taps your knee with a small hammer, your leg moves automatically without you deciding to move it. In the same way, a **knee jerk reaction** is an automatic response to a situation, usually based on emotions rather than careful thought.

The phrase is commonly used when someone reacts too fast, often in a negative way. For example, if someone criticizes your work, and you instantly get defensive and say something rude, that is a **knee jerk reaction**. Later, you might regret what you said because you didn't take time to think before responding.

Another example is when a driver gets cut off in traffic and immediately honks the horn and yells without thinking. Their quick outburst could be called a **knee jerk reaction**.

To remember this expression, imagine yourself at the doctor's office. When the doctor taps your knee, your leg kicks out without you deciding to do it. A **knee jerk reaction** in conversation or behavior works the same way—it just happens, without planning. Thinking about this physical response will help you remember that a **knee jerk reaction** means reacting quickly and emotionally, often without considering the best response.

A similar phrase is "to act on impulse," meaning doing something without thinking ahead.

Here are a couple more examples with **knee jerk reaction**:

Paul: When I came home after work today, I saw that the dog had chewed up the TV remote. I freaked out and yelled at him, and now he's acting like he's scared of me. I feel bad.

Sophie: Your **knee jerk reaction** is understandable, but dogs' brains don't work that way. He probably doesn't even understand the connection between you yelling at him and the TV remote.

Tessa: I don't know what got into me. Liam was late for our dinner date, and I just had a **knee jerk reaction** and yelled at him. He was only fifteen minutes late, too!

Rudy: Only fifteen minutes?! Yeah, you should definitely apologize.

Off the cuff

Expression

The phrase **off the cuff** means doing or saying something without any preparation. It describes when a person speaks or acts in the moment, without planning ahead. In the episode, Andrew and Indiana explain that this expression is neutral—it can be positive or negative, depending on the situation. For example, if someone gives a speech without preparing but does a great job, people might say, “Wow, that was an **amazing off the cuff speech!**” But if someone makes a joke without thinking and it upsets people, that **off the cuff** remark might not be well received.

This phrase is often used when someone has to think quickly. For example, in a job interview, if an interviewer asks a surprise question, the candidate might have to answer **off the cuff**. It can also happen in social situations. If a friend tells a funny story, and someone immediately adds a clever comment without thinking, that comment is **off the cuff**. Many comedians are great at making **off the cuff** jokes, reacting to situations in the moment without a script.

One important thing to note is that **off the cuff** is usually used for speaking or acting in the moment. It’s generally not used for physical tasks that take a while, like cooking, driving, or tidying up. Also, people sometimes confuse **off the cuff** with **knee jerk reaction**, but they are different. **Knee jerk reaction** means reacting emotionally or impulsively, while **off the cuff** just means doing something without preparation—it’s not necessarily emotional.

Similar expressions include “**wing it**”, which means to do something without preparation, and “**improvise**”, which means to create or respond in the moment without a plan. Another similar phrase is “**think on your feet**”, which means to respond quickly and smartly in an unexpected situation.

Here are a couple more examples with **off the cuff**:

Lauren: The CEO asked me for ideas in the meeting, and I had to think fast.

Thomas: Wow, so you spoke **off the cuff**? How’d it go?

Lauren: Not bad! I think I made a good impression.

Isabella: My brother asked me to give a speech at his wedding, but I forgot to prepare!

Kevin: Oh no! What did you do?

Isabella: I just went up there and did it **off the cuff**. Luckily, it turned out okay!

Constructive criticism

Noun

The phrase **constructive criticism** means feedback that helps someone improve instead of just making them feel bad. It is a type of advice that points out mistakes or weaknesses but also gives helpful suggestions for fixing them. Unlike regular criticism, which can feel negative or mean, **constructive criticism** is meant to be useful and encouraging.

In the episode, Indiana explains that **constructive criticism** is different from just criticism because it focuses on how to improve, rather than just saying what is wrong. For example, if a teacher says, "Your essay needs better organization, but your ideas are strong. Try using clearer paragraphs next time," that is **constructive criticism** because it points out a problem but also gives advice on how to fix it.

People use **constructive criticism** in many areas of life, especially at work, in school, or when learning a skill. A coach might give **constructive criticism** to help an athlete perform better. A boss might give it to help an employee improve their work. A friend could even give **constructive criticism** if they want to help someone become a better person. The key is that it is meant to help, not to insult. However, some people may still feel bad when they hear **constructive criticism**, even though it is supposed to be positive.

To remember this phrase, think of the word *construct*—just like construction workers build things, **constructive criticism** helps "build" a person's skills.

Here are a couple more examples with **constructive criticism**:

Larry: Rebecca, how's your art class going?

Rebecca: It's going great! I feel like I'm learning a lot. Every week at the end of class, we have a small **constructive criticism** session and offer tips and feedback about each other's work.

Larry: That sounds great!

Jonathan: My mom tasted my pasta and gave me some **constructive criticism**.

Nora: What'd she suggest?

Jonathan: She said the flavor was great, but I should let the sauce simmer longer to make it thicker.

Nora: Ahh, that's good advice. You don't want your sauce to be too thin.

To jump to conclusions

Idiomatic verb

The idiom **jump to conclusions** means to assume something too quickly without knowing all the facts. It describes when someone makes a decision or forms an opinion before getting enough information.

In the episode, Andrew talks about how employees at a company heard a rumor about layoffs and immediately thought they were going to lose their jobs. They **jumped to conclusions** because they believed something bad was going to happen without waiting for the full announcement. In the end, they were wrong—the company was just moving to a new office, and no one lost their job. This shows why **jumping to conclusions** can be a problem. When people assume things too fast, they often worry for no reason or misunderstand a situation.

People **jump to conclusions** in many areas of life. For example, if someone sees their friend talking to a stranger and immediately thinks they are dating, they are **jumping to conclusions** without knowing the full story. In school, a student might get back a test with a teacher's note and **jump to the conclusions** that it's a bad grade before even reading it. In relationships, if someone doesn't answer a text right away, their partner might **jump to conclusions** and think they are being ignored, when really, the person is just busy. These situations show how people sometimes assume things too fast, leading to unnecessary stress or misunderstandings.

To remember this phrase, think about the image of "jumping" instead of walking carefully. When you walk, you take your time and step carefully, just like when you gather information before making a decision. But when you *jump*, you skip steps and move quickly without checking what's ahead.

Similar expressions include "**to make a hasty judgment**", and "**to assume too quickly**." Another related phrase is "**to read too much into something**", which means to believe something has a deeper meaning than it really does.

Here are a couple more examples with **to jump to conclusions**:

Henrietta: Jake didn't say hi to me today. I think he's mad at me.

Carlos: Maybe he was just in a hurry. Don't **jump to conclusions**.

Chris: The manager scheduled an emergency meeting. I bet the company is shutting down!

Ivy: Let's not **jump to conclusions**. It could be about something completely different.

It happens to the best of us

Expression

The phrase **it happens to the best of us** is used to comfort someone when they make a mistake or face an embarrassing situation. It means that even skilled, smart, or experienced people also make mistakes, so the person shouldn't feel too bad about it.

In the episode, Indiana says this after talking about job interviews. Sometimes, no matter how much a person prepares, they still get asked a difficult or unexpected question and struggle to answer. Indiana uses **it happens to the best of us** to say that this is normal and even experienced professionals deal with the same problem.

People use this phrase when they want to make someone feel better after something goes wrong. If a coworker mispronounces a word during a presentation and feels self-conscious, you could reassure them by saying, "**It happens to the best of us.**" This helps them feel less embarrassed because even confident speakers make mistakes.

Similarly, if a student forgets their lines during a school play, their teacher might say, "Don't worry, **it happens to the best of us.**" The phrase helps the person feel less embarrassed because it reminds them that mistakes are part of life.

The phrase comes from the idea that even the "best" people—experts, professionals, or skilled individuals—are not perfect. Everyone experiences failures, small accidents, or embarrassing moments. It is a way to show that mistakes are universal and nothing to be ashamed of.

Similar expressions include "Don't worry about it," "No one is perfect," "These things happen," and "Everyone makes mistakes."

Here are a couple more examples with **It happens to the best of us**:

Frankie: I missed such an easy shot during the game today. I feel so dumb.

Amelia: Don't beat yourself up. **It happens to the best of us.** You'll get it next time!

Monica: I tried baking a new cookie recipe for the first time, and they came out completely burnt.

Kyle: Haha, don't worry. **It happens to the best of us.** Try lowering the temperature next time.

Monica: Good idea.

It can't hurt (to...)

Expression

It can't hurt means that doing something will not cause any harm and might even be helpful. It is often used when suggesting an action that is not strictly necessary but could be useful or beneficial. In the episode, Andrew says, "**It can't hurt to** prepare," meaning that while some people prefer to speak without preparation, there is no downside to preparing in advance. Even if it's not required, it might be helpful.

People use this phrase in everyday conversations when giving advice or making suggestions. For example, if someone is going for a job interview, you might say, "It can't hurt to practice answering some common questions." This means that practicing is not absolutely necessary, but it could be useful and won't do any harm. Similarly, if a friend is feeling a little sick, you could say, "**It can't hurt to** drink some tea and get some rest." The idea is that drinking tea might help, and even if it doesn't, it won't make things worse.

To remember this phrase, think about everyday situations where taking an extra step might be helpful but isn't required. For example, bringing an umbrella when the weather forecast says "maybe rain"—it might not be necessary, but **it can't hurt** to have it just in case.

One important thing to note is that "**it can't hurt**" is mostly used for small decisions or actions with no risk. It is not used for big or serious situations where taking an action could actually cause harm. For example, if someone asks, "Should I take twice the medicine to feel better faster?" you would NOT say "**It can't hurt**," because that could actually be dangerous.

Similar expressions include "It's worth a try," "It doesn't hurt to," and "Might as well." Another related phrase is "Better safe than sorry," which suggests that taking a small precaution is a good idea.

Here are a couple more examples with **it can't hurt (to...)**:

Evan: How's the weather? Should I bring a jacket?

Deborah: **It can't hurt!**

Polly: It's been a few weeks after applying for that job, but I haven't heard back. Should I send a follow-up email?

Jeffrey: **It can't hurt to** check in. It might show them you're really interested.

Polly: Okay, I'll do it.

Expressions Quiz

1. Which of the following is an example of a "knee jerk reaction"?

- a) Taking time to think before answering a question.
- b) Immediately yelling at someone when you feel frustrated.
- c) Writing a detailed email after considering all points.
- d) Making a to-do list before starting a project.

2. In which situation would "off the cuff" best describe someone's behavior?

- a) A teacher reading from a lesson plan.
- b) A chef following a strict recipe.
- c) A scientist carefully measuring chemicals.
- d) A student giving a speech without preparing.

3. Which of these situations would NOT be considered "jumping to conclusions"?

- a) Assuming someone is angry because they didn't smile at you.
- b) Checking the weather forecast before deciding to bring an umbrella.
- c) Believing a rumor without verifying it.
- d) Thinking someone is guilty of something without any proof.

4. If someone says, "It can't hurt to ask," what do they mean?

- a) Asking won't cause harm and might help.
- b) Asking is useless and a waste of time.
- c) Asking will definitely solve the problem.
- d) Asking is risky and should be avoided.

5. Which situation best fits the phrase "it happens to the best of us"?

- a) A person cheating on a test.
- b) Someone never making a mistake.
- c) A famous athlete missing an easy shot.
- d) A student never forgetting their homework.

Listening Comprehension Quiz

6. What physical example does Andrew use to explain "knee jerk reaction"?
7. What **knee jerk reaction** was featured in the first example dialogue about an employee and his boss?
8. Andrew shares a story about jumping to conclusions. When Andrew lived in Montreal, he taught English at a corporation to its workers. How did Andrew's students "**jump to conclusions**" at their workplace?
9. What was the truth about the company's big announcement in Andrew's story?
10. What does Andrew say about the Culips small-group conversations?

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you had a **knee jerk reaction**. What were you reacting to? Do you wish you had reacted differently?
2. Describe a time when you had to speak or perform **off the cuff**. How did it go? If given the option, would you rather prepare in advance or speak spontaneously?
3. Are you someone who tends to **jump to conclusions**? Talk about a time when you **jumped to conclusions** and what you had thought turned out to be completely incorrect.
4. Usually, we would agree that **it can't hurt to** prepare for a job interview or a test. However, do you think it's possible to overprepare for a situation like this? What can go wrong when you overprepare? Have you ever experienced this yourself?
5. What advice would you give someone who needs to provide **constructive criticism** without upsetting or hurting the other person's feelings? Do you think you're good at giving and receiving **constructive criticism** at work or in your personal relationships?

Quiz Answers

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

6. A reflex test at the doctor's office.

7. The employee had a **knee jerk reaction** and quit immediately after receiving critical feedback.

8. The students heard a rumor that there would be a big meeting and a big announcement. They **jumped to conclusions** and assumed everyone would be laid off.

9. The office was just moving to a new location.

10. Some students prepare their responses carefully while others speak **off the cuff**. The small group discussions often go in unexpected directions.

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