

Catch Word #79– Needle in a haystack

Transcript

Harp: Hello everyone. This is Harp.

Maura: And your pal Maura.

Harp: At your favourite ESL podcast, that's Culips.

Maura: Right. And our website is C-U-L-I-P-S.com. And you can go to our website, and really, there's so much you can do at our website, isn't there?

Harp: There really is.

Maura: You can check out our older episodes and you could also become a member, because then you have access to transcripts, you have access to a more detailed explanation, and a quiz for every episode.

Harp: Yeah. And if you like what you're hearing or you like what you see—hopefully both—you can make a donation or you can become a member.

Maura: Right, because all your money just supports us in continuing to make excellent podcasts for you. Now, today's episode is a Catch Word episode, where we look at expressions and synonyms and give you lots of examples and explanations about those expressions.

Harp: Yes. And today, we're looking at expressions that talk about something that is difficult to find.

Maura: Right, exactly. So something that is not easy to find, and it could be because you lost the item, and so you have no idea where it is.

Harp: Mhmm. Or it could be difficult to find because it's in an area that's unorganized, it's **cluttered**, it's messy.

Maura: Right. It could be also be difficult to find because it's in an area with a lot of things, maybe even a lot of things that look similar to the item you're looking for.

Harp: Yeah. Or it could be difficult to find because it's very small.

- Maura: Right. So, anything that you lose that's very small is really hard to find, because sometimes you can't see it.
- Harp: Yup.
- Maura: Great. So, all our expressions today are talking about trying to find something that's very difficult.
- Harp: Exactly. Our first expression is ***a needle in a haystack***.
- Maura: Right. So when you're looking for something that's difficult to find, you can say that it's ***like trying to find a needle in a haystack***.
- Harp: Yes, ***a needle in a haystack***.
- Maura: Now, it's very important to understand ***a needle in a haystack***. A *needle* is a very, very small tool that's used for sewing.
- Harp: Yes. And a *haystack* is large and is full of straw, and you'd find it on a farm.
- Maura: Right. Sometimes, if you're driving along a road, you might see a field with lots of different haystacks around the field.
- Harp: Yeah. So ***to find a needle in a haystack*** is very difficult.
- Maura: Yes, near impossible. So, if you imagine trying to find this very small needle in this big haystack ... well, it's very difficult.
- Harp: Or impossible.
- Maura: Or impossible, you're right Harp. So, if something is ***like trying to find a needle in a haystack***, it means that it's very, very difficult to do. So, obviously, this makes sense. We use this expression when we're trying to find something and it's not easy. It can be any item and it can be in any place, but it's not easy to find.
- Harp: Yes.
- Maura: So, let's give a dialogue example.
- Harp: OK, let's do it. Hey Jane, ***do you have a minute?***

- Maura: Umm, actually I have to find the file number 136 from 1989, so I have to go down to the **basement** to look for it.
- Harp: Oh no. It's very unorganized downstairs.
- Maura: I know. And there are so many files. I'm really afraid it's going to be like **trying to find a needle in a haystack**.
- Harp: I think it might be.
- Maura: So, in that example, trying to find one specific file from a long time ago, in a **basement** that's not organized, with lots of other files, is going to be difficult.
- Harp: Very difficult.
- Maura: Just like **trying to find a needle in a haystack**. Now, something that's also important about this expression is that sometimes it means that to look for the item is impossible; it's so difficult and it would be so hard that it's just impossible.
- Harp: Yes.
- Maura: So sometimes when people use this expression, it's like they're saying don't look for it; it will take too long and you won't find anything.
- Harp: OK. Let's give an example with **needle in a haystack** where it's virtually impossible to find the thing.
- Maura: Great. Bonnie, I need your help. I just lost my earring in the ocean. Will you come help me find it?
- Harp: Sara, I think it's lost. I don't think you're going to find it.
- Maura: But **it means so much to me**. I wanted to try.
- Harp: But finding that small earring in the ocean is going to be **like to trying to find a needle in a haystack**. It's impossible.
- Maura: I guess you're right. I just ... I loved that earring.
- Harp: I'm sorry.

- Maura: OK, great. So, in that example, when we used **a needle in a haystack**, you were really saying that it was impossible; that trying to find my earring in an ocean would be impossible.
- Harp: Yes, exactly.
- Maura: So, let's look at another expression that we use when we're trying to find something that is difficult to find.
- Harp: OK. The next expression is **to go on a treasure hunt**.
- Maura: Right. So, **to go on a treasure hunt**.
- Harp: Yes. **To go on a treasure hunt** means the same thing: you're trying to find something that is difficult to find.
- Maura: Right. It's like you're hunting, or searching, for the treasure and the treasure is the thing that you're looking for.
- Harp: Yes.
- Maura: Now, maybe not so much anymore, but in the past, people would go on real treasure hunts, like pirates. They would try to find where a treasure was by following a map or looking for clues. And it was never easy.
- Harp: Never easy.
- Maura: So that's kind of where this expression comes from: you're trying to find something, something that's important to you, but it's not easy to find.
- Harp: Yes. OK, Maura, let's give an example with this expression.
- Maura: So Holly, where are your glasses? I thought you needed your glasses to watch this movie.
- Harp: You know, I'm just gonna try to watch it without.
- Maura: Well, are you going to be able to see anything?
- Harp: Not really.
- Maura: Well, why don't you look for them?
- Harp: Every time I need my glasses I have **to go on a treasure hunt**. I put them down in a different place every time and I never know where to find them.

- Maura: Huh. I understand. Well, maybe you should get a cord to attach your glasses around your neck, and then you won't have that problem.
- Harp: That's a good idea.
- Maura: So, great. That was a good example of when someone has **to go on a treasure hunt** to find something. I also remember when a lot of people were **going on a treasure hunt**. A few years ago, at Christmas, there was that new toy for kids called **Tickle Me Elmo**. Do you remember that?
- Harp: **I do remember that.**
- Maura: Right. And all the kids wanted it, and all the parents wanted to buy it for their kids. So it was really hard to find in stores, because everyone was buying it. So in that case, it was a real **treasure hunt** for parents, because they had to go to so many stores and try to find it.
- Harp: Yeah, I think some parents couldn't even find it.
- Maura: Yeah, I agree. Some people couldn't even find the toy. Now, the last expression also is used when you need to look in many different places for a long time, trying to find something.
- Harp: And the next expression is **to search inside out**.
- Maura: Right. So **to search inside out** means that you looked everywhere, the thing that you're looking for is not easy to find, and you're trying to look in every place that you can to find this thing.
- Harp: Yes. **To search inside out** is when you're trying really hard to find something.
- Maura: Right. If you think about it, you search inside and you search outside. You search everywhere that you possibly can, trying to find this difficult thing.
- Harp: Now, this expression, **to search inside out**, is a little bit different, because it can also be used for people.

- Maura: Right. When something is described as ***like trying to find a needle in a haystack***, or you say that you're ***going on a treasure hunt*** to find it, those are only for things. But when you ***search inside out***, it can be for a thing or for a person.
- Harp: Yeah. So for example, this morning, I ***searched inside out*** to find my sister, and I couldn't find her at the mall.
- Maura: Right. So you looked everywhere that you could, but you still could not find her.
- Harp: No. I went to every store, I looked where the restaurants are, I look in the shoe department. I couldn't find her anywhere. So Maura, can you think of a time where you had to ***search inside out*** to find something, where you ***went on a treasure hunt***, or where you were ***trying to find a needle in a haystack***?
- Maura: Well, I can't think of any big thing that I actually lost, but fairly often I do have ***to go on a treasure hunt*** to find my keys, or my wallet, or my cell phone; all those things that you grab before you leave the house.
- Harp: Me too, sometimes.
- Maura: Mmhm. OK. So, all of these expressions can be used when you're trying to find something that is very difficult to find. So you can compare your search for your item to ***trying to find a needle in a haystack***.
- Harp: Or ***to go on a treasure hunt***.
- Maura: Or you can also talk about where you looked in your search; that you ***searched inside out***, that you looked everywhere trying to find your item.
- Harp: Yes.
- Maura: And we hope that when you use these expressions, you eventually are able to find the thing that you're looking for.
- Harp: Yes. We hope it's not impossible to find.
- Maura: Yes. So, remember to go to our website, Culips.com, C-U-L-I-P-S.com, and check out all we have there.

Harp: Yes. And keep listening! We hope you enjoyed this episode, and all of our episodes.

Maura: So, we'll talk to you next time. This has been Maura.

Harp: And Harp.

Maura: See you later!

Harp: Bye everyone!

Detailed Explanation

Cluttered

In English, there are so many ways to describe something that is disorganized or messy! To say that a place is **cluttered** is another way to describe a place that is not organized well. If a place is **cluttered**, it means that there are many things not organized in a space that's too small.

People's desks are places that often get **cluttered**. After a lot of working or studying, you can have a computer, papers, files, books, pens, pencils, and more on your desk! If you work really hard, you may not take the time to organize all these items. In this case, your desk is **cluttered**. Other spaces that can get **cluttered** include bedrooms, tabletops, and closets.

Here's an example with **cluttered**:

Brad: I can't find anything in this room. It's so **cluttered**.

Isla: I know. Sandra never keeps her room clean!

To try to find a needle in a haystack

A needle in a haystack is not easy to find! A needle is a skinny, long piece of metal and a haystack is a large pile of bigger pieces of dried grass that are a similar shape. The origin of this expression is not certain, but it has likely existed for more than 100 years. One thing that no one seems to know for sure is exactly why it is specifically a **needle** in a **haystack**.

When we use this expression, we almost always say that something is **like** looking for a needle in a haystack. Looking for something is compared to looking for a needle in a haystack, and this means that it is very difficult to find or impossible to find. Sometimes it is not clear if the person using this expression means that it is impossible or just difficult. Here are two examples of the different uses:

Jean: I can't find my receipt from last week on my desk.

Fred: It's like **trying to find a needle in a haystack**. It's going to take you forever!

Jean: I can't find my receipt from last week in the dumpster behind the building.

Fred: It's like **trying to find a needle in a haystack**. You might as well forget it!

Do you have a minute?

Asking someone if they **have a minute** is like asking them if they have some time at the moment to talk. Someone might ask “**Do you have a minute?**” if there is something specific they want to ask or if they need to get the person’s attention for a more detailed conversation. Harp asks Maura “**Do you have a minute?**” in the dialogue example when she wants to talk to her for a while.

There are some variations with this expression, like ***if you have a minute...*** or ***when you have a minute...***

Here are a couple more examples with this expression:

Nancy: **Do you have a minute**, Carmen? I need to ask you something.

Carmen: Sure. What’s up?

Leo: What are you doing right now?

Winston: I’m just working on the Peterson project.

Leo: **If you have a minute**, I need to talk about to you about that.

With this expression, people are not actually asking for just one minute, they are asking for some short amount of time. People might also say, “**Do you have a second?**” or “**Do you have a sec?**”

A basement

The **basement** is the part of the house or building that’s partially or completely below the ground. In the basements of people’s homes, there are often windows at the very top of the wall that are just at ground level outside. The **basement** is the foundation of the house.

In Canada, virtually every building has a **basement**. In countries like Canada, where it gets quite cold, the foundation needs to be built below the frost line in the ground. This is why we must have **basements**. In warmer climates, there are often buildings without **basements**.

Basements are often used for storage or as a place to keep appliances like furnaces. In some family homes, the **basement** is just another room in the house, maybe a TV room or an additional bedroom.

It means so much to me

It means so much to me means that something is very important to the person who says it. There are so many meanings of the word *mean*! In this expression, it is talking about the item being very important.

Maura uses this expression in an example dialogue. She says that the earring she lost **means so much to her**. This means that the earring is very important to her. This could be because it was given to her by someone special or because it reminds her of an important event in her life. Or maybe it's just because she really likes the way it looks.

There are many variations of this expression. Some examples include: ***it would mean so much to me***, ***it means a lot to him***, and ***that meant so much to them***.

Here's another example with this expression:

Lois: Let's try to get her the perfect birthday present!

Ben: Good idea. I know **it will mean so much to her** to have a nice birthday this year.

To go on a treasure hunt

This is another expression that can be used when something is difficult to find. When we use the expression ***to go on a treasure hunt***, it means that the person will likely need to look in many places in order to find the item.

Here is another example with ***treasure hunt***:

Yasmina: Have you seen my cook book?

Norm: Nope. I have no idea where it is.

Yasmina: Looks like I'm gonna have **to go on a treasure hunt** to find it!

This expression comes from real treasure hunts with pirates, where they went to many different places, following clues until they found the treasure. There are many films that include people going on treasure hunts, like *National Treasure* (2004), or *Into the Blue* (2005), or any *Indiana Jones* movie.

A treasure hunt is also a game for children. At parties, items may be hidden around a room or a house, and the children need to find them. The treasures in this case are usually things like toys and candy.

Tickle Me Elmo

Elmo is a friendly, red, furry monster from the television show Sesame Street. **Tickle Me Elmo** is a doll that, when squeezed, begins to laugh. In 1996, **Tickle Me Elmo** was the most popular toy for children at Christmas, and so many parents had to search at many different stores to get one, so we could say they went on a treasure hunt. Some parents were never able to get one.

I do remember that

This is a reminder about how we can stress, or emphasize, a verb in English. In this example, Harp says “**I do remember that.**” She wants to stress that she remembers, so she emphasizes this by saying **do** before. This can be done with verbs in the past or present tense.

Here are a couple more examples:

Mother: You need to clean your room before going out.

Son: I **did** clean my room.

Kevin: In order to get better grades at school, you need to study and work hard.

Ricky: But I **do** study and I **do** work hard.

To search inside out

This is another way that we can say that we are looking for something that is difficult to find. If you **search inside out** for something, it means that you look in every possible place. Like we say in this episode, **to search inside out** is to say that you search inside and outside, which is everywhere!

The phrase *inside out* is also used to describe something that has been turned so that the inside is facing out. For example, a shirt with a picture on the front can be turned inside out, which puts the picture on the inside of the shirt. The tag at the back of the shirt is then on the outside. Again, if you imagine looking for your item by turning things inside out, you have really looked everywhere!

Here is another example with **to search inside out**.

Ron: I **searched inside out** for my favourite shirt, but I just can't find it.

Gina: Did you look in the washing machine?

Ron: Yes, I looked everywhere!

This phrase is a little different from *like a needle in a haystack* and *to go on a treasure hunt*, because we can also **search inside out** for people. The previous two expressions are for things only. You can also say **to look inside out**.

Quiz

- 1. Savannah: There are so many things on my kitchen table. It's so**

_____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) clumsy
- b) hungry
- c) cluttered
- d) buttered

- 2. Complete the following expression: It's like trying to find a needle in a**

_____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) haystack
- b) hairspray
- c) hay shack
- d) sewing basket

- 3. Elliot: Do you have a minute?**

Trevor: Sure.

Elliot: I just wanted to ask you if you could help me with this question.

Why does Elliot ask Trevor if he has a minute?

- a) He wants to ask Trevor a question.
- b) He wants to speak with Trevor for exactly one minute.
- c) He wants to know what time it is.
- d) He needs a watch.

- 4. In Canada, which part of the house is often used for storage?**

- a) the kitchen
- b) the bedroom
- c) the living room
- d) the basement

5. **Hannah: I want you to know how much I like your painting. It's great.**
Ken: Oh, thank you so much. _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) That means so much to me.
- b) That doesn't mean much to me.
- c) That means so much to you.
- d) That means a lot to her.

6. **If Donna says that she is going on a treasure hunt, what could that mean?**

- a) She is looking for something very difficult to find.
- b) She is a child playing a game.
- c) She is a pirate.
- d) all of the above

7. **What is Tickle Me Elmo?**

- a) a toy that was very popular during Christmas one year
- b) Harp's ex-boyfriend
- c) something that is very difficult to find
- d) something that is easy to find

8. **Enid: I can't find my wallet. I've searched _____ for it, but I still can't find it.**

Please fill in the blank.

- a. outside in
- b. inside out
- c. upside down
- d. up

Answers: 1.c 2.a 3.a 4.d 5.a 6.d 7.a 8.b