

Catch Word #80 – Don't cry over spilled (spilt) milk

Transcript

Maura: Hello everyone! It's Maura.

Jessie: And Jessie!

Maura: And we're back with your Culips English learning podcast.

Jessie: And don't forget to go to our website at Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Maura: And when you go to our website, you can become a member, where you'll then have access to the transcripts, and a more detailed explanation, and a quiz for this episode and other episodes. And if you want to support us, you can make a donation, so we can keep making excellent podcasts for you and you can keep learning English with us. Now, Jessie, what is today's Catch Word expression?

Jessie: Today's Catch Word is actually a whole phrase, and it is ***don't cry over spilt milk***.

Maura: Yeah, it's a long one: ***don't cry over spilt milk***. Now everyone is listening and wondering *what does this expression mean?*

Jessie: Well, if you think about it, spilling milk is not something that anyone wants to do. It's probably an accident. It might make a big mess. So you might be really upset about spilling milk, especially if you spill it on your laptop.

Maura: Yes, that wouldn't be good.

Jessie: So, you can have the mental image of somebody so upset that they **spilled** some milk that they're crying. But the thing is, crying about it doesn't change anything, doesn't fix anything. You can't **go back in time**. So, **there's no use crying over spilled milk**. **Don't cry over spilled milk**, just accept that it happened and **move on**.

Maura: Right. If you spill milk, all you can do is clean it up. Obviously you can't use it anymore, you can't drink it, you can't change anything. So, all you can do is **move on** from the situation. And that's really what this expression means.

- Jessie: Right. And because this is an idiom, it's not just about milk, and spilling milk, it's about mistakes and accidents and things you can't change in general.
- Maura: Right. So, imagine that something happens to you and you can't change it, you can't do anything about it. But it's something that you really don't like, something that upsets you.
- Jessie: Right. So, if your friend wants to tell you *hey, there's nothing you can do about it, just **move on***, they might say **don't cry over spilt milk**.
- Maura: Right, because you can't change the negative thing that happened to you in the past. You can't change it; it already happened. So all you can do is accept it, forget about it, and continue with your life.
- Jessie: So, we gave the expression **don't cry over spilt milk**, but there are actually a few different ways you could say this. It's almost always used in the negative, so somebody might say **it's no use crying over spilled milk**, or **stop crying over spilt milk**.
- Maura: And you could also say **there's no reason to cry over spilt milk**. So there's lots of different ways you can change this expression, but like you said, Jessie, it's almost always used in a negative way. And you're giving someone advice and telling them not to think about the past and accept it and **move on**.
- Jessie: Exactly.
- Maura: So let's do a dialogue example now.
- Jessie: Great idea.
- Maura: Oh man, I can't believe we lost the basketball game. It was the last game of the season. Man! It was all my fault.
- Jessie: Maura, don't be so **hard on yourself**. It wasn't your fault.
- Maura: No, it was all my fault. I had the ball, I should've passed it, but I didn't, and now we lost, and I can't believe it.
- Jessie: Well, I think it could have happened to anyone. But even if it was your fault, **there's no use crying over spilled milk**. You made a mistake, but you can practice and the next game you'll do better.

- Maura: I don't know. I'm still so depressed. So, in that example, I definitely was upset about the basketball game and I didn't want to **move on**. I was really upset with myself.
- Jessie: Right. And even though I didn't think you should be blaming yourself in the first place, I also didn't think you should be **crying over spilled milk**, regretting something that's already in the past.
- Maura: Right. So, how about we do another example?
- Jessie: OK. Jen, I'm so sorry!
- Maura: Why? What happened?
- Jessie: You know that cake we baked to bring to the **potluck** dinner?
- Maura: Yeah, the beautiful, amazing cake?
- Jessie: I dropped it on the floor.
- Maura: Oh no! Oh, well that's OK, don't worry about it.
- Jessie: I already cleaned it up, but now we have nothing to bring.
- Maura: No, we'll just buy something. It's no big deal. Don't worry about it.
- Jessie: OK, you're right. I'm not gonna **cry over spilled milk**. We'll just buy a cake.
- Maura: Right. Don't feel bad. It's fine.
- Jessie: Thanks.
- Maura: OK, so there's another example of when someone might use this expression, **don't cry over spilt milk**, or **there's no reason to cry over spilt milk**.
- Jessie: Right. And in that example, we said *I'm not going to cry over spilled milk*.
- Maura: Right. So some people might even say it about themselves, like you did.
- Jessie: Exactly. So, you may have noticed that sometimes we've been saying **spilled milk** and sometimes we've been saying **spilt milk**.

- Maura: Right. So if you've been listening very closely, you might have heard a small difference in the pronunciation. Sometimes we say **spilled** and sometimes we've said **spilt**.
- Jessie: Right. But really, the only difference is the spelling and the pronunciation. The words **spilled** and **spilt** have exactly the same meaning.
- Maura: If you've ever studied English grammar, you might have noticed that some words in the past have two choices, and this is one of those cases. So if you want to know more about that, you can go to our website, become a member, have access to our learning materials, and we'll explain more about that difference there.
- Jessie: Now, another interesting thing about this expression is that it's actually very old.
- Maura: Right. Sometimes we look at expressions and the origin is really unclear, but this one is clear and, like you said, it's so old. It's been around for a while.
- Jessie: Yeah. One of the oldest known uses of this phrase in literature is from 1659.
- Maura: That is a long time ago.
- Jessie: But in that book, the author actually wrote **no weeping for shed milk**.
- Maura: Right, **no weeping for shed milk**. So, the words are different but the meaning is really the same.
- Jessie: Right. The phrase has evolved over time.
- Maura: Right. And the word *weeping* actually means *crying*.
- Jessie: Yeah. And people still use that today, a little bit.
- Maura: Yeah. And then we have the word *shed*, which also people still use, and in this case has the meaning of **spilled**.
- Jessie: Right.
- Maura: Another interesting thing about this expression is that some people even say that it's a proverb.
- Jessie: Right. And that means that it teaches us some important life lesson.

- Maura: Yeah. So it's an expression that we use and that we still hear today, but there is also a life lesson in this expression, ***don't cry over spilled milk***, and that is to not stay in the past and focus too much energy on negative things that happened in the past.
- Jessie: Right, because nothing you do now can change what's already happened.
- Maura: Exactly. So, ***moving on***, are there any real synonyms for this expression?
- Jessie: Well, there are some similar expressions, but they're not really idiomatic.
- Maura: Right. There are some really simple ones, like ***what's done is done***.
- Jessie: Exactly. And that seems obvious—what's done is obviously done, but it's just to remind us of the fact that if it's already happened, you can't change it now.
- Maura: Right. And just like this expression, ***what's done is done***, there's another one that is also stating something simple, that is ***the past is the past***.
- Jessie: Exactly.
- Maura: And when it's the past, it's finished; there's nothing you can do about it.
- Jessie: So, for example, if you missed your flight because you got to the airport late, there's nothing you can do about that now. ***What's done is done; the past is the past***. That plane is gone.
- Maura: Right. Or maybe you broke up with someone three years ago, and you still love them, and you still talk about them, but ***what's done is done***; you broke up with them, it's over, so you need to ***move on*** and find someone else.
- Jessie: Yeah, there's no point ***dwelling on the past***.
- Maura: No.
- Jessie: OK.
- Maura: So, today's expression that we looked at was ***don't cry over spilt milk***, which, we learned, could also be a proverb.
- Jessie: Right. And it just means that there's no point staying upset about something that's happened, because you can't change it. All you can do is move

forward and focus on the future.

Maura: And I think that's pretty good advice. Probably this expression exists in many different languages.

Jessie: Yeah. So for all our listeners out there, we'd be really interested in hearing if you have any idioms in your language that have the same meaning.

Maura: That would be really interesting. Thanks for listening, don't forget to go to our website, Culips.com, and support us in whatever way you can.

Jessie: So until next time, take care of yourselves, and **don't cry over spilled milk**.

Maura: Bye!

Jessie: Bye!

Detailed Explanation

Don't cry over spilled (or spilt) milk

Maura and Jessie mentioned in the Catch Word podcast that this is an idiomatic expression. That means this expression is not just about milk, it can be used whenever we mean to say that we can't change what's already happened, so there's no point in feeling bad about it. As you can imagine, there are many variations of how this expression is used, though it's almost always used in the negative, because we would never encourage someone **to cry over spilled milk!**

Here are a few different ways you might hear this expression:

I'm not going to cry over spilled milk.

There's no point in crying over spilled milk.

There's no reason to cry over spilled milk.

You shouldn't cry over spilled milk.

You can't cry over spilled milk.

It doesn't help to cry over spilled milk.

Here are some examples of this expression being used in conversation:

Yvette: I wrote an angry response to a mean email I received from my sister. I couldn't help myself at the time but now I feel so bad about it.

Blaine: **You can't cry over spilled milk.** Maybe you can try talking to your sister about her email and why it upset you so much.

Des: I got my car back from the mechanic last week, and on the same day I sideswiped a car parked on the road. I can't believe I wasn't being more careful. My insurance premiums are going to go up for sure. This has been such a terrible day.

Elise: **It doesn't help to cry over spilled milk.** You'll just have to deal with the consequences the best you can.

To go back in time

When someone regrets something that has happened, they might wish they could **go back in time** and change the outcome. Someone who'd having a hard time moving past an incident that they feel bad about might say this. Of course, they know that it's impossible to actually **go back in time**, but when we hear this expression, we understand how bad the person feels about what happened. It might be a good time to offer them the advice that they shouldn't cry over spilled milk!

Here's an example:

Lana: Oh, I'm so upset with myself! I spent too much time on the first half of the exam and I didn't have enough time to finish the last page!

Andrew: Oh no! That's too bad.

Lana: I wish I could **go back in time** and pace myself better. I just didn't realize how quickly the time was passing.

Andrew: Well, there's no point in crying over spilled milk. You'll just have to remember to manage your time better on the next exam.

Karen: I only realized once I was on the airplane, but I left my cell phone in the cab!

Aileen: What a terrible mistake.

Karen: I know. I wish I could **go back in time** and remember to put it back in my purse!

To move on

We seem to talk a lot in North America about **moving on**! You might hear it when people talk about life after a relationship has ended, for example:

"It's great to see that Joan has **moved on** after Brent broke up with her."

Or maybe:

"I'm having a hard time **moving on**; I just really thought that Hailey and I would spend our lives together."

In this situation, the **moving on** can usually be judged by whether or not the person is dating other people. But we don't just **move on** from relationships, sometimes it can be just an unusual experience that we get stuck on. For example:

Neeta: Last year I volunteered in Haiti after the earthquake. I haven't been able to forget the images of destruction I saw. I can't seem to **move on**. I think I'll go back and help in whatever way I can.

In this example, Neeta has returned home after her volunteer work and her life has continued as it did before she went to Haiti. Nothing gives away that she is having a hard time **moving on** from this experience, except that she feels compelled to return to a place where she can help.

To move on can be challenging, because it might be difficult to forget about a situation that you regret. Sometimes, in order **to move on**, you might just need to accept changes in your life that you don't feel bad about. When someone is not **moving on**, they might feel stuck in a situation or frustrated.

To be hard on yourself

To be too hard on yourself is to blame yourself or to be angry with yourself more than you really should. This episode is about not crying over spilled milk, which is some advice that we might give to someone who we feel is being **too hard on themselves**. When someone does something that they feel bad about and they continue to think about it even though they can't change it, we could say **don't be so hard on yourself**. It can be used instead of *don't cry over spilled milk* or in addition to it. They don't mean the same thing, but both expressions are useful for similar situations. Here's an example:

Marnie: I had an interview last week for my dream job, but I got there late because of construction. Now I haven't heard back from them.

Nicole: Maybe they haven't made a decision yet.

Marnie: I made a bad first impression by arriving late. I should have left earlier!

Nicole: You're being **too hard on yourself**! You didn't know there would be traffic. I'm sure they understand.

Marnie: Yeah, you're right. I did call to let them know I was going to be late.

To be too hard on yourself can also be used when someone sets expectations for themselves that are too high, and they fail:

Patrice: I studied really hard for that exam. I thought I understood the material really well but I still made mistakes.

April: **Don't be so hard on yourself**! Even though you made some little mistakes, you still did very well on the exam.

Another related expression is *you can't keep beating yourself up about it*. This is not a literal expression! We can say it when someone keeps feeling bad about a mistake they made and can't move on.

Rita: I keep asking myself why I stayed with him for so long. I should have known he was never going to change. I feel like such a sucker for ever believing him.

Malinda: You can't keep beating yourself up about it. At least you've left him now and you're not wasting any more time on him.

Potluck

A **potluck** is an event where the people who are coming each bring some food to share with everyone else. We previously did an entire episode on **potlucks**, so you can look through our past episodes to learn more about this.

Spilled vs. spilt

Spilled and **spilt** are two different ways of saying and spelling the same word. **Spilt** is more commonly seen in the United Kingdom, while **spilled** is the variation used more often in North America. Both are correct.

There are many other words that similarly are spelled differently in the UK and North America. In fact, the word *spelled* is itself one of these words; it may be seen as *spelled* or *spelt*. *Learned/learnt* and *dreamed/dreamt* are two more examples.

No weeping for shed milk

In 1659 James Howell published a collection of English proverbs in the book *Paroimiografia*. This is the first time that the expression ***no weeping for shed milk*** was recorded in written history. However, its inclusion in the book indicates that it was already widely accepted as an idiom even before 1659.

What's done is done/The past is the past

These phrases are more direct than *don't cry over spilled milk*, and they can be used instead of that idiom or to reinforce it. These are all things we might say to a person who can't move on from a situation. Here are a couple of examples of how we might use these phrases:

Heath: I'm really sorry about forgetting your birthday. I've just been so busy at work lately.
Kim: It's OkOK. **What's done is done**. You'll just have to make it up to me next year!

In this example, Kim offers Heath a way that he can move on so that he won't keep feeling bad about forgetting her birthday. She tells him that, while he can't do anything about forgetting her birthday this year, next year he can do something extra special to make up for it.

Lotta: It was terrible of me to tell Stephanie about your break-up. I know it was really painful and private. I shouldn't have gossiped about you. I hope you can forgive me.
Lila: Well, **the past is the past**. You've apologized now and we've been friends for so long. I think we can move past this.

To dwell on the past

This expression describes what a person who *is* crying over spilled milk is doing: **dwelling on the past**. **To dwell on the past** means to keep going over a situation or event in your mind and be stuck there. It's one of those situations where the person might wish they could go back in time and change something they did.

The word **dwell** can be used in a few different ways. In this phrase, it means that your thoughts or your mind spend much of their time focused on the past. You can also use the word **dwell** (or dwelled/dwelt if you are talking in the past tense) as a verb that means to write or speak about something a lot. A dwelling can refer to a person's home, meaning a place where they physically spend much of their time. Here are a couple of examples:

Cara: I don't mean **to dwell on the past**, but I still don't understand why I wasn't considered for the promotion but Aaron was, especially since I have seniority over him.

Esmeralda: I don't want **to dwell on this** for too long, but we need to go over the process for submitting vacation requests.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is not an example of an idiom?

- a) Don't cry over spilled milk.
- b) It was raining cats and dogs.
- c) There is nothing you can do to change the past.
- d) Don't beat a dead horse.

2. Which of the following statements is true?

- a) *Spilt* is just a shortened way of spelling *spilled*.
- b) *Spilled* is more commonly used in the UK.
- c) *Spilt* is an incorrect spelling of the word *spilled*.
- d) Both *spilled* and *spilt* are correct and can be used.

3. When might you use the expression *don't cry over spilled milk*?

- a) when someone keeps feeling bad about something that happened in the past
- b) when there's a lot more milk in the refrigerator
- c) when someone is too happy about something that happened in the past
- d) when you want to make someone feel worse about something bad they did

4. Who might you tell to move on in the following scenarios?

- a) a man who keeps calling an old girlfriend who's dating someone new
- b) someone who just got a promotion but keeps thinking about their old job
- c) a student who keeps talking about how badly she did on her math test
- d) all of the above

5. Being too hard on yourself is the same as which of the following?

- a) dwelling on the past
- b) crying over spilled milk
- c) moving on
- d) beating yourself up

- 6. Which of the following phrases should you NOT say to someone who's feeling bad about something that happened in the past?**
- a) What's done is done.
 - b) Keep crying over spilled milk.
 - c) Don't dwell on the past.
 - d) You have to move on.

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