

Real Talk #044 – How to react to surprising news

Episode description

Some people enjoy surprises. Some people absolutely hate them! It is sometimes difficult to know how to react when someone tells you something incredible. In this Real Talk episode, Andrew and Jeremy share plenty of expressions to help you react.

Fun fact

A lot of people love being surprised by amazing facts. Ripley's Believe It or Not! is a franchise of publications and museums that deals in amazing and hard-to-believe facts. They have more than 80 attractions around the world that bring in more than 12 million guests every year.

Expressions included in the study guide

- You'll never guess
- Don't tell me
- You're kidding
- I can't believe it myself
- To chip in
- At hand
- That's unbelievable
- Are you for real?



Transcript

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

Andrew: Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew.

Jeremy: And my name is Jeremy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Andrew: Hello there, Culips listeners. Welcome back to Real Talk. Real Talk is the series where we teach you the English that you need to know for real-world situations. Before we get started, I wanna let you all know that there's a study guide for this episode available for all Culips members. And we highly recommend following along with the study guide while you listen to us here today. Now, you may be wondering who is us? Well, it's me and also Jeremy. Jeremy is here to help me today. Hey there, Jeremy.

Jeremy: Hi there, Andrew. So, today, we're going to talk about how to react to surprising situations or how to talk about surprising situations.

Andrew: Exactly. So, you know, like, when one of your friends tells you some good news and it's kind of shocking to hear that good news. This kind of situation, like, how can you respond in a natural way and like an English native speaker would respond in that surprising situation, which is positive, right? It's not, like, a bad surprise, like, I just got in a car accident or my house burned down. We're not going to talk about those negative things today, only positive surprises.

Jeremy: But maybe we should talk about those in another episode someday. What do you think?

Andrew: That is a good idea, we should definitely cover that. But, for now, for today, what we're going to do is listen to a conversation between two friends. And one of the friends has some good news to share. So we'll take a listen to that example conversation. And then after we finish, we are going to break down and analyze that example. We'll take a closer look at some of the expressions you need to know and some of the ways that you can speak about a surprising situation. So let's get started by listening to that example conversation now.

Jeremy: Let's do it.

Friend 1: You'll never guess what happened to me today.

Friend 2: Why, what happened?

Friend 1: Last week, I randomly decided to **chip in** to my office lottery pool.

Friend 2: Wait, **don't tell me**. You won?

Friend 1: Yeah, we won. How crazy is that?

Friend 2: You're kidding.

Friend 1: No, man. I'm serious.

Friend 2: What? **That's unbelievable**.

Friend 1: I know, **I can't believe it myself**.

Friend 2: Yeah, congratulations, man. So how much did you win?

Friend 1: Let's just say that the next time you see me, I might be driving a new car.

Andrew: OK, so we just heard that example conversation. And in that conversation, two friends or two coworkers, maybe they're even coworkers, they're talking about something really amazing that happened today. And that is that one of the friends won some money in his office lottery pool, office lottery pool. So he decided to **chip in**, which means to contribute. So he **chipped in**, he contributed some money to this lottery pool. And, Jeremy, perhaps you could explain to our listeners what a lottery pool is, because I'm sure there are some listeners out there that have never heard about this before.

Jeremy: Sure. A lottery pool is when a group of people pool their money together, meaning they all put in some money to buy a bunch of lottery tickets. And then they share the winnings. They share the money that they win, if they win, of course. And in this situation, the person and his office, meaning everyone at his work, everyone that he works with, they won. So they all divided up the money. And they're all pretty happy about that.

Andrew: Exactly. And from time to time you'll read a story in the newspaper or see it on the news about a company where some of the employees do an office lottery pool and win. And there's always, like, one or two employees who don't participate in the pool. And then they're always really sad because all of their coworkers win and often they quit. So it's like two or three employees in that team are left remaining working in the company and the other people quit their jobs, because they won the lottery. It's always kind of funny and sad to see stories like that on the news.

Andrew: But that's getting away from our main focus today. So let's get back to the conversation **at hand**. And so what we really want to check out here and take a look at closely is how the friend responds to this amazing, surprising news that he hears. So let's look at some expressions that you can use when you need to give surprising news OK? We'll start with that. So the friend won the lottery and he needs to tell that news. So he says **you'll never guess** what happened to me today. **You'll never guess** what happened to me today. And so, Jeremy, we could use this in any kind of situation where we need to communicate that something really surprising happened to us, right?

Jeremy: Yeah. I think another way we often say it is guess what? Or guess what happened to me today? There are lots of variations of this phrase that you can use in this situation. And I think it's important to note that you aren't really supposed to guess if someone says this to you.

Andrew: Right.

Jeremy: Guess what happened to me today? I don't know you, you got hit by a car?

Andrew: Right. So actually, in the example conversation, the friend says **you'll never guess** what happened to me. And then the reaction is what happened, right? That is usually how we respond to this, what happened? So we don't try and guess, like, oh, you went shopping? You were late for your hair appointment? I don't know. You know, we don't actually guess. It's just a way to say something surprising happened to me today and I want to tell you about it. That's kind of the function of this expression.

Jeremy: And for guess what, the response is usually just what, what happened?

Andrew: Exactly. Guess what? What? That's almost 99% of the time that's the format that that interaction will follow.

Jeremy: So how about some ways that we can react to surprising news? So when someone says it to us, what are some things that we can say?

Andrew: Yeah, so in the example conversation, we heard, "Wait, **don't tell me**. You won?" It's like **are you for real?** Are you being serious? **Don't tell me** that you won, right? It's kind of got this nuance to it. It's almost like you can't believe it.

Jeremy: It's also important to note that this sentence isn't used literally. It isn't actually saying **do not tell me** that you won. It's just an expression we use, usually because when someone starts telling the story of what happened about this good news, sometimes the other person can predict what that will be. And they want to guess correctly. So they'll say wait, **don't tell me**. I think I know what it is. Here is my guess. Is that correct? I think that's what is implied by this expression.

Andrew: Yeah. So, Jeremy, you're exactly right that when we are saying **don't tell me**, it's not like we actually want that person not to deliver that surprising news to us. We do want to hear the surprising news. But we just say it to say, like, wow, is that for real? Are you being serious? It kind of has that feeling to it. I can say **don't tell me**, you won. **Don't tell me**, you got a promotion. **Don't tell me**.

Jeremy: You're having a baby?

Andrew: You're having a baby, right? All of these kind of surprising situations. But there are many other ways that we can react to surprising news. And some common ones are to use a short expression like **you're kidding** or you're joking or you're pulling my leg. You're pulling my leg.

Jeremy: That's a weird one.

Andrew: Yeah, we use all of these expressions. **You're kidding**, you're joking, you're pulling my leg whenever the news is so surprising that at first we don't really believe that it's true.

Jeremy: And the expression pulling my leg is kind of an older expression, I would say. And it just means to joke, basically. So joking, pulling my leg, those mean the same thing. And there's another version of that, another expression for the same thing and that is you're full of it, full of it. This may seem strange to some English learners, but this means that the person is lying, sort of, he's full of it. That means he is full of things that are not true.

Andrew: Yeah. And, Jeremy, I think you're full of it, we would use this in a surprising situation where we really didn't believe that it was happening. And also when maybe that the relationship between the two people who are talking is not too friendly. It almost has a mean feeling to it to me. Like, Jeremy, if we were strong competitors at work and then you came to me to tell me like, "Hey, Andrew, guess what? I got a promotion." And I'd be, like, "What? You're full of it. You're lying. You didn't get a promotion." Like we have this kind of negative relationship, that's when I'd use it.

Jeremy: Yeah, I can see that. It sounds a little bit harsh. So, to our listeners, I would recommend just using you're joking or **you're kidding**.

Andrew: Totally. Now, there's some other ways as well that you can react to surprising news, such as saying, wow, **that's unbelievable**. **That's unbelievable**. Or that's crazy. Or even **are you for real?** **Are you for real?** **Are you for real?** And this means are you serious? Are you telling the truth?

Jeremy: Are you serious is another version of this.

Andrew: And there's an expression that I use from time to time. I don't know if I want to recommend it to our listeners, because it's kind of old fashioned, but sometimes I use it in a comedic way. I will say get out of town. Get out of town. Get out of town. This is just an idiomatic expression that means stop lying to me. Stop lying to me, tell me the truth. And we can use it when, yeah, we hear some news that is really surprising, almost unbelievable. Then we could say get out of town. Jeremy, you didn't win the lottery. Get out of here. Get out of town.

Jeremy: Yeah, get out of here. That's what I would say. Also, I want to mention, of these I usually use that's crazy the most. This one is the one that I use in my daily life. And I actually use it even when the news is sort of negative or even neutral. So, for example, if someone says it snowed 6 feet on the mountain over there, I would say, wow, that's crazy, right? It's not necessarily bad or good. It's sort of neutral. And I would still say that's crazy.

Andrew: I also use that's crazy a lot and a similar expression, that's insane. I also say that a lot. That's insane. And, yeah, we'll use it for surprising situations and also situations that are really not surprising at all. Like, maybe, Jeremy, you could tell me, "Oh, I ate a cucumber sandwich for lunch" and I was, like, wow, that's insane, was it good? Even a situation that's not very surprising, we'll say something like, wow, that's crazy, a cucumber sandwich, whoa. So it's kind of weird that native speakers react that strongly to these situations, but I think that's crazy and that's insane are very good to know for many situations when speaking English.

Jeremy: Yeah. And you can really use any word that means crazy. So if you look in the dictionary or thesaurus and find words that are synonyms with crazy, you can use pretty much any of them. That's ludicrous. That's bonkers. That's ridiculous. Like all of those work.

Andrew: One expression that I've been using more and more lately, I've noticed, is that's wild. That's wild. So I also say that. That's a little bit of a different meaning, but used in a very similar way.

Jeremy: So let's move on to talk about some expressions for reassuring the other person that you're being serious and not joking. So, in other words, these are ways that you can react to the person who said that's crazy, unbelievable, **you're kidding**.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. So when you need to reassure that you're not full of it, and that you are telling the truth, and that your surprising news is actually real, then you could say something like, yeah, for real. For real, I'm not joking, right? Maybe somebody asks you **are you for real?** You can say, yeah, for real, means I am being serious.

Jeremy: Or you could just say no, I'm serious. Or no, I'm not joking.

Andrew: And in the example conversation, we heard **I can't believe it myself. I can't believe it myself.** Or we could even say I can barely believe it myself. And when we use **I can't believe it myself** or I can barely believe it myself, it just means that even we are surprised. Even we, as the speaker, are surprised that this event happened. Like winning the lottery, you know, it's even surprising to me. And so we can communicate that we are surprised ourselves by using an expression like this.

Jeremy: Like I can imagine, for example, if there were two friends talking and one person said my wife is pregnant with sextuplets.

Andrew: How many babies is that, six?

Jeremy: Six children, right? And the other person would say would probably seriously say, **you're kidding**, no way. You're pulling my leg. I don't believe you. But if it were actually true, then the person could say, no, I'm serious, I can barely believe it myself. Because that is such a rare occurrence, that all of these phrases could be used in that situation as well.

Andrew: Well, that brings us to the end of today's episode, everyone. Thank you for listening. And thank you for studying English with us today.

Andrew: If you enjoy Culips and if you find us to be educational, and perhaps even a little bit entertaining, then please support us. There are many ways that you can support us. For example, you could sign up to become a Culips member. And when you're a Culips member, there are so many awesome benefits that you get. And you can check all of those out on our website, Culips.com. One of the awesome benefits is that you can study with our study guides that we make for each and every episode. And if you're not a Culips member yet, but you would like to be and you're interested to see what our study guides are like, then you can download some free samples. And all you have to do is select the Study Guide Samples option from the Membership menu on Culips.com.

Andrew: But becoming a Culips member is not the only way that you can support us. You can also support us by following us on social media, or telling your friends who are learning English to listen to Culips. And, finally, you could also support us by leaving us a five-star rating and a nice review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

Andrew: So that is it for us today. But we will be back soon with another brand-new Culips episode and we'll talk to you then. Bye, everyone.

Jeremy: Bye, everyone.

Detailed Explanations

You'll never guess

Phrase

In the example conversation, one friend begins by saying to the other, “**You’ll never guess** what happened to me today.” When you start telling a story with **you’ll never guess**, you are announcing to the other person that you have something interesting to say. You can wait for the other person to actually guess, but usually people just continue with their story.

You could also say, “**Guess what?**” For that, the most common response is simply, “What?” This shows that the other person will be listening to your story.

Here are a couple more examples with **you’ll never guess**:

Omar: Did you have a nice day with your friends?

Romy: For sure. It was pretty fun. Oh, **you’ll never guess** who I saw at the mall.

Omar: Who?

Romy: Maya from high school.

Omar: Maya? Wow! It’s been so long since we’ve last seen her.

Chaim: Oh, **guess what?**

Kyle: What?

Chaim: Georgina is pregnant.

Kyle: Really? That’s great! They’ve been trying for a couple of years, right?

Chaim: They have. We should sent them a congratulatory card.

Don't tell me Idiom

In the example conversation, when the first friend mentions to the other that he chipped in money to the office lottery pool, the second friend immediately knows the ending of the story. He says, "Wait, **don't tell me**. You won?" In saying this, he is both guessing the news before being told and is surprised at the news at the same time.

Depending on the situation, you can say **don't tell me** and leave a long pause because you are thinking of an answer. This depends on body language. You might raise a hand as if telling the other person, "Stop! I want to guess the answer."

Here are a couple more examples with **don't tell me**:

Frances: It's so frustrating. George was late to our game yet again. Do you want to know why?

Bobby: **Don't tell me.** Because of traffic, right?

Frances: Right. He always uses the same excuse.

Bobby: I know. And we always play at the same time. He should leave earlier if there's always the same traffic.

Theo: I went to the movies last night. Guess who I saw?

Danika: **Don't tell me.** Was Justin there?

Theo: Yup.

Danika: Was he with Jessy?

Theo: Yup.

Danika: I thought they broke up a year ago.

Theo: Apparently it's complicated.

You're kidding

Idiom

In the example conversation, the second friend responds to the news by saying, “**You’re kidding**.” This is a way for the speaker to show some amount of doubt and surprise. You can say this when you are looking for extra confirmation. You want to hear more.

You’re joking, **you’re pulling my leg**, and **you’re full of it** are all similar ways of showing disbelief at hearing surprising news. However, unlike the other expressions, **you’re full of it** can have a negative connotation. This is because **you’re full of it** is basically calling someone a liar. Depending on the situation, you can say someone is **full of it** in either a friendly or unfriendly way.

Here are a couple more examples with **you’re kidding**:

Penny: Remember I told you I had a big surprise for you?

Agatha: Yes.

Penny: Well, here it is.

Agatha: What’s this?

Penny: I bought you a plane ticket for us to go to Los Angeles in February.

Agatha: **You’re kidding!**

Penny: No, really! Check the ticket. We’re going!

Toby: I got bad news. I didn’t get into university.

Casper: But you’re at the top of your class! And you had so many great recommendations!

Toby: I know. It didn’t work out. I’m pretty sad about it.

Casper: Wait, why are you smiling? **You’re pulling my leg**, aren’t you?

Toby: Yeah, I got accepted!

Casper: Great!

I can't believe it myself

Idiom

In the example conversation, the first friend is also surprised at winning the lottery and says, "**I can't believe it myself.**" You can say this when the event in your story is so surprising that you are also surprised by it. A common variation of this expression is **I can barely believe it myself.**

Here's one more example with **I can't believe it myself**:

Seth: Did you hear the news? My son signed a contract with Manchester United.

Iris: Really? That's amazing!

Seth: I know! **I can barely believe it myself.**

Iris: Congratulations! When does he start?

To chip in

Phrasal verb

To chip in means to contribute to a group effort. You can **chip in** money, like giving money to a local charity, but you can also **chip in** by helping physically. For example, if your friends are building a house and you helped them, you can say that you **chipped in**.

Here's one more example with **to chip in**:

Rachael: I heard you raised a lot of money to buy basketball uniforms for the local team. Good job!

Camilla: Actually, it was my employees who raised most of the money. I just **chipped in** enough to reach the amount needed.

Rachael: Still, that's pretty cool.

Camilla: Thanks. I'll ask you for a donation next time!

At hand Phrase

At a certain point in their conversation, Andrew and Jeremy talk about lottery pools, which is somewhat off topic. To resume talking about their main topic, Andrew says they should get back to the conversation **at hand**. **At hand** refers to something that is happening. The conversation they're currently having should be about reacting to surprising news, and not about lottery pools.

Here's one more example with **at hand**:

Graham: Oh, by the way, you missed a really good time last night.

Jada: Really?

Graham: Yeah, we went out bowling for a few hours. After that, we went to an electronic archery range. It was crazy.

Jada: Sounds like you guys had a lot of fun, but I think we should get back to the task **at hand**. We only have 2 hours to prepare for our demonstration. Let's get back to work.

That's unbelievable Idiom

Another way of expressing surprise at hearing someone's story is to say **that's unbelievable**. It's not that you literally don't believe the person. It's an exaggeration. You can construct other variations by combining "that's" with a synonym for the word "crazy" such as **that's crazy**, **that's insane**, **that's ludicrous**, **that's bonkers**, and **that's wild**.

Here's one more example with **that's unbelievable**:

Seamus: How was Joey's hockey game? Did they win?

Grace: They won 10 to 0.

Seamus: What? **That's unbelievable!**

Grace: I know, and Joey scored 6 of those goals.

Seamus: **That's crazy!**

Are you for real?

Idiom

Yet another way of expressing disbelief is to ask, “**Are you for real?**” In saying this, you want to confirm the truth of the story. You can also ask, “**Are you serious?**” or “**Seriously?**” They are similar reactions to saying **get out of here** or **get out of town**.

Here’s one more example with **are you for real?**:

Inga: Look out the window. Can you see my new car?

Arnold: I don’t know. I can only see a red Tesla.

Inga: That’s my new car.

Arnold: **Are you for real?** You bought a Tesla? That’s insane!

Inga: Wanna go for a ride?

Quiz

1. Which of the following does NOT have the same meaning as you're kidding?

- a) you're pulling my leg
- b) don't tell me
- c) you're full of it
- d) are you for real?

2. Usually if you say you'll never guess [something], are you expecting the other person to guess the answer?

- a) yes
- b) no

3. What does to chip in mean?

- a) to not help
- b) to contribute
- c) to play with poker chips
- d) to eat a snack

4. True or false? You don't want to hear the story if you tell someone, "Wait, don't tell me."

- a) true
- b) false

5. Which of the following is NOT a synonym for crazy?

- a) bonkers
- b) ludicrous
- c) insane
- d) stupid

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. There are many variations in English for “that’s unbelievable!” What expressions can you think of in your native language that have the same impact?
2. What is one of the biggest surprises you have told someone?
3. What was a true story you’ve heard from a good friend that you simply couldn’t believe?
4. What was a true story of yours that other people didn’t believe at first?
5. Are you the type of person to chip in? Why or why not?

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Jeremy Brinkerhoff

Music: *Something Elated* by Broke For Free

Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates

Audio editor: Andrew Bates

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Matty Warnock

English editor: Stephanie MacLean

Business manager: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima

Project manager: Jessica Cox

Image: Ben White (Unsplash.com)