

Simplified Speech #197 – The rat race (Ad free)

Episode description

Have you ever heard of the "rat race"? In this episode, Andrew and Kassy talk about their own experiences with the rat race. They explain what this term means to them and discuss different ways to escape it. If you want to learn about competitiveness in the business world and find out how to have a happier and more balanced life, this episode is perfect for you!

Fun fact

Many other languages have their own versions of "rat race." For example, in German, it's called "Hamsterrad," which means "hamster wheel," conveying the same idea of running without getting anywhere. Is there a fun, idiomatic term for "rat race" in your mother tongue?

Expressions included in the study guide

- Rat race
- Midlife crisis
- To taper off
- To shine a light on
- To be in the thick of (something)
- To be cut out for (something)



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: And now I'm here with my trusty co-host Kassy. Hey, Kassy!

Kassy: Hey, Andrew.

Andrew: And we are going to be talking today about the **rat race** and escaping the rat race. And this topic was suggested by Kassy, actually, because it's connected to a book that you read recently, Kassy. And I know that you're a big bookworm. Usually, you read like almost 100 books a year, right?

Kassy: Yeah, a little less this year.

Andrew: A little less this year?

Kassy: Yeah.

Andrew: There's still time. We're only in the middle of the year, so you still got time to catch up. But a big reader, big bookworm. And so that's what we're going to talk about. And I'm really excited about this one. I think this is a really interesting topic. The rat race, escaping the rat race, and really how to live a happy life. So, Kassy, maybe we should start by defining what the rat race is. For people who are not familiar with this expression, they're probably getting like a really interesting visual in their head, imagining like some rats running through a maze trying to find a piece of cheese or something. And maybe we could think of it like that, but why don't we define it clearly for everyone so they know what it is, and then maybe we can talk about the imagery after. But what is it? What is a rat race?

Kassy: Honestly, it's pretty much the definition of capitalism, in my opinion. It's just, you know, everybody's working as hard as they can to be successful and reach the quote unquote, "top".

Andrew: So, the rat race is what we call really, it's like a nickname for a competitive society, right? When you are constantly working really, really hard to try and gain more and more things, try, and get more and more money. Maybe you try and get a higher position in your company, try, and get promoted and get to a higher and higher level. You try and acquire more and more things, a bigger house, a faster car. Some people even try to get a more attractive partner, right? Like a **midlife crisis**, right? There's that stereotype of the midlife crisis guy who divorces his wife, who buys a Porsche, and then who starts dating a younger woman in her 20s. I don't know. That's like a cliché, right? That kind of mid-age crisis. Anyways, that's what we call the rat race, is this competition in society to try and be better than everybody else. And to an extent, I think most of us, Kassy, like you said, who live in a capitalist economy, we participate in this. Whether we like it or not, to an extent, it's really, really hard to live outside of the rat race. Some people are more interested in competing with others than other people are, but to an extent, it's really hard to live outside of the rat race. And it can be exhausting, right? This is like something that causes so many people a lot of stress, is that they feel like if they're not competing with other people, well then, they're going to fall behind.

Kassy: Exactly. I think it's not just capitalism, but it's also urbanization. You know, our generation and the generations most recently before us, we flock to the cities, and we're just surrounded by strangers and other competition. And when you go outside, you see people wearing fancy outfits or driving fancy cars or, you know, having a whole bunch of stuff that you don't have and you feel like, "I got to keep going. They're way better than me." You constantly see the competition around you.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. And so, for some of us, that can be really, really stressful. For others, not so much. Kassy, what about you? To what extent, let me phrase the question like this: to what extent would you feel like you participate in the rat race?

Kassy: Yeah, I don't think I participate in the rat race as much as those who are in a traditional company setting since I'm a teacher. I do feel like there's a bit of a teacher rat race inside of each school, you know, trying to be more influential in the school or something. I think in my early 20s and mid-20s, I was more interested in trying to, like, gain as much momentum in my career as I possibly could and take on all these part-time jobs and any opportunities that came my way. I tried to grab them because I didn't have a whole lot of resources. I feel like the less resources you have, the more of a go-getter you are. And then if you reach a point where you feel satisfied in your life, that's where you have the two types of people, the ones who kind of like **taper off** and find satisfaction with their current life or the ones who are like, "OK, I'm safe. What can I risk now to take me to an even higher level?" And I'm not that second person. I'm more of the first category.

Andrew: I like that expression you just said, "to taper off," and that means to lose momentum, right? To become smaller and smaller and smaller. You could imagine like a curve on a graph and that curve just slowly, slowly, slowly going down to zero. That would be tapering off. So, your desire to participate in the rat race tapered off as you got a little bit older.

Kassy: Yes. I mean, definitely involved. Don't want to quit my job anytime soon, but I feel satisfied with my current salary. Could it be a little higher? Yeah. But do I need to work way harder in order to get a higher salary? No, I don't think that'll increase my happiness very much.

Andrew: I think to an extent anyone who goes into education has sort of given up on the rat race right from the start because it's a sad but true reality of the education field in general that often it's really, really hard to become a high-level earner in this field. But anyways, yeah, I think I kind of agree with you, Kassy. My story is similar to yours to an extent. I also think that I'm not too interested in the rat race, especially all through my 20s and into my 30s as well. It was just not something that I was interested in at all. Like I even remember when I chose my major at university, a lot of my friends were like, "Why are you

studying English literature and history? Like you'll never make a lot of money once you graduate." And my thinking was like, I'm not here at university to make a lot of money for my future. I'm here to like get educated and learn. And so, I should choose something that I'm interested in to study. Now in retrospect, probably I should have listened to my friends. Now that I'm a little bit older and wiser, like, yeah, I could have learned all of those things from university just in my spare time and I maybe should have studied like programming or some technical thing.

Kassy: But would you have been as happy as you are now? Who knows?

Andrew: Who knows, right? Yeah, you never know. So, in retrospect, it's always easy to say, "Yeah, I should have done this, or I should have done that." But in the time, I think it was right. And I do have a very nice life right now. So, no complaints about the lifestyle I am living. But I don't feel a super strong desire to compete with others. I have friends who work in different industries, some friends who make a lot more money than me, two, three, five, 10 times more money than me. And I look at them and sometimes I feel a little bit jealous, like, "Ah, yeah, it would be nice if I had a BMW as well. Yeah, you know, it'd be nice if I could do that or if my house was bigger." But at the end of the day, I don't think those friends are too much happier than I am. You know, I think we're both like really satisfied. And although maybe they have some things that are nicer, I think like it's not those things that are giving them the happiness. So, yeah, I think for me right now, I'm not too much in the rat race. I think just like a little bit, of course, like a little bit is like human desire, right, is natural to sometimes dream or fantasize about owning some things, owning a sports car or whatever. But yeah, I don't pursue it with a lot of passion and enthusiasm.

Kassy: Yeah, I completely agree with you. I think another thing that's interesting about this topic, the rat race was brought up in the book that I read, which was called, "Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop." "Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop." It was originally written in Korean by a Korean author, but it's been translated to various

languages. It's quite new. I think it was published originally in 2022. And it talks a lot about the rat race and specifically how we're kind of in the late stages of capitalism. And that's why there comes a time for a lot of people where you can't even really enter the rat race or once you're in it, you're just miserable. I know in the US, a lot of people talk about and probably Canada too, how the housing crisis is so crazy these days, and how wages are quite stagnated. They're not increasing at the same rate as the inflation and living costs are. I've heard that our generation and Gen Z is actually living worse off than our parents and our grandparents for the first time in history, which is crazy. And likewise in Korea, where this book was written and where the characters live, they're talking about similar problems. The second character you're introduced to is a college student called Minjun. And he literally does everything correctly, Andrew. He studies really well through high school. He gets into a really nice university in Seoul, which is like going to like a top university in any country. He studies a good major that you're supposed to be able to get a job in easily. And he graduates and that's it. He spends the next two years working his butt off to get a job. He goes to dozens and dozens and dozens of interviews. You know, he was a straight A student. Like he went to a good university. He had connections. And he couldn't even begin to enter the rat race because he didn't get a shot. And I feel like this is happening in a lot of countries, not just Korea or the US, but like around the globe. So, there's this interesting dynamic now where we have a rat race, but we also have this generation of young people who can't even join the rat race and they're freaking out and trying to figure out what to do with their lives.

Andrew: Kassy, I think that's a great point, but I just want to say to our listeners here that this is really interesting because before we recorded this episode, Kassy told me that she had this great idea to talk about the rat race. And I said, "Yeah, let's do it. That's an awesome topic." And she also said that she had a book that she had read recently that was connected to this topic. But I said, "OK, don't tell me any information about the book" because sometimes if we talk about a topic too much before we record Culips, then it's not as interesting. Our reactions on the podcast are not as interesting. So, I always say, "Oh, let's save it for the podcast. Let's talk about this for the first time on Culips instead of, you

know, pretending that we're surprised to hear some news a second time." But this is crazy because that book that you're talking about, I'm actually reading in Korean right now. And I've talked about it on Culips before as well. So, this is the second time that we're bringing up this book. And unfortunately, my May, I talked about this maybe in April. My May has been really busy. So, I've got like 25 pages left. I'm almost at the end of the book.

But yeah, Kassy, it's funny because you said, oh, Andrew, if you're looking for a book to read in Korean, you should check this one out. And I'm already on it. So, I think that is a really nice example of a host of characters who in one way or another have left the rat race, right? And it does **shine a light** about this. And that kind of leads us into a nice transition to talk about escaping the rat race. And in that book, we hear about a woman who owns a bookstore. And that was kind of her way of escaping the rat race, right, was to start her own bookstore. And we hear a lot about the trials and tribulations of what that is like starting your own business and as much as possible trying to step away from the demands of society and be like, "I'm doing my own thing. This is going to be my new life and I'm in control." And you don't have to worry about like a boss or people competing with you. I mean, when you are a businessperson like that, I guess you do have to naturally compete with other bookstores, right? But to an extent, you're like stepping away and you're like, "OK, I'm going to do this on my own. And this is my way of escaping from the rat race."

Kassy: I think that, you know, owning your own business definitely comes with a lot of different stresses too, right? You have to be in charge of your own health insurance and how much income you make. But on the flip side, that means you have so much more freedom and so many more opportunities to decide where your energy goes, how much income you want to make. That's how much you have to work or how much effort you have to put in. And if you decide that you are satisfied with your current salary, then you could keep your business at that current level. You don't necessarily have to keep growing it and make it some sort of famous franchise that, you know, pops up around the globe.

Andrew: It doesn't have to be Amazon, right?

Kassy: Exactly.

Andrew: Another thing that we should talk about regarding the rat race is like just the comments and the pressure that you can feel from other people. And this is definitely true in Korean society. I know like in the context of that book, but I'm sure it's true for most societies around the world. And that is like, you know, you go to work and maybe you work in the same office as many other people, you're in a big company and you all share the same floor. And people are going to brag a little bit like, you know, "Oh, last weekend I went golfing here." Or, "My kid's going to this school. My kid's going to this private school." And so, you feel competition and pressure to keep up with other people around you. So maybe you don't even really want to chase wealth and get a lot of things, but you feel pressure, especially if you're a parent. You might feel, "Oh, my student isn't going to this school, this like international school or this private school or taking piano lessons from this amazing teacher. Then my child will fall behind." And so, you feel pressure in that way to keep participating in the rat race. And when you start your own business, to an extent, you're leaving that environment, right? You're removing yourself from all of those people around you, your coworkers, and your boss and all the people that you have to see day in and day out who you maybe are not best friends with and don't really like, but you have to interact with them every day anyways. And so, yeah, you're right. There are other elements of competition when you start your own business, but maybe you can escape that part of the rat race to an extent.

Kassy: Yeah, or you don't even have to start your own business. There's so many opportunities. For example, I had an uncle who he worked in, I don't remember, some sort of business as a business management something or other, definitely part of the rat race. And he wasn't happy. So, he took a huge pay cut to go work in a brewery because that was his dream. I think I've mentioned him before on the podcast maybe, but yeah, he made barely above minimum wage for a few years, but he was happy. And he worked up

the ranks in the brewery and now he does really well for himself, even better than he did before when he was working as a business manager. So yeah, it just goes to show, you have to decide, do you want to live to work or work to live?

Andrew: Right. Yeah, it's a good way to put it, work to live or live to work, right? Which one really is what you want to chase. So, I'm curious, Kassy, if you were to leave the rat race and yeah, like we said, we're kind of both in education, so we're not really in the thick of it. We're not really in the rat race. But if you are going to be like, OK, I'm really going to follow my heart and do just what I want to do, and I'm not going to compete with anybody anymore. I feel like you might open your own bookstore. Like I could see you doing that, but what would you do?

Kassy: Honestly, I've already talked about it. I talked about two ideas for a small business that I think I would love to do. One of them would be opening a small bakery and English library in Korea. And then maybe if it was in the countryside, we would have some land next door where we could have a futsal field for my husband. Yes, he could do like futsal classes and then I could, you know, have some English book talks, and then also make cakes and things because I love that. My other idea was also in the countryside of Korea would be to have a mini-golf course and an ice cream parlor.

Andrew: You know, I think both would be really fun, but mini golf is so fun. I love playing mini golf and it doesn't exist in Korea and it blows my mind why it doesn't exist here because I think it would also be a huge hit. Maybe we should go in on that together. We start the Culips mini golf club course or something.

Kassy: Yeah, we couldn't do it in the city area. We'd have to do it in a small town in like Gyeonggi-do or southern part of Korea or something, but...

Andrew: Yeah, it would be really fun. Yeah, if there are any Koreans with deep pockets, there's a business idea for you. Mini golf is really, really fun and doesn't exist here as far

as I know. If there are some Koreans listening who know about a mini golf course in the country, please let me know because I want to introduce my wife to this sport. And for people who don't know, mini golf is really just putting. You're only doing the putting and there are several different holes and all you have to do is putt the ball into the hole through different obstacles. It's really a lot of fun. You don't have to be a pro golfer or anything to play.

Kassy: It's a perfect place to take your kids, to go on a first date.

Andrew: Yeah, I'm actually planning to go next time I go back to Canada to take my wife to the mini-golf course that's in my hometown because it's so much fun and she's never tried. So, I'm like, "Oh my god, we got to do mini golf when you're in Canada. It'll be a blast."

Kassy: How about you, Andrew? If you got out of the education **rat race**, what do you think you would do?

Andrew: There are a lot of things that I would like to do that would probably make me no money. But like, you know, I love coffee and I love music. So maybe having a little cafe where I could DJ and play music that I like and hopefully, you know, there would be enough customers who also like that style of music to come and just chill and have a coffee. You could also do a bar like that, but I think owning a bar is not really a good fit for me. I wouldn't want to deal with drunk people, and I wouldn't want to stay up really late at night. So not a bar. But I also love live music. So, this would be kind of a different idea, but I've always wanted to open a concert venue. I think that could be really cool, especially in Canada. I don't know, there are not too many great venues, but it's a really hard business to operate and to make money on. So, I don't think it would ever happen, but it's fun to dream about from time to time. I also dream about from time to time really escaping the rat race and moving to the countryside and just becoming a farmer. You know, like have my own off-grid home and just farm organic vegetables and do the whole homesteading thing.

Kassy: Yeah, my sister, that is legitimately her goal, and she is already in training. Like, she's still renting, so she doesn't have a house yet. But she asked her landlord if she was allowed to pretty much dig up the entire yard and make it into a giant garden and they said, "OK." So, she just has a huge garden full of seasonal flowers and fruits and vegetables and she also makes her own sourdough bread, like, weekly. Yeah, so her future goal someday is to own her own property and then sell flowers and bread. I think she's going to do amazing at it, but it is a cool dream.

Andrew: Yeah, that's really cool. I think there's some people that I know back in Canada who have done that, and they've been really successful and so I think it's pretty cool. I could see myself really enjoying that and that's a really big step that's like exiting the rat race completely, right? It's like I'm just going to do my own thing, grow my own food, go my own way and there's something really romantic about that. I don't know if I would like it. You know, once I got into it, I'm sure there are some periods where it's really, really difficult and although I am introverted, I still do like being around people and I do like the conveniences of big city life. So, I don't know if I'm **cut out for it**, but it would be cool.

Kassy: You could have your homestead but not be a complete hermit.

Andrew: Yeah, that's what I'd have to do. You have to find that balance, right?

Kassy: OK, so Andrew, I was so excited earlier when you said you were reading that book because I don't usually read books at the same time as other people. So, ah, fangirling right now. Anyway, who is your favorite character or who do you feel resonates with you the most in this book and why?

Andrew: I'm going to go with Yeonju, Kassy, who I believe, I believe that's her name and she is the owner of the bookstore and yeah, she has pretty much a different life story than me. Kind of different, very different. But at the same time, I really like the idea of also owning a bookstore. I didn't talk about that earlier, but I think that's really cool. And, you

know, I like what she was doing in the story. I don't want to spoil the story too much. I don't want to spoil the story too much for anybody who wants to read, but I'll try to not give away too many details. But she owns the bookstore. She starts the bookstore, but she also does some book curation. She leaves lots of notes like about the summary of the book or if you like this style of book, you would like this. She tries to really find what's a good fit for her customers. She also does things like hosts lectures and events and has study groups. And reading groups that she organizes. She has a cafe in the bookstore. So, I think, yeah, her version of leaving the rat race is really attractive to me. And I think for that reason, I kind of can connect with her on that level. How about you? Who is your favorite character?

Kassy: They were all so good. My favorite was probably Minjun, which is the one I talked about earlier, who, you know, went to school and did so well but couldn't get a job. And he decided one day that he was just done, and he didn't want to be part of the rat race. He didn't want to start. So, he had enough money for a few months, and he just existed. And he watched a lot of movies.

Andrew: Yeah, he's watching a movie every day, right?

Kassy: Yeah. And he did yoga. And he worked part time jobs until he finally got a part time job as a barista at the bookshop. And he fell in love with making coffee. And the thing I loved about him was that, you know, he made a choice to not join the rat race, even though he knew he grappled with this guilt of wasting his education and wasting his potential because, "I worked so hard for this for so many years. I'm just going to throw it all away to make coffee?" But he also realized that he wasn't happy trying to be in this rat race and making coffee as perfectly as he could for each, and every customer brought him this joy and satisfaction that he couldn't find anywhere else. And even if his parents didn't think that it was a quote unquote, "real job," he was satisfied. And I don't know, I just found that really admirable.

Andrew: His mom made me so annoyed when she called to check in on him.

Kassy: Yes.

Andrew: Classic, classic mom. Kassy, I've got a bonus content question here for you. I'm going to go the other way. If you were going to go headfirst into the rat race, and you were going to like, "I'm going to try and make it! I'm going to try and get a better house, buy a better car, get fashionable clothes. I'm going to be the queen bee on my block!"

Kassy: Sounds exhausting.

Andrew: What would you do? What would be your steps to try and like, take over?

Kassy: I always thought about entering the scientific book world. For example, there's people there's people that write books or news articles for scientists. I hate research, could never work in a laboratory. For listeners who don't know my major was physics. But I was very much more interested in learning about physics and solving the math problems and actually like doing the physics research. And I also love reading. So, I think if I could work for a publishing company that publishes scientific magazines or something like that, that would really be my, my niche.

Andrew: Yeah, that sounds awesome. You could... I wonder if you could even do that in Korea with your Korean skills, right? You probably have to maybe study a little bit because like technical Korean would be very difficult, but you have like the scientific knowledge and the background you could do like translation from Korean research papers into English or something.

Kassy: There's always time.

Andrew: There's always time, yeah!

Kassy: How about you, Andrew?

Andrew: At this age, what would I do to enter the rat race? I think what this question is really asking is like, if you had a method to be rich, what would it be? And if I knew that then I probably would have done it already. So, it's really tough to speculate but yeah, probably like finding what industry would be really lucrative. And "lucrative" means that you can make a lot of profit, right? So, finding a really lucrative industry, probably in finance, I mentioned before that I have some friends who make much much much more money than I do, and they work in finance. So probably transitioning into one of those fields. And although they have 20 years more experience than I do, trying to gather some experience and work really hard and try and make it to the top in the finance world. I think that would be like, you'd be the king rat in the rat race if you made it to the top of the finance world. Because I think a lot of the times when we think of the rat race, that is one of the first industries to pop into our minds, right? Are like those ruthless investors who will do anything, who will destroy other people's lives, who are heartless and who don't even care about, you know, you see in a movie sometimes some like old grandma who can't make her mortgage payment, who's going to lose her house. She goes to the bank and they're like, "Denied!" Like, they have no heart, right? It's like, "Pay me my money, you move out of your house!" Like this kind of thing.

Kassy: Yeah, like the insurance companies too. Yeah, finance and insurance. I could never ever in a million years imagine you in the finance world, Andrew.

Andrew: Yeah, I don't think I'm cutthroat enough but just, you know, thinking about like, how would you get to the top of the rat race? Maybe that would be one way, but I highly doubt that will happen. Just a thought experiment. Kassy, this was a fun talk. Let's leave it here for today. Thank you to all of the listeners for tuning in. Of course, we'd love to hear your thoughts and opinions about the rat race as well. Please share them with us and with our whole Culips community on our Discord server. We look forward to hearing from you. Take care guys and we'll talk to you next time. Bye bye.

Kassy: See ya.

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

Detailed Explanations

Rat race

Noun

The term **rat race** describes a very busy and competitive lifestyle where people work hard to get more money, a higher position, or more things. It often means a life where people are always busy and always trying to get ahead, but feel like they can't escape.

People use **rat race** to talk about the constant struggle and competition in their daily work or life. For example, a friend might say, "Work has been so difficult lately. The rat race is exhausting me. I'm thinking about changing professions."

Rat race is always used negatively. Someone who enjoys their busy, competitive life would NOT call it a rat race.

Recently, social media influencers have popularized the term **rise-and-grind**, which is similar to **rat race** but has a more positive meaning. For example, "I'm getting up at 5am tomorrow to hit the gym before work. Gotta rise and grind!" However, many people also criticize this lifestyle.

The term **rat race** likely comes from the idea of rats running around in a maze or on a wheel, where they run and run but never get anywhere. To help remember this term, imagine these poor rats trying hard to escape the maze but never finding the exit!

Some similar expressions to **rat race** include **the daily grind**, **climbing the corporate ladder**, and **the hamster wheel**.

Here are a couple more examples with **rat race**:

Mike: You seem happier lately. What's changed?

Juliet: I quit my corporate job. I was tired of the **rat race** and wanted to find a more balanced life.

Adrian: Are you coming to the party tonight?

Ella: I wish, but I just can't. I need some rest. The **rat race** at work has drained all my energy.

Adrian: I understand. Take care of yourself. Hopefully we'll see you next time!

Midlife crisis

Noun

A **midlife crisis** is a period, usually around the age of 40 to 50, when people feel unsure about their achievements and direction in life. They might feel that they haven't accomplished enough or that life is moving too fast. During this time, some people might make sudden changes, like buying an expensive car, changing careers, or even starting a new relationship.

These actions are often an attempt to feel young or to find new excitement in their lives. For example, Andrew mentions the stereotype of a man in his 40s who divorces his wife, buys a flashy luxury car like a Porsche, and starts dating a much younger woman. This is a common image of a midlife crisis. Another example is: "I think my dad is going through a midlife crisis. He just bought a motorcycle and is talking about quitting his job."

The term **midlife crisis** was first created by psychologist Elliott Jaques in 1965. He used it to describe the period of self-doubt and reflection that he observed in his middle-aged patients. Since then, the concept has become widely recognized and discussed in popular culture and psychology.

The stress of participating in the **rat race** might contribute to someone's **midlife crisis**. Not everyone experiences a **midlife crisis**, but it is often joked about or referenced in media and movies.

Here are a couple more examples with **midlife crisis**:

Ian: Hey, don't you think dad is acting weird lately?

Rebecca: Why do you say that?

Ian: He's always going to the gym. He never used to do that. Plus, he keeps trying to use internet slang with me. It's so awkward!

Rebecca: I don't know, maybe he's going through a **midlife crisis** or something.

Jessica: Did you hear that Mr. Thompson left his wife and moved to the city?

Howard: Yeah. Sounds like a **midlife crisis** to me! I hope he doesn't regret it.

Jessica: I hope I don't go through one when I'm in my 40s.

Howard: You never know!

To taper off

Phrasal verb

Kassy tells Andrew that she used to work really hard to advance in her field in her 20s and participated heavily in the rat race. However, at some point, she felt confident and satisfied with her career, and her participation in the rat race began **to taper off**.

The verb **taper off** means to gradually decrease or become smaller over time. Imagine a line on a graph that starts high and slowly goes down to zero. That's what it looks like when something tapers off. For example, if someone says their interest in a hobby has tapered off, it means they were very interested at first, but over time, their interest became less and less.

Taper off is a great verb for describing when things slowly reduce in amount, intensity, or frequency. For example, "The rain started heavy but tapered off by the afternoon," or "Her enthusiasm for running tapered off after she got injured." You might also hear something like, "Attendance at the weekly meetings has been tapering off since summer started." This expression is useful when describing gradual changes.

You can also use **taper off** as a transitive verb (acting on a direct object), especially when talking about medications. For instance, "My doctor said I can stop taking my medicine, but I need to taper it off over several weeks. I can't stop all at once or else my body could have a negative reaction."

Some similar verbs to **taper off** include **peter out**, **fade**, and **dwindle**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to taper off**:

Anna: How's your headache? Is it still bothering you?

Carlos: It's much better, thanks. The pain started **to taper off** after I took the new medication the doctor prescribed.

Anna: That's great to hear. Hopefully it will go away completely soon.

Frank: How was traffic on your way home?

Beth: It was bad at first, but it **tapered off** after I got out of the downtown area.

Frank: That's a relief. I hate being stuck in traffic for too long.

To shine a light on

Idiomatic verb

Andrew tells Kassy that he thinks the book they both read, "Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop," really **shines a light on** the ways that people could escape the rat race and find happiness and fulfillment elsewhere.

To shine a light on means to make something clear or to help people understand it better. It's like using a flashlight to see something in the dark more clearly. When you shine a light on a topic or issue, you are giving it attention and making sure others notice it and understand it.

You can use **shine a light on** when you want to talk about revealing the truth or bringing attention to something important. For example, "The documentary shines a light on the struggles of refugees" means the documentary helps people understand the difficulties that refugees face. Another example could be, "Her research shines a light on the impact of climate change," meaning her research helps people see and understand the effects of climate change.

The origin of this phrase comes from the simple idea of using light to see things better. When you shine a light in a dark room, you can see what's there. Similarly, when you shine a light on a topic, you help others see and understand it more clearly. To remember this phrase, think of how a flashlight helps you see in the dark.

Some similar verbs include **bring to light**, **highlight**, and **shed light on**.

Here are a few more examples with **to shine a light on**:

Emily: Did you read the latest company report?

Anthony: Yes, it really **shines a light on** our sales performance this quarter.

Emily: I hadn't realized how well we performed until I read the report!

Mark: I just sent you an interesting article that I read last night. It **shines a light on** the effects of plastic pollution on ocean life. It was quite shocking.

Ilana: It's heartbreaking to see the damage caused by plastic waste in the oceans. What did the article highlight specifically?

Mark: It talked about how plastic breaks down into microplastics, which are eaten by ocean animals and then cause severe health issues.

To be in the thick of [something]

Idiomatic verb

Andrew and Kassy agree that the field of education doesn't feel like as much of a rat race as other professions because there isn't a lot of room for career advancement and salary growth. So, when it comes to the rat race, they're not really **in the thick of it**.

The verb **to be in the thick of [something]** means to be deeply involved or actively participating in a busy or intense situation. It suggests that you are in the middle of the action, surrounded by activity or challenges. For example, if you are in the thick of a big project at work, it means you are very busy with the project and deeply engaged in all its details.

You can use **in the thick of [something]** when you want to describe being in the most active or intense part of an activity or situation. For example, "During the holiday season, retail workers are in the thick of the busiest time of the year," or "The students are in the thick of their studies the week before final exams, trying to prepare for all their tests."

Some similar expressions include **in the midst of**, **in the middle of**, and **immersed in**. For example, you could say, "She was right in the midst of writing her thesis when the power went out." However, **in the thick of it** is the best choice for describing the most active or intense part of a situation.

Here are a few more examples with **in the thick of [something]**:

Gabriella: I haven't seen you around much lately. What have you been up to?

Steven: I've been **in the thick of** a huge project at work. We're launching a new product next month, and everybody has been working hard to make sure it happens on time.

Gabriella: That sounds intense. I hope all your hard work pays off!

Paul: How was your vacation, Josie?

Josie: Incredible! I loved visiting Thailand. We were **in the thick of** the hustle and bustle of Bangkok all week doing sightseeing, shopping, and clubbing.

Paul: Wow, that sounds exhausting but fun. Did you get to relax at all?

Josie: Not much. It was a much more active and jam-packed vacation than I'm used to, but I'm glad we got to experience life in the big city!

To be cut out for [something]

Phrasal verb

Kassy tells Andrew that her sister's dream is to be a homesteader and grow all her own vegetables. A homesteader is someone who lives on a piece of land and aims to be self-sufficient by growing their own food and raising animals. Andrew thinks that's a really cool and romantic goal. He'd like to experience that kind of lifestyle, but he doesn't think he would be **cut out for it** because he loves the conveniences of city life.

The phrasal verb **to be cut out for [something]** means to have the right qualities, skills, or personality for a particular job, activity, or situation. If someone says they are not cut out for something, it means they don't think they are suitable for it. For example, if you say, "I'm not cut out for a desk job," it means you don't think you would be good at or enjoy working at a desk all day.

You can use **to be cut out for** when talking about whether someone is suitable for a specific role or activity. For example, "She is cut out for teaching because she is very patient and loves working with kids," or "He realized he wasn't cut out for city life and decided to move to the countryside."

The origin of this expression comes from the idea of cutting something out of a piece of material to fit a particular shape or purpose, like tailoring a piece of clothing. To remember this phrasal verb, think of a puzzle piece that fits perfectly into its place. If you are cut out for something, you fit well into that role or activity – like a puzzle piece!

Similar expressions include **to be suited for**, **to be fit for**, and **to be made for**. For example, you could say, "She is well suited for a career in medicine," or "He is fit for the role of team leader."

Here are a couple more examples with **to be cut out for**:

Daniel: Mom, why did Uncle Tom sell his house in the city and move to the countryside?

Olivia: He realized he **wasn't cut out for** the fast-paced city life. He wanted a quieter, simpler lifestyle.

Mateo: Nina, I noticed you haven't been coming to basketball practice lately. What's up?

Nina: I realized **I'm not cut out for** competitive sports. The pressure and intensity just aren't for me. I've actually started going to yoga classes instead.

Mateo: That's understandable. I hope you're enjoying it!

Quiz

1. If someone says they are "cut out for" a job, it means that...

- a) They are not interested in the job
- b) They have the right qualities for the job
- c) They have a physical injury
- d) They are quitting the job

2. "To shine a light on" something means to...

- a) Disagree with it
- b) Make it less important
- c) Bring attention to it
- d) Agree with it

3. If you are "in the thick of" a project, it means you are...

- a) Finished with the project
- b) Deeply involved in the project
- c) Slacking off on the project
- d) Having trouble with the project

4. Which of the following is a stereotypical example of a midlife crisis?

- a) A 45-year-old man buying a motorboat and dating younger women
- b) A 17-year-old buying her first car
- c) A 28-year-old getting a promotion
- d) A 75-year-old starting a gym routine

5. Your friend tells you that her interest in playing video games has tapered off over time. What does she mean?

- a) She has gradually become less interested in video games
- b) She has gradually become more interested in video games
- c) She has gradually spent more money on video games
- d) She has gradually played every video game she owns

Comprehension Quiz

6. How many books does Kassy usually read a year?
7. What does Kassy say happens to the character Minjun in the book “Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop”?
8. What did Andrew major in at university and what does he think about that decision in retrospect?
9. What are some of the business ideas Kassy and Andrew discuss for escaping the rat race?
10. Why was Yeonju Andrew’s favorite character in the book?

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt like you were stuck in the **rat race**? When and why? Did you keep struggling through it or did you try to escape it?
2. Do you think you would be **cut out for** working in a very competitive field? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think people go through **midlife crises**? Have you ever experienced this, or have you known someone who has? Please describe.
4. If you had the ability to leave the **rat race** and follow your dream, what would your dream life look like? Would you live in the city or the country? Would you own your own business or work for someone else? Would you work at all?
5. Kassy and Andrew think that the book, "Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop," shines a light on the struggles of modern society and participating in the rat race. What is a book or movie you have read or seen recently that **shined a light on** an issue you are interested in? Please describe it.

Quiz Answers

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

6. 100

7. In the book, Minjun is a college student who excels academically and graduates from a top university in Seoul. Despite his excellent grades and connections, he struggles to find a job, spending two years going to numerous interviews without success.
8. Andrew said he chose to study English literature and history at university. This was because he was interested in getting educated and learning, not making a lot of money, although he now thinks maybe he should have chosen a more technical subject.
9. Kassy discusses opening a small bakery and English library or a mini golf course and ice cream parlor. Andrew talks about having a café where he could DJ and play music or opening a concert venue.
10. Yeonju is Andrew's favorite character because she's really passionate about book curation, finding the right books for her customers, organizing lectures and study groups, etc. Her way of leaving the rat race was very appealing to Andrew and therefore he connected with her.

Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Kassy White
Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates
Audio editor: Marshall Vaillancourt
Transcriptionist: Heather Bates
Study guide writer: Indiana Brown
English editor: Andrew Bates
Operations: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima
Image: Denitsa Kireva [pexels.com]