



WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

'To Have a Monkey on Your Back' Is No Laughing Matter

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And now, *Words and Their Stories*, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about an expression, or idiom, involving an animal – a monkey to be exact.

Monkeys are intelligent animals, and they often do funny things. So, the English language has some monkey expressions that describe a fun situation.

For example, to monkey around means to do things that are not useful or serious. And if something is more fun than a barrel of monkeys, it is very fun!

But what if you had to carry a monkey around with you every minute of every day ... on your back? That may not be so fun.

And that brings us to today's expression – to have a monkey on your back.

If you have a monkey on your back, you have a problem that cannot be easily solved. And you possibly have had that problem for a long time.

To have a monkey on your back can also mean to carry a great emotional weight. This weight comes from a bad decision or perhaps a feeling that you have done something wrong.

But the expression is used in more situations than that.

It is often used to describe a serious problem, worry, or concern that makes life difficult or unpleasant. Sometimes we use this idiom to describe a situation that is not our **fault**. It could be a hardship or condition from which we suffer.

Here are some examples.

A man grew up in extreme poverty. For a time, it was a monkey on his back. But getting a good education was the first step to getting the monkey off his back.

If a woman has a gambling, alcohol, or drug **addiction**, we could say she has a monkey on her back. It could last for many years or even a lifetime. However, if she could solve or end the problem, we could say she finally got the monkey off her back!

There is another expression that also means having a monkey on your back.

That expression is a millstone around someone's neck.

A millstone is a very large, heavy stone used for grinding things such as grain or corn. It crushes things easily. So, we also use the word millstone to describe a serious responsibility, problem, or concern.

For example, student debt is a millstone for many young people. We could also say the debt is a millstone around their necks or a monkey on their backs.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

barrel -*n.* a round bulging container that is longer than it is wide and has flat ends

fault -*n.* a wrongful act

addiction -*n.* a strong inclination to do, use, or indulge in something repeatedly

