



WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

Are You a 'Bull in a China Shop'?

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

Have you ever felt out of place? Have you ever felt **clumsy**, like you cannot move **gracefully** and smoothly? If you answered yes, then today's show is for you!

Today we talk about what happens when a big animal runs loose in a small area. The expression is to be a bull in a china shop.

China is **fragile**, meaning very easy to break. Imagine a large bull running loose in a china shop. All the fragile plates, bowls, and tea cups in the shop would be on the floor and broken in a million pieces.

So, a bull in a china shop describes a person who is **awkward** and clumsy. Wherever they go, they create a mess.

This can happen on purpose or on accident. If you are behaving wildly in a small space and are breaking things here and there, you are acting like a bull in a china shop. But maybe you don't mean to. Maybe you are just very big or your body movements are not very graceful.

This expression can describe a person or a situation. For example, a fancy wedding is my bull in a china shop situation. I always end up knocking something over or saying the wrong thing.

This expression is used in other ways.

When a person feels out of place and deals too **roughly** with a **delicate** problem they can say they feel like a bull in a china shop.

If you are this kind of person, you do not handle light situations well at all. For some reason and sometimes through no fault of your own ... you just make things worse.

It can also mean you rush into a situation without thinking about it clearly. Acting like a bull in a china shop means recklessly attacking a problem without proper planning.

So, when you act like a bull in a china shop, you create damage. You leave a big mess in your wake. This could be an actual mess or a **figurative** one. For example, if you are a bull in a china shop you may not be invited to a problem-solving meeting at work. You may bring a little too much **mayhem** with you.

This expression can also mean you handle a delicate situation badly. You don't react calmly and carefully. Instead you add fuel to the fire. This means you make the situation worse.

For example, when it comes to relationship issues, Diedre is like a bull in a china shop. She always ends up making more trouble. One time she tried to help a married couple who had been arguing a lot. After Deirdre's "help" the couple ended their marriage.

It is widely believed that this expression came from real animals causing real damage at outdoor markets in the 1800s. Word experts say that many languages have a similar expression but maybe they use a different animal, for example an elephant. And elephants would also do a lot of damage in a china shop.

And that's all the time 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

clumsy – *adj.* lacking skill or grace in movement

gracefully – *adv.* displaying grace in form or action : pleasing or attractive in line, proportion, or movement

fragile – *adj.* easily broken or destroyed

awkward – *adj.* lacking skill and flexibility (as in the use of the hands) : not graceful : clumsy

roughly – *adv.* in crude fashion

delicate – *adj.* easily torn or damaged

figurative – *adj.* characterized by figures of speech

mayhem – *n.* needless or willful damage or violence

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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