

BACK

In Their Words:

“If you cannot lift the load off another’s back, do not walk away. Try to lighten it.”

Frank Tyger

“The only really decent thing to do behind a person’s back is pat it.”

Author Unknown

A backbreaker (n): A very hard task that can cause backaches

Lifting that 200-pound-flat grill was a real backbreaker even for two strong men.

Usage notes:

1. See also “*break your back*” in this section.
2. We English learners have often been taught that a word that ends with “-er” indicates “a person/a doer”. It’s not always true, though, as shown in this phrase.

A backslapper (n): Someone who is overly friendly and outgoing

Some stand-up comedians often cast President Bush as a frat-boy backslapper who never has read a book.

He is friendly, and sometimes he can be a bit of a backslapper.

Usage notes:

1. The term has a connotation of being ‘insincere’.
2. See also “*a glad-hander*” under **HANDS**.

A monkey on your back (expression): Has two meanings:

1. Slang term for drug addiction

She has had a monkey on her back for several years now.

There's no question I feel much better mentally. Getting that monkey off my back really does enhance my self-esteem.

2. A persistent or annoying problem or burden

That business deal turned out to be a monkey on our back.

Origin: The term probably came from an old Sinbad story about a tormenting ape-like creature that mounts a man's shoulders and won't get off. (www.etymonline.com)

Usage note: Compare: "*an albatross around your neck*"; see under **NECK**.

Be on someone's back (v. phr.): To make constant demands; be a bother or annoyance

The coach has been on my back about missing the game last week.

Most kids don't like it when their parents are on their backs about cleaning their rooms.

Behind someone's back (prep. phr.): Without someone's knowledge

I wouldn't trust her if I were you. She acts friendly but she always goes behind someone's back.

We used to talk normally, but in the last few years, he'd say one thing to my face and another behind my back.

"Your best friends are those who speak well of you behind your back."

Sam Ewing (1920-2001)
American writer, humorist

Usage note: The opposite is "*to someone's face*".

Bend over backward (v. phr.): To go out of your way, to try harder to accommodate someone than you really have to

She's so ungrateful; and after I bent over backward to help her!

The boss bent over backward trying to be fair.

“Bend over backward for the customer. Don’t bend forward.”

Author Unknown

Break your back (v. phr.): To work very hard, use all your efforts

I’ve been breaking my back over this project the past few weeks.

Usage note: Compare: “break your neck” under **NECK**.

Break someone’s back (v. phr.): To overpower, overcome

We got the ball back and made a couple of plays. The play that really broke our backs was that second interception.

Usage note: Also, “to break the back of”:

Our defense strategy really broke the back of the opposing team.

This term can also mean “to get through the most part, the hardest or the worst part of something”:

We’re over halfway there; we’ve broken the back of this trip.

It’s listed in the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as a British expression.

Flat on your back (expression): To be sick in bed; be in a helpless situation

The flu put my mother flat on her back for over a week.

I wish I could help you out, but paying all these bills has really put me flat on my back.

Usage note: Variant: “to be in bad shape”

Get off someone’s back/get off someone’s case (v. phr.): To stop finding faults or criticizing someone

I wish he'd get off my back and stop asking me when I'm going to look for another job.

Usage notes:

1. Also used as an order
2. The opposite is “*to be on someone's back/case.*”
3. There is also an expression “*to get someone off one's back*”

Get your back up /get your dander up (v. phr.): To become angry or make someone angry, especially in a way to cause one to resist; to lose one's temper or become aroused to some form of action

It really gets her back up when cars tailgate her on the freeway.

The boxer suddenly got his dander up and started charging his opponent with a vengeance.

Don't get your dander up! (Don't get mad!)

Origin: As “back”, the expression most likely came from the cat's habit of arching its back when angry.

“Dander” is an old word meaning “anger”; it may have come from the Dutch “*donder*” meaning “thunder”.

Give the shirt off your back (expression): To give anything and everything you have

He's the kind of person who'd give the shirt off his back to help you.

Got your back (expression): We are in this together; whatever comes, I am with you.

Don't worry, I got your back. I'll help you out anytime.

By purchasing this CD, you're making a donation to Operation Military Pride. This is your opportunity to say to our troops...I've got your back.

Have your back (up) against the wall/your back to the wall/your back is against the wall. (expression): To be in a desperate situation or to be under heavy attack

The coach had his back against the wall. Either his team had to win next time or he could be fired.

Our home team is famous for squandering big leads. They're a team with their backs to the wall with a 20-point lead.

Bankruptcy is not the best choice, although it can be seen as a way out for families who feel their backs are against the wall.

Pat someone on the back (v. phr.): To praise or congratulate

I'd love to shake your hand and pat you on the back for a job well done.

Usage notes:

1. Also used as a noun:

The award is a pat on the back, saying you are doing the right thing and keep going at it.

2. I've also seen "pat oneself on the back".

Put your back into something (v. phr.): To make a strenuous effort to do something

You could get rid of all the weeds and dig this plot in one afternoon if you really put your back into it.

If you put your back into that assignment, you'll soon be done.

Origin: It alludes to physical labor involving the strength of one's back (Ammer, Christine 1997).

Scratch someone's back (v. phr.): To do someone a favor

If I scratch her back this time, maybe one day she'll scratch mine.

Usage note: Often used in the expression "you scratch my back, I'll

scratch yours”, discussed later in this section

Stab someone in the back (v. phr.): To harm someone by treachery or betrayal of trust

He stabbed me in the back by telling lies about me to other people.

This is a man who came back from Vietnam to stab not only his country but also his comrades-in-arms in the back.

Usage notes:

1. The person who does it is “*a backstabber*”.
2. Also used as a noun: “*a stab in the back*”

The world on your back (expression): To be very worried by many different problems

He seemed so depressed, blue with the world on his back.

Usage note: Same idea as “*(carry) the world on your shoulders*”; see under **SHOULDERS**.

Turn your back on someone/something (v. phr.): To refuse to help someone, ignore someone or something, stop being involved in something

I needed your help so badly, but you just turned your back on me.

The guy is a loudmouth jerk who turned his back on his country and turned his back on his faith.

America cannot afford to turn its back on the problem of terrorism in the Middle East.

Usage note: Also, “*to turn away from something*”

Watch your back (v. phr.): To be careful of the people around you, making sure they don’t do anything to harm you.

You’ve got to watch your back more at work. Do you realize how many people would love to have your job?

You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. (expression): You do a favor for me and I'll do a favor for you.

"Can you take me to the airport tomorrow? I'm going to Thailand for a few weeks."

"OK, if you promise you'll bring me back a few things from there."

"Sure, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

"Back" Bonus

Backside (n.): Informal. The part of the body that you sit on

Usage note: A polite way of describing your posterior

(Like) water off a duck's back (expression): Criticisms or warnings that have no apparent effect on the person

The scathing reviews rolled off the actor like water off a duck's back.

Origin: It alludes to the fact that duck feathers shed water.

Piggyback (adj., adv.): Carried atop your shoulders or back

"Daddy, give me a piggyback ride, please!" said the little boy.

She carried her son piggyback while holding her purse in her arm.

That's the straw that broke the camel's back. (saying): There's a limit to everyone's endurance; everyone has his/her breaking point.

My old boss constantly used vulgar language. When he said 'God damn it!...' to me right in front of everybody, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. I quit the next day.

Usage note: Or, "*that was the last straw.*"

