English Idioms in Use

60 units of vocabulary reference and practice
Self-study and classroom use

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**Idioms using these keywords:**  
45  Finger, thumb, hand  
46  Foot, heel, toe  
47  Bones, shoulder, arm, leg  
48  Head  
49  Face, hair, neck, chest  
50  Eyes  
51  Ear, lips, mouth, nose, teeth, tongue  
52  Heart  
53  Brain, mind, blood and guts  
54  Back  
55  Long  
56  Line  
57  Act, action, activity  
58  Good and bad  
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Health

Idioms describing health

Mark had been feeling under the weather\(^1\) for weeks. One day he came into work looking like death warmed up\(^2\) and so we told him to go away for a few days to recharge his batteries\(^3\). After one day beside the sea, he no longer felt off-colour\(^4\) and by the second day he knew he was on the road to recovery\(^5\). He sent us a postcard and we were all glad to learn that he was on the mend\(^6\). By the end of the week, he returned to work as fit as a fiddle\(^7\). And he’s been as right as rain\(^8\) ever since.

\(^1\) not very well
\(^2\) looking extremely ill
\(^3\) do something to gain fresh energy and enthusiasm
\(^4\) felt unwell
\(^5\) getting better
\(^6\) getting better
\(^7\) perfectly well
\(^8\) perfectly well

Informal idioms for mad

There are many informal idioms which are used to say that someone is mad:

He’s not all there. She’s a basket case.
She’s off her trolley. He’s off his rocker.
He’s not right in the head. She’s one sandwich short of a picnic.
She’s got a screw loose. He’s as nutty as a fruitcake.

Informal idioms for die

There are also a lot of very informal idioms meaning die, for example:

She’s popped her clogs. She’s given up the ghost. She’s kicked the bucket.
He’s bitten the dust. He’s fallen off his perch.

Idioms based on medical images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>idiom</th>
<th>meaning</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a sore point/spot</td>
<td>a subject which someone would prefer not to talk about because it makes them angry or embarrassed</td>
<td>Try not to mention baldness while he’s here – it’s a sore spot for him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give someone a taste/dose of their own medicine</td>
<td>do the same bad thing to someone that they have done to you in order to show them how unpleasant it is</td>
<td>Refusing to lend him money now would give him a taste of his own medicine – he’s never lent you any.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bitter pill to swallow</td>
<td>unpleasant, but has to be accepted</td>
<td>Losing my job was initially a bitter pill to swallow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sugar the pill</td>
<td>do something to make something unpleasant more acceptable</td>
<td>The boss has sugared the overtime pill by offering a large extra payment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have itchy feet</td>
<td>want to travel or move on</td>
<td>I can’t stay in one place for more than a year without getting itchy feet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercises

1.1  Put these expressions into four groups of idioms that share the same meaning. (There are two groups of two idioms and two groups of four.) Explain the meaning in each case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>give up the ghost</th>
<th>be on the road to recovery</th>
<th>bite the dust</th>
<th>be on the mend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>be as nutty as a fruitcake</td>
<td>feel off-colour</td>
<td>be not all there</td>
<td>feel under the weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pop your clogs</td>
<td>be off your trolley</td>
<td>fall off your perch</td>
<td>be a basket case</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.2  Complete each of these idioms.

1. Don’t mention the merger to him – it’s a bit of a _______________________________ spot for him.
2. Telling Joe what you feel may be a _______________________________ pill for him to swallow, but you owe it to him nevertheless.
3. Watching travel programmes on TV always gives me _______________________________ feet.
4. I wonder what’s happened to Stan – he looks like death _______________________________ up!
5. Plans to put increased funds into education are supposed to sugar the _______________________________ of increased taxation.
6. Imagine someone as unfit as Ruth going on holiday in the Himalayas. She must have a _______________________________ loose.
7. A good game of golf at the weekend always helps to _______________________________ my father’s batteries.
8. Tom was quite ill for a while last year, but he’s as fit as a _______________________________ now.
9. I was exhausted when I got home from work, but, after a nice cup of tea, I’m as _______________________________ as rain.
10. Helen won’t understand the problem – she’s one _______________________________ short of a picnic.

1.3  Which of the idioms meaning ‘die’ do these pictures make you think of?

1. pop your clogs  2. bite the dust  3. give up the ghost  4. feel under the weather  5. be a basket case

1.4  Match each statement on the left with the most likely response on the right.

1. I’ve got itchy feet.  
   Oh dear, I hope he’s OK tomorrow.
2. He’s as right as rain now.  
   Yes, but she’ll soon get over it.
3. He’s not right in the head.  
   Where would you like to go?
4. I’m going to tell him what I think of him.  
   That is a relief!
5. Dad’s a bit off-colour today.  
   Good. Give him a dose of his own medicine.
6. Failing the exam was a bitter pill to swallow.  
   I know, Jane told me he was off his rocker.

FOLLOW UP

Why do you think there are so many idiomatic expressions meaning ‘mad’ and ‘die’? Is it the same in your language? Do you think it would ever be appropriate for you to use any of these English idioms for ‘mad’ or ‘die’? If so, in what circumstances? If not, why not?