



American Expression E0653 Once bitten, twice shy

IOTS Publishing Team  
International Online Teachers Society  
Since 2011

The idiom "once bitten, twice shy" is a saying that conveys the idea that a negative experience or past failure can make someone cautious and hesitant to take similar risks or actions in the future. It suggests that a person who has experienced a painful or harmful event will be more cautious and wary when faced with similar situations to avoid a repeat of the negative outcome.

The phrase is often used to describe a learned behavior where a person becomes more reluctant to trust, invest, or engage in certain activities after having a negative experience in the past. It is an expression of the human tendency to learn from mistakes and use past experiences as a guide to making future decisions.

The origin of the saying can be traced back to the 14th-century poem "The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar," written by John Lydgate. The line "For he had been somtyme hurt befor" captures the essence of the idiom, indicating that a prior injury or hurt influences subsequent behavior.

The concept of "once bitten, twice shy" is applicable in various aspects of life. In personal relationships, someone who has experienced a betrayal or heartbreak may become guarded and less willing to open up emotionally in future relationships. Similarly, a person who has faced financial losses in investments may become more risk-averse in their financial decisions.

In business and professional contexts, the saying is relevant as well. For example, a company that has faced a costly and unsuccessful product launch may become more cautious in developing and launching new products in the future, conducting more extensive market research and testing before taking such risks again.

The idiom also applies in decision-making and risk assessment. It suggests that past experiences act as lessons that shape future judgments, helping individuals and organizations avoid repeating mistakes and making more informed choices.

While the phrase emphasizes the importance of learning from past experiences, it also implies the potential for overcautiousness or excessive fear of taking any risks. Sometimes, the fear of failure can hinder progress and innovation. Striking a balance between prudence and calculated risk-taking is crucial for personal growth, business success, and societal advancement.

It is essential to recognize that the principle of "once bitten, twice shy" is not about avoiding all risks but rather about making well-informed decisions based on past experiences and lessons learned. It encourages thoughtful reflection and evaluation of potential risks and rewards before proceeding.

In conclusion, "once bitten, twice shy" is a meaningful idiom that highlights the human tendency to become more cautious and hesitant after experiencing negative outcomes or past failures. It emphasizes the value of learning from mistakes and using past experiences to guide future decisions. While it promotes prudence and careful decision-making, it also reminds us of the importance of striking a balance between risk aversion and calculated risk-taking to continue growing, learning, and progressing in life.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of any personal experiences where you have applied the principle of "once bitten, twice shy"? How did that past experience influence your decision-making and behavior in similar situations in the future?
  2. In business or professional contexts, how can organizations strike a balance between learning from past failures and taking calculated risks to drive innovation and growth? How can leaders foster a culture of learning from mistakes while encouraging creativity and experimentation?
  3. How does the principle of "once bitten, twice shy" apply to relationships, trust-building, and emotional vulnerability? How do individuals find a balance between protecting themselves from potential harm and opening up to meaningful connections with others?
  4. Sometimes, the fear of failure can paralyze individuals or organizations, leading to missed opportunities. How can people overcome the fear of past mistakes and embrace risk-taking as a means to learn and grow?
  5. The saying "once bitten, twice shy" suggests that past experiences influence our future decisions. However, how do we ensure that we do not allow past traumas or negative experiences to excessively impact our present and future lives? What strategies can help individuals overcome deep-rooted hesitations and move forward with a positive outlook?
-