



American Expression E1598 Do a number on someone

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The idiom "do a number on someone" is a colorful and colloquial expression used to describe a situation where someone has experienced a negative or damaging impact, often as a result of someone else's actions or a set of circumstances. This phrase is informal and figurative, and it conveys the idea that someone has been significantly affected or harmed, either physically or emotionally, often to the point of distress or disarray.

The origin of this idiom is not entirely clear, but it is thought to have evolved from the world of entertainment, particularly in the context of theatrical performances or musical acts. In show business, "doing a number" typically refers to delivering a performance or a routine. In the idiom "do a number on someone," the word "number" suggests a specific action or set of actions that has been carried out, akin to a performance or routine, but with negative consequences.

In its usage, "do a number on someone" can encompass a range of adverse effects, including psychological distress, emotional upheaval, physical harm, or damage to one's reputation. For instance, if someone experiences a traumatic event, such as a car accident, it could be said that the accident "did a number on them," implying that they suffered both physically and emotionally from the experience.

In interpersonal relationships, the idiom can be applied when someone is mistreated, manipulated, or deceived by another person. For example, if an individual goes through a painful breakup where their partner cheated on them and betrayed their trust, it could be said that their ex-partner "did a number on them," emphasizing the emotional toll of the betrayal.

In some cases, "do a number on someone" can also imply that the individual has been outwitted or manipulated in a cunning or devious manner. This aspect of the idiom underscores the idea that the negative impact was not merely accidental but, in fact, the result of a deliberate and calculated effort.

Furthermore, this expression is versatile and can apply to various contexts. In a professional setting, an employee who faces undue stress, harassment, or a hostile work environment due to a difficult boss or colleague might describe the situation as having someone "do a number on them" emotionally and psychologically.

It is important to note that while "do a number on someone" typically conveys a negative impact, it can also imply resilience and the ability to bounce back from adversity. When someone says, "That setback really did a number on me, but I managed to recover and grow from it," it suggests that they have overcome challenges and emerged stronger.

In summary, "do a number on someone" is an idiomatic expression that vividly communicates the idea of someone experiencing a significant negative impact, often as a result of deliberate actions or circumstances. It encompasses a range of adverse effects, including emotional distress, physical harm, and damage to one's well-being or reputation. This versatile idiom is commonly used to describe situations where individuals have endured hardships, manipulation, or adversity, emphasizing the lasting impact of these experiences.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you recall a personal experience or situation where someone "did a number on you," leaving a lasting negative impact on your emotions or well-being? How did you cope with the aftermath?
2. In what ways can recognizing when someone is attempting to "do a number on you" help you protect yourself from manipulation or harm in personal and professional relationships? Are there warning signs or red flags to watch for?
3. How does the concept of someone "doing a number on you" relate to issues of trust and betrayal? Can you share examples of how trust can be eroded in various relationships due to such actions?
4. What strategies or coping mechanisms can individuals employ to recover and heal when someone has "done a number on them"? How can these experiences lead to personal growth and resilience?
5. In the context of personal development and self-awareness, how can reflecting on situations where someone has "done a number on you" help you gain insights into your own strengths, vulnerabilities, and boundaries? What lessons have you learned from such experiences?