



American Expression E2517 Make a virtue of necessity

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

The idiom “make a virtue of necessity” refers to the act of turning an unavoidable situation, often difficult or unpleasant, into an opportunity to display strength, wisdom, or positive qualities. Instead of resisting what cannot be changed, one embraces it and finds ways to benefit from it. The expression emphasizes adaptability and resilience, showing that even limitations or forced circumstances can become avenues for growth or respect.

At its root, this phrase suggests that necessity does not have to be viewed only as a burden. When circumstances leave no choice, responding with grace or creativity can transform an obligation into something admirable. For example, if someone loses their job but uses the time to learn new skills or start a venture, they have made a virtue out of necessity. What could have been seen as misfortune instead becomes a chance for reinvention.

The phrase also highlights the importance of attitude. A person’s outlook often determines whether they feel crushed by necessity or elevated by it. While one individual might complain about being forced into a particular path, another might embrace the challenge and be praised for their resourcefulness. This demonstrates how perception shapes reality and how choosing to act with dignity can influence how others respond to us.

Historically, the expression can be traced back to medieval literature, where it often described individuals who turned constraints into demonstrations of virtue. Over time, it became a general saying about human nature and adaptability. It carries the timeless wisdom that life often imposes restrictions, but how we meet those restrictions can define our character more than the restrictions themselves.

In modern contexts, the phrase finds relevance in both personal and professional life. Companies facing budget cuts, for instance, might “make a virtue of necessity” by streamlining operations and highlighting efficiency as a new strength. Similarly, individuals might find themselves adjusting to remote work during unforeseen events, later discovering the benefits of flexibility and balance. The idea resonates strongly in times of change or crisis.

On a personal level, this idiom encourages resilience in daily life. Whether dealing with health challenges, family responsibilities, or financial constraints, making a virtue of necessity involves finding the hidden advantages or framing the experience in a way that builds endurance and gratitude. It teaches that while we cannot always choose our circumstances, we can always choose our response.

In conclusion, “make a virtue of necessity” is a reminder that even when choices are limited, dignity and opportunity can still emerge. By transforming unavoidable situations into meaningful actions, people not only cope with difficulty but also elevate themselves in the eyes of others. This idiom affirms that strength of character often shines brightest when necessity leaves us no alternative but to act wisely, creatively, and with grace.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does turning a difficult situation into an opportunity demonstrate resilience and character?
2. Can you share an example where you or someone you know made a virtue of necessity?
3. Why do you think attitude plays such a powerful role in shaping how necessity is perceived?
4. In what ways can organizations or communities benefit from making a virtue of necessity?
5. Do you believe constraints can sometimes spark greater creativity than having unlimited choices?