



American Expression E2624 On the back burner

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“On the back burner” is an idiomatic expression that means giving something a lower priority or temporarily postponing it. When a task, plan, or idea is placed on the back burner, it is not abandoned, but it is set aside to focus on more urgent matters. The phrase suggests a conscious decision to delay attention rather than forget about something entirely.

The origin of the expression comes from cooking. On a traditional stove, the front burners are easier to reach and are used for dishes that require close monitoring. The back burners are less accessible and are typically used to keep food warm or simmering slowly. This culinary image provides a clear metaphor for priorities in daily life. Important or urgent matters occupy the “front burners,” while less pressing concerns remain in the background.

In professional settings, projects are often put on the back burner due to shifting deadlines or limited resources. A company might delay a new marketing campaign while addressing a financial crisis. In such cases, the phrase communicates practicality and strategy rather than neglect. It reflects the reality that time and energy are finite, requiring careful allocation.

The expression also appears frequently in personal life. Someone may put travel plans on the back burner while caring for a family member or preparing for exams. Dreams and hobbies sometimes wait quietly while responsibilities demand attention. The phrase acknowledges the balancing act people perform as they navigate competing priorities.

However, placing something on the back burner can have emotional consequences. When long-held goals remain postponed for too long, frustration or regret may arise. A creative project delayed indefinitely may lose momentum. Thus, while the expression implies temporary delay, it also raises questions about how long something can remain unattended before it fades away.

Interestingly, being on the back burner does not always diminish importance. Sometimes, stepping back from an idea allows it to develop more thoughtfully. Just as food simmering gently can deepen in flavor, a postponed plan may benefit from reflection and improved timing. The metaphor suggests patience as well as postponement.

In conclusion, “on the back burner” describes the act of lowering a priority without completely discarding it. Rooted in the imagery of cooking, the phrase conveys thoughtful delay rather than abandonment. It reflects the practical necessity of managing limited time and resources while recognizing that some goals must wait. Ultimately, the expression highlights the dynamic nature of priorities and the constant adjustments required in both personal and professional life.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some common reasons people put goals or projects on the back burner?
2. How can placing something on the back burner affect long-term motivation and success?
3. In what situations might putting a plan on the back burner be a wise decision rather than avoidance?
4. How can someone ensure that a back-burner goal does not get forgotten entirely?
5. What emotional responses might arise when important personal dreams stay on the back burner for too long?