



American Expression E2645 Once bitten, twice shy

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The phrase “Once bitten, twice shy” expresses the idea that a negative experience makes a person more cautious in similar situations in the future. It suggests that after being hurt, deceived, or disappointed once, someone becomes reluctant to take the same risk again. The imagery is simple yet powerful: if a person is bitten once, they will naturally hesitate before approaching the same source of danger a second time.

The expression likely comes from the literal experience of being bitten by an animal. A child who is bitten by a dog may become wary of dogs afterward. The memory of pain creates a protective response. Over time, this physical reaction became a metaphor for emotional and psychological caution. The phrase captures how experience shapes behavior and influences decision-making.

In relationships, “Once bitten, twice shy” often applies to matters of trust. Someone who has been betrayed may struggle to trust again. Even when a new person seems kind and reliable, the memory of past hurt can create hesitation. The phrase does not imply weakness; rather, it reflects a natural human instinct to avoid repeated pain. Experience becomes a teacher, guiding future choices.

The proverb also appears in financial or professional contexts. An investor who loses money in a risky venture may avoid similar investments later. An employee who experiences workplace conflict might be cautious about speaking up again. In each case, the earlier setback shapes future behavior. The phrase highlights how lessons learned through difficulty can lead to increased vigilance.

However, excessive caution can have drawbacks. If someone becomes too shy after being “bitten,” they may miss opportunities for growth or happiness. Not every situation will repeat the past, and not every risk leads to harm. The challenge lies in balancing wisdom gained from experience with openness to new possibilities. The phrase therefore invites reflection on how much fear should influence future actions.

Emotionally, the expression acknowledges vulnerability. It recognizes that pain leaves a mark, sometimes deeper than expected. Yet it also affirms that people learn and adapt. Being twice shy is not necessarily a permanent state; over time, healing and confidence can restore courage. The proverb thus captures both the protective instinct and the potential for recovery.

In conclusion, “Once bitten, twice shy” is a timeless expression about learning from painful experiences. It illustrates how past hurt can lead to greater caution, shaping decisions in relationships, work, and everyday life. While experience encourages carefulness, it also challenges us to find balance between protecting ourselves and remaining open to trust and new beginnings.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. How does a painful past experience influence the way a person approaches similar situations in the future?
2. Can being “twice shy” protect someone from harm, or can it also limit personal growth?
3. How can someone rebuild trust after being “bitten” in a relationship?
4. Is caution always a wise response to failure, or are there times when taking the same risk again is necessary?
5. What is the difference between learning from experience and being controlled by fear?