

A

Emotions

Head is used in a number of idioms that relate to emotions and staying calm and in control.

keep your head

[keep calm, especially in a difficult or dangerous situation]

lose your head

[panic or lose control]

laugh/scream/shout your head off

[laugh/scream/shout very much and very loudly (informal)]

**be banging or hitting your head against a brick wall**

[ask someone to do something which they won't do]

bring something to a head / something comes to a head

[an unpleasant situation is so bad that it has to be dealt with]

If you can **keep your head** when all around are losing theirs, you'll be a man, my son. (written by 19th century poet Kipling)

They were **shouting their heads off** until late at night and I just couldn't fall asleep.

Trying to get the boys to tidy their bedroom is just **banging your head against a brick wall**.

Andy and Jill had been upset with each other for some time, but things eventually **came to a head** last night when they had a terrible row.

B

Thought

Sometimes *head* is used in idioms to mean the place where ideas or thoughts are produced.

idiom	meaning	example
put ideas into someone's head	make someone want to do something they had not wanted to do before (usually something stupid)	Louisa was always quite happy in the village until Rex started putting ideas into her head.
get your head (a)round (usually – can't get (my) head (a)round)	come to fully accept or understand something (informal)	I just can't get my head around what's happened. It's been such a shock!
off the top of your head	without thinking about it for very long or looking at something that has been written about it	Off the top of my head, I couldn't tell you where they live, but I could soon find out.

C

Other head idioms

Rebecca is so beautiful; she always **turns heads**¹ whenever she walks into a room. My brother Leon is beginning to fall in love with her, but our parents would like to **knock that on the head**². This is a very busy year for Leon and he is going to have to work very hard to **keep his head above water**³. However, he **bites/snaps their heads off**⁴ if they tell him to ignore her. I'm taking care not to get involved – it's safer to **keep my head down**⁵.

¹ people notice that person because they look interesting or attractive

² put a stop to it (informal)

³ deal with a difficult situation when he has too much work and not enough time, or when he has just enough money in order to live or keep a business going (an image from swimming)

⁴ speaks to them angrily

⁵ say as little as possible in order to avoid arguments

Exercises

50.1 What do these underlined idioms mean?

- 1 I can't get my head around how much she's changed since she met Joel.
- 2 Maria will never turn heads in the way that her older sister does.
- 3 You'll laugh your head off when you see Bill wearing a dinner jacket.
- 4 Mike hadn't had time to prepare a speech, but he spoke very well off the top of his head.
- 5 If I were you, I'd keep my head down until the situation improves.
- 6 Sam wants to use your saw to build a treehouse – you'd better knock that idea on the head.
- 7 My boss snapped my head off just because I asked for an extra day off.
- 8 It was the first time that Joanna had talked about wanting to work abroad and her father blamed her new boyfriend for putting ideas into her head.

50.2 Complete each sentence with an idiom from the box. Make any other necessary changes.

bang your head against a brick wall bring things to a head come to a head keep your head
lose your head scream your head off snap someone's head off

- 1 Amy when she saw a rat under the table.
- 2 When the pilot announced that the plane was having engine problems, all the passengers behaved calmly and no one
- 3 I'm trying to get him to give up smoking, but I
- 4 You'll easily pass your driving test as long as you
- 5 I wish he wouldn't when I ask him about his work.
- 6 Jack and Lucy have not been getting on well for some time now, but Jack's rudeness to her last night and they had a blazing row.
- 7 The disagreement over pay at a meeting yesterday.

50.3 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?



50.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 Has anyone ever bitten your head off? Why did they do this?
- 2 Under what circumstances would you find it hard to keep your head?
- 3 When was the last time you laughed your head off?
- 4 What kind of person would turn your head in the street?
- 5 Can you think of someone who has been criticised for putting ideas into people's heads?
- 6 Would a business be pleased if it were keeping its head above water? Why (not)?

Over to you

This unit includes just some of the idioms based on the word *head*. Look in a good dictionary, find three more idioms and write them down in example sentences.

A

Face

Our face presents the image we show people and that is reflected in most of the idioms with *face*.

idiom	meaning	example
make/pull a face	show that you do not like something by making an unpleasant expression	Emma pulled a face when she heard that Jim was coming to the party.
keep a straight face	not laugh or change your expression even though you want to laugh	It was all I could do to keep a straight face when I saw Jim in his new suit.
put a brave face on something	pretend you are happy about something when you are not happy	Chris was disappointed about not getting the job, but he's put a brave face on it.
take something at face value	accept something as it looks without thinking about whether it might, in fact, not be quite what it appears	I decided to take his words at face value although my brother told me I was being naive.
on the face of it	according to the appearance of something	On the face of it, it's a generous offer. But I feel there might be a trick in it.
face to face	with another person in their presence rather than, say, by phone or letter	You should really discuss this with her face to face.

B

Hair

Hair in idioms often has associations with being calm and in control.

If you say to someone **Keep your hair on!** (informal) you mean Calm down!

Her boyfriend has disappeared again. She's **tearing/pulling her hair out!** [getting very anxious (usually used with continuous verb forms)]

My boss **didn't turn a hair** when I handed in my notice. [showed no reaction at all]

C

Neck and chest



It's uncomfortable at home at the moment because my two flatmates, Tom and Ali, are **at each other's throats**¹ all the time. It started when Tom used Ali's computer and managed to destroy some files. Tom decided to **make a clean breast of it**². Now Ali won't let him use the computer without **breathing down his neck**³ all the time and he's always going on about how stupid Tom was. Tom finds this **a real pain in the neck**⁴ and he wishes he had never **got it off his chest**⁵, but had just let Ali think it was a computer virus that had destroyed his files. Tom knows he is in the wrong, but he wishes Ali wouldn't keep **ramming it down his throat**⁶ all the time and would just show his annoyance by **giving him the cold shoulder**⁷.

¹ arguing in a very angry way

² tell the truth about what he had done so that he did not feel guilty any more

³ paying close attention to what he is doing in an annoying or threatening way

⁴ really annoying

⁵ told him what he was feeling guilty about

⁶ forcing him to listen to his opinions

⁷ ignoring him in a deliberate way

Note how idioms with *throat* or *neck* often describe someone behaving in a way that the speaker finds aggressive or intrusive. Note also how the idea of a guilty secret being a weight on your chest is reflected in two idioms – **make a clean breast of** and **get it off your chest**.

Exercises

51.1 Complete each idiom with a word from the box. Use some of the words more than once.

chest face hair neck shoulder throat(s)

I haven't been enjoying my job recently. On the¹ of it, it's a good job, but my colleagues don't get on with each other. They are either at each other's² or giving each other the cold³ and I don't know which is worse. My boss is always breathing down my⁴ and ramming his reactionary views down my⁵. I find him a terrible pain in the⁶. I had to get my feelings off my⁷ and, today, I decided to unburden myself to his secretary. Suddenly, I realised that my boss was standing behind me. 'You should have told me this⁸ to⁹'; he said and, without turning a¹⁰, he added 'You're fired!' I was so angry that I pulled a¹¹ at him and stormed out of the office.

51.2 Match the beginning of each sentence on the left with its ending on the right.

- | | | |
|--|--------------------------|--|
| 1 You try to keep a straight face | <input type="checkbox"/> | a when you get very upset about something. |
| 2 You put a brave face on something | <input type="checkbox"/> | b when you admit to doing something wrong. |
| 3 You are pulling your hair out | <input type="checkbox"/> | c when you accept it in a straightforward way. |
| 4 You make a clean breast of something | <input type="checkbox"/> | d when you are showing your anger. |
| 5 You may make a face | <input type="checkbox"/> | e when you want to control your laughter. |
| 6 You take something at face value | <input type="checkbox"/> | f when you deliberately ignore them. |
| 7 You may be told to keep your hair on | <input type="checkbox"/> | g when you are not pleased about something. |
| 8 You give someone the cold shoulder | <input type="checkbox"/> | h when you try to hide your disappointment. |

51.3 Correct the mistakes in these idioms.

- Rose's father didn't pull a hair when she told him she was going to get married.
- I wish my boss would let me get on with my work instead of breathing down the neck.
- You should tell him directly how you feel rather than just giving him the cold shoulders.
- Nina is very worried about her husband's illness, but she's putting her brave face on it.
- Keep your hair up!
- If you take what they say with face value, you'll soon get disappointed.
- Having to do homework is such an ache in the neck!
- I have to tell you a terrible secret. I'll go mad if I don't get it on my chest soon.

51.4 Which idioms do these pictures make you think of?

1



3



5



2



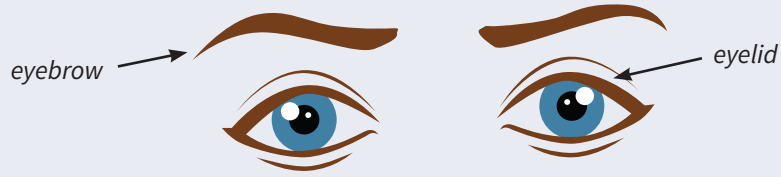
4



6



The eyes are the basis of a large number of idioms. Note the idioms and their meanings in these paragraphs.



I **couldn't believe my eyes**¹ when I first saw her. She was so beautiful, I just **couldn't keep my eyes off**² her. I tried to **catch her eye**³ to say hello.

Mia and I were good friends at first, but now we don't **see eye to eye**⁷. I know the fact that we stopped being friends **raised a few eyebrows**⁸ at the time.

It all happened in the **blink of an eye**¹² and no one could do anything to prevent it. It was horrible. But the police officer standing nearby **didn't bat an eyelid**¹³. Then something **caught my eye**¹⁴ which shocked me even more.

As a teacher myself, I know that teaching is not easy. You always have to **keep an eye on**⁴ the students, but sometimes you just have to **turn a blind eye**⁵ if they behave badly. If you want to be a teacher, you have to go into the profession **with your eyes open**⁶.

Could you **run/cast your eye over**⁹ this report and see if there are any spelling mistakes? My computer's **on the blink**¹⁰ and the spell-checker refuses to work. These reports are important, and I always have to **have/keep one eye on**¹¹ how the boss will react to them if they look untidy.

Working in such a poor country **opened my eyes to**¹⁵ how unjust the world is. It was indeed a **real eye-opener**¹⁶.

¹ couldn't believe what I was seeing

² couldn't stop looking at her

³ get her attention; make her look at me

⁴ keep your attention on

⁵ ignore behaviour which you know is wrong

⁶ aware of all the problems there could be

⁷ agree with each other

⁸ surprised/shocked people

⁹ have a quick look at

¹⁰ beginning to break down and go wrong, probably because it is old (*to blink* means to close and open your eyes very quickly)

¹¹ observe carefully

¹² extremely short time

¹³ didn't react at all

¹⁴ made me look

¹⁵ made me understand for the first time

¹⁶ an event or situation that I unexpectedly learnt something from

Exercises

52.1 Write a suitable response to each of these remarks with an idiom. Use the keyword in brackets.

- 1 A: Oh! We're doing 58 and the speed limit is 50. There's a police car there!
B: Don't worry, if it's just over the limit, they usually (BLIND)
- 2 A: There's Petra over there. I wonder if she's seen us?
B: I don't know. Let's wave and see if we can (CATCH)
- 3 A: Are you and Sara not friends any more?
B: No, not really, we just don't (SEE)
- 4 A: Is there something wrong with this photocopier?
B: Yes, it's been for a while now. (BLINK)
- 5 A: Was it an interesting experience working for Social Services?
B: Yes, I learnt a lot of things. It was a real (OPEN)
- 6 A: Did she react in any way when you told her the awful news?
B: No, she didn't (BAT)

52.2 Circle the correct word to complete each sentence.

- 1 If you want to be a professional athlete, you have to go into it with your eye / eyes open.
- 2 Will you cast your eye / eyes over this report? I have to hand it in tomorrow.
- 3 Erik is so crazy about Amina. Look at him! He can't keep his eye / eyes off her!
- 4 The events of last night really opened my eye / eyes to just how arrogant he really is.
- 5 I couldn't believe my eye / eyes when I saw what a mess they had made of the room.

52.3 Rewrite the underlined part of each sentence with an eye idiom.

- 1 An accident can happen so quickly you can't stop it.
- 2 His behaviour at the meeting surprised a few people.
- 3 You should take into consideration your chances of promotion when taking up a new job.
- 4 A very strange sight forced me to look as I was driving along the motorway yesterday.

52.4 Here are some random examples from a computer database containing lines from real conversations. The figures in diamond brackets, e.g. <s1>, <s2>, mean 'first speaker', 'second speaker', etc. How many of the examples use eye as an idiom, and how many use the word eye in its literal sense as 'the organ we see with'? Use a dictionary if necessary.



- | | |
|----|--|
| 1 | go into town and get erm an eye test. <s1> Mm. <s2 > In town. |
| 2 | you er keep an eye out for tramps, do you then? |
| 3 | In your mind's eye how are you going to do that? |
| 4 | <s1> So I'll keep a general eye on it. And er <s3> Yeah |
| 5 | <s1> There's something in my eye . There's that thing floating |
| 6 | difficult to put that to your eye . You also have to have one eye |
| 7 | good offer? <s2> Yeah it caught my eye <s1> Yeah it's |
| 8 | I'm casting my eye over this form and I think |
| 9 | this year. <s4> Just keep an eye out for it. <s4> Yeah. |
| 10 | <s2> You'll have to keep an eye on her. <s1> Yeah. <s2> Oh my |
| 11 | so you're about eye level with the monitor. |
| 12 | saw her out of the corner of my eye . <s3> Her lipstick is all over |

A

Ear

The association of *ear* with hearing/listening is prominent in most of these idioms.

example	meaning
In my opinion, you should just play it by ear .	respond to the situation as it occurs, don't decide what to do beforehand
Do you play the guitar from music or by ear ?	play without music; just by sensing the right notes
I couldn't believe my ears when she told me.	couldn't believe what I was hearing
Bill never listens when you tell him important things. It just goes in one ear and out the other .	said when someone doesn't listen or pay attention, or forgets things immediately
Go on! Tell me the gossip. I'm all ears !	I'm very keen to hear what you have to tell me.

B

Other face idioms: lips, mouth, nose, teeth, tongue

Some literal associations remain strong in these idioms. But remember, these are only guidelines, and some idioms may be less transparent in their meanings.

Main association: Lips are associated with saying/talking.

The company **pays lip service to** the principle of equal rights for women. [says it believes in, but does not carry out]

I promise I won't tell anyone. **My lips are sealed**. [I shall keep the secret / tell no one]

Main association: Mouths are associated with speaking or eating.

I heard about the school **by word of mouth**. Everyone said it was good. [by being told directly]

Those cream cakes are really **mouth-watering / making my mouth water**. Take them away before I eat them all! [making me want to eat them]

Main association: Noses are associated with feelings/reactions and involvement.

Stop **poking/sticking your nose into** other people's business! [interfering in]

You shouldn't **turn your nose up at** 200 pounds a week. It's better than nothing. [refuse]

That new secretary **gets right up everybody's nose**. Someone will have to talk to the boss about it before it's too late. [annoys/irritates everyone]

Main association: Teeth are associated with hard work / determination / struggles.

He achieved it **in the teeth of** serious opposition. [despite]

I escaped disaster **by the skin of my teeth**. [I only just escaped a disaster]

We can't change what's happened. We'll just have to **grit our teeth** and do our best to carry on as before. [accept the situation and handle it with determination]

Joe is **lying through his teeth**. I never said any such thing! [telling a deliberate lie]

Main association: Tongues are associated with speaking.

I was upset by her remarks, but I **bit my tongue**. [remained silent; didn't react]

Her name's **on the tip of my tongue**, but I just can't remember it. [I know it and will be able to remember it very soon]

Tip

Where idioms do carry indirect associations with their literal meanings, try to group them in some way, e.g. 'lips and tongue are associated with speaking', as this may help you to remember them.

A

Feelings

idiom	meaning	example
open your heart	share your deepest feelings	Tony opened his heart to me.
bare your heart/soul	share secret (often dramatic) feelings with someone else	I find it rather painful to bare my heart to anyone else.
pour your heart out	share secret worries with someone else	Imelda poured her heart out to me – I wished I could help her.
your heart misses/skips a beat	you suddenly feel so excited or frightened that your heart beats faster	When I first saw Pat, my heart missed a beat. I knew he would be important to me.
someone's heart is in the right place	someone is good even if they sometimes behave the wrong way	He is a bit rude sometimes, but his heart is in the right place.
have a change of heart	change your opinion or the way you feel	Ben wants to buy the boat before his wife has a change of heart.
break someone's heart	make someone very sad (often someone who loves you)	It breaks my heart to see the refugees on the news.
your heart sinks	you start to feel sad or worried	My heart sank as Bob approached.
a man/woman after my own heart	someone who you admire because they do or believe the same as you	He loves dogs – he's a man after my own heart!
talk to someone heart-to-heart / have a heart-to-heart	have a serious conversation and express your feelings openly	They had a heart-to-heart and sorted out their differences.
take something to heart	take something (usually criticism) seriously	Don't take it to heart. He really didn't mean to upset you.

B

Determination

lose heart

[stop believing that you can succeed]

to your heart's content

[you do it as much as you want to because you enjoy it]

put your heart and soul into something

[put a great deal of effort and determination into something]

**set your heart on something / have your heart set on something**

[be determined to achieve something]

know something by heart / learn something off by heart

[memorise something so that you can recite it perfectly]

Paul **didn't lose heart** even though he had failed his driving test six times.

Jess **put her heart and soul into** a project aimed at helping blind children.

Tom **set his heart on / had his heart set on** emigrating to Australia.

When you've done your homework, you can play computer games **to your heart's content**.

Actors get very good at **learning things by heart**.

Exercises

54.1 Match each remark on the left with the person who the remark might be addressed to on the right.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 Don't lose heart! | <input type="checkbox"/> | a Someone who has an unrealistic ambition. |
| 2 Don't take it to heart! | <input type="checkbox"/> | b A loved one who is causing you grief. |
| 3 You're a man after my own heart! | <input type="checkbox"/> | c Someone who has to give a speech. |
| 4 Don't set your heart on it! | <input type="checkbox"/> | d Someone with the same tastes. |
| 5 Learn it by heart! | <input type="checkbox"/> | e Someone who is feeling discouraged. |
| 6 You're breaking my heart! | <input type="checkbox"/> | f Someone with a secret to share. |
| 7 Your heart is in the right place! | <input type="checkbox"/> | g Someone who is upset after being criticised. |
| 8 You can open your heart to me! | <input type="checkbox"/> | h A kind person who tries to do the right thing (but doesn't always succeed). |

54.2 Complete each sentence with an idiom.

- 1 My when the handsome man smiled at me.
- 2 When we are on holiday, the children can build sandcastles while we lie on the beach and read.
- 3 Jake used to support the Green Party, but he's
- 4 If you ask Rob to help you, I'm sure he'll and the job will be finished in no time.
- 5 It's not a good idea to to a journalist unless you want your secrets to become public knowledge. (Give three answers.)
- 6 Your dissertation is nearly finished, so don't now.
- 7 It to see my brother making such a fool of himself. (Give two answers.)
- 8 My when I realised pay day was still a week away.

54.3 Rewrite each underlined idiom with a literal expression that means the same.

Emily (1) had set her heart on getting a promotion. She had been (2) putting her heart and soul into her work, but had not yet been offered a better position. So she decided to (3) have a heart-to-heart with her boss. Over several cups of coffee she (4) poured her heart out to him, telling him all about her achievements and her ambitions. Her boss listened (5) with a sinking heart. When she had finished (6) baring her heart, he said: 'You're a great worker, Emily, and (7) your heart is certainly in the right place. In many ways, (8) you're a woman after my own heart. But you do need to improve on your people skills before we can consider promoting you. (9) Don't lose heart, though. I'm sure you will make it one day.' Emily (10) took his words to heart and was at first very upset. But then she bought a book called *People Skills and How to Get Them* and decided she'd (11) learn it by heart.

54.4 Answer these questions.

- 1 What might a boy who is very good at playing the guitar set his heart on doing?
- 2 If you do something to your heart's content, do you do it very well or do it a lot?
- 3 If you say that someone is a woman after your own heart, do you mean that she likes you or that she is like you?
- 4 If you say that someone's heart is in the right place, are you praising them?
- 5 If your heart misses a beat, which of these might you be: sick, excited, afraid, in love?
- 6 Who does a teenage girl often open her heart to?
- 7 Why might a woman have a change of heart about getting married and what would she then do?
- 8 What sort of thing might break a young lover's heart?