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**Hilary P.** is a professional psychotherapist and has practised in the United Kingdom for over 15 years. Hilary has a keen interest in language learning, with a classical language educational background. Hilary's particular interests & experience is in psychology, education & learning, especially online learning and language acquisition.

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# Transcript Learn English Article 130

## Help Yourself To A Free Online English Speaking Course

### Summary

Today's English language lesson focuses on a popular English phrase "Help yourself". You will have to listen to the audio to understand why the lesson is called "Help Yourself To A Free Online English Speaking Course " and along the way you will find out that this English phrase is used in many ways, not all of the uses are obvious!

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## Transcript

Hi there, I'm Hilary and welcome to this week's Monday podcast from Adept English. Adept English is here to help you. If you're someone who has been learning English for a while, but you never quite get to that point where you are fluent, you never quite get to the place where you can understand and speak to native English speakers – well, we're here to solve that problem! Adept English provides you with the material, always with a transcript, so that you can listen to lots of English and increase your fluency in English conversation.

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So this week? Let's talk about some more English expressions, which people use all the time and which are a bit confusing because they sound a bit the same, they all sound similar. And they're all easy words, but the meaning doesn't necessarily translate exactly. It isn't always obvious. So the phrases I'm going to talk about today all contain the verb 'to help'. And the first is when an English speaker says to you 'Help yourself!'.

So quite easy words – but what does it mean? So Help is a verb, well, it's a noun as well. But in this case, when they say 'Help yourselves', it's a verb, so it's really 'to help'. And if you help someone, it means that you go to assist them, you give them aid, assistance. You might help an old lady across the road, if she has difficulty seeing. You might help a child with their homework their school work. And if you say 'yourself'? Well, any of the English words that end in -self or -selves are used when someone is doing an action to themselves.

So you might use myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves in all kinds of sentences. 'She dressed herself', 'He sang to himself', 'We got ourselves some drinks'. So you get the idea, this is used when you are making a sentence where there's a person doing an action, but they're not doing it to another person, they're doing it to themselves.



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So when someone says in English 'Help yourself!' or if there's more than one person being spoken to, they'd say 'Help yourselves!'. They're telling you what to do. They're giving you a direction. So it's the same form of the verb as 'Ask me a question', 'Do it now!'. 'Throw the ball to me'. 'Let me look at your phone'. So they're all commands - so they're telling you to do something.

So when someone says 'Help yourself' or 'Help yourselves', what do they mean? Well, much of the time, you'll hear this phrase being used, where there is food. So the direction might be 'There are biscuits in the kitchen - please go help yourselves'. This means 'Go and get yourself some biscuits'. You might be in the office where you work - and often when it's someone's birthday, they might buy cake.

So an email goes round - and it says 'It's my birthday today. There are cakes on the desk next to me - please help yourselves'. Or it might be a party or a celebration, where all the food is spread out on a big table and you go and get a plate and you 'help yourself'. So around food, it's an invitation to go and get what you like.

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But you may also hear this phrase in other contexts. For example, the Tourist Information Office may have maps and guides which are free. 'Help yourself to a map of the city', or 'Help yourself to a guide book for the museum'. If you were staying at a friend's house and you said to them 'Please can I just use your computer' perhaps to print something out or to check your email maybe. And they might say 'That's fine'. And they take you to where the computer is and they say 'Help yourself'. So that means 'There's the computer - please just get on and use it'. So 'Help yourself' is giving you permission. It says 'Please don't wait, just get on and use it, it's fine'.

Sometimes people use the phrase 'help yourself' or 'help themselves' when permission hasn't been given. So if someone is talking about thieves, robbers,

burglars, coming into their house and stealing things. It's not nice when that happens – it's happened twice to me. In that instance, you might say 'Someone broke into my house and they helped themselves to my computer or my jewellery or my stamp collection' - or whatever it is that's worth stealing. You might hear 'They just helped themselves' meaning that they stole some things, they took things which didn't belong to them. Someone broke into my van and helped themselves to all my tools. So it's got this negative meaning as well, sometimes.

But if you hear somebody say 'She doesn't help herself', (so actually putting the 'not' with it and making it properly negative), what this means is that the person is not doing things, which are helpful to their own cause. So it's probably not around food when it's used like this. 'She doesn't help herself'. So this person doesn't do what's in her best interests. You might be talking about someone who is unpopular, someone who isn't well liked by other people. And you say 'Well, she doesn't help herself – she makes fun of other people'. Or 'She doesn't help herself, she's very critical of other people'. So in a sense, it's not surprising that she's not popular. So if you don't help yourself, it means that you do things, which perhaps without you knowing it, are not in your best interests. They don't help you these things.

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And there's another phrase, again which sounds quite similar because it uses almost the same words, but which has a different meaning. If someone says 'I can't help myself' - what they mean here is that I find it hard to resist, I find it hard to restrain myself, hard to stop. So I might know that something is bad for me, but I 'can't help myself', I do it anyway. So it might be that someone spends too much money, but they say 'Oh, when it comes to shoes, I can't help myself!' (meaning 'I like them too much, even if I spend too much money on shoes'). So it's about showing restraint, holding back.

If someone else's child behaves badly and it's not really your place to say something about it, but you do anyway – and then the friend is not very happy



with you. You might say 'I can't help myself - I just have to say something!'

So there you are, some really really common English phrases, which sound similar to each other, but with just slightly different words, they mean different things.

So, just to summarise:-

'Help yourself!' or 'Help yourselves' means you're invited to have something, or to take something. 'Help yourselves to tea and coffee' or whatever it is.

And if somebody is talking about something being taken, stolen, without permission, they might say 'And the thieves helped themselves to my prize vegetables' or whatever it is.

If you say someone 'doesn't help themselves', they perhaps annoy their boss, and then don't get promoted - yes? That's another use of it.

And if you say that someone 'can't help themselves' or 'Ooh, I can't help myself', it usually means they find it difficult to control themselves. They know that the thing they're doing is not helpful, but they can't resist. We've all been there - that's probably me, with packets of crisps!

## **Goodbye**

Anyway, practise these phrases. Listen to the podcast a number of times. You'll be practising your understanding of all the words in the podcast of course, but these phrases are so common, they're really worth knowing.

Enough for now. Have a lovely day. Speak to you again soon. Goodbye.

## **PS**

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You will find lots of English language learning tips, audio lessons with transcripts and a free video course setting out our learning method in "The 7 Rules of Adept English". We really do recommend you watch and listen to Hilary in this free learn English speaking course as our method is new, better and more sensible than traditional approaches to learning to speak English.



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