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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute English

### Living with debt



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

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#### Neil

Hello, this is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

#### Pippa

And I'm Pippa. Are you good at saving money, Neil? Or do you like to spend it?

#### Neil

Well, actually, a bit of both. I like to spend money on nice things, but I also try to save, mainly because I've got children. How about you?

#### Pippa

Yeah, I'm the same. I like to save money, or I try to, for the future. But I also do spend it. I don't count every penny that I spend and save every single penny that I earn.

#### Neil

Mmm. Well, whether you're a saver or a spender, being in **debt** is common in the UK. **Debt** refers to money a person has borrowed to buy something and which they have to **pay back**, usually to a bank, a credit card company, or another person.

#### Pippa

Many people avoid talking about **debt**, but it affects us all. In 2025, over 1000 people contacted the UK Citizens Advice Bureau every single day of the year for help with their **debt**. And when **debt** gets out of control, it causes stress and worry. BBC Radio 4 programme Thinking Allowed interviewed one young man, Jason, about his **debt**.

#### Jason

Whatever jobs there are aren't enough to provide for a family. Sometimes you need to take out loans. I've done it a few times, but you can't ever **pay it back**. You can't see a way out, other than winning the lottery or something. I'd like to think I could **clear** them all one day, even if it means, like, five years **paying** them **off**.

### Neil

Jason uses three phrases, **pay back**, **pay off**, and **clear debt**, all of which mean the same thing – to give back the money you've borrowed.

### Pippa

In this episode, we'll hear more about living with **debt** by learning some useful new words and phrases. And remember, you'll find all the vocabulary used, plus a quiz and worksheet, on our website, [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com).

### Neil

But first, I have a question for you, Pippa. According to **debt** support group The Money Charity, roughly how much is the average British adult in **debt** through credit cards, overdrafts and personal loans? Is it:

- a) £2,200,
- b) £4,200, or
- c) £6,200?

### Pippa

Hmm. I'm not sure. I'll say £2,200.

### Neil

OK. Well, we will find out the answer later in the programme. Jason's story features in a new book by sociologist Ryan Davey. Ryan spent months living in a low-income housing estate, which he gave the fictional name Woldham. He talked with residents and listened to their money worries. Here, Ryan explains more to BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed:

### Ryan Davey

My approach was to let people know that I was interested in learning about their lives and how they were **making ends meet**, so I did some interviews with residents, and I paid attention to where **debt** came up in everyday conversations. For many people in Woldham, Jason included, **debt** was an ordinary feature of daily life. And beyond that, being **in arrears** – so, being behind with one or more monthly payment commitments – was part of daily life.

### Pippa

The people of Woldham were **making ends meet**. To **make ends meet** means having just enough money to pay for basic living expenses like food, bills and rent.

### Neil

Ryan found that many residents were **in arrears**, a phrase meaning to still owe money that should have already been repaid. For most residents, **debt** was a normal part of daily life.

### Pippa

With a regular income, **debt** can be managed, but for those who are unemployed or on low incomes, it can cause serious distress. Here, Ryan discusses how the residents he met felt about their **debt** with BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed:

### Ryan Davey

Jason actually fluctuated between wanting to **clear** all of his **debts** on the one hand, and on the other what he described as living on **the never-never** and actually questioning the supposed moral obligation to pay his **debts**. Over the months that I knew him, the **financial strain** on him and his partner increased. They missed some of their bills. Their internet was disconnected.

### Neil

Jason was living on **the never-never**, an informal phrase for buying the things you need by making regular small payments over a long time. It's called **the never-never** because it seems the **debt** will never be repaid.

### Pippa

Jason experienced **financial strain** – emotional stress caused by a lack of money to meet his basic needs or to repay his **debt**. **Debt** is a serious issue. It affects many people and there are support groups who can help if you need it. OK. Neil, what was the answer to your question?

### Neil

I asked what the average amount of **debt** a British adult has through credit cards, overdrafts and personal loans.

### Pippa

I said it was around £2,200.

### Neil

I'm afraid that's not the right answer. In fact, it's £4,232. OK. Let's recap the vocabulary we've learned, starting with **debt** – money a person has borrowed and needs to give back.

**Pippa**

The phrases to **pay back**, to **pay off**, and to **clear a debt** all mean to give back money you have borrowed.

**Neil**

If someone is **making ends meet**, they have just enough money to pay for basic living expenses. And if they are **in arrears**, they still owe money that should have been repaid already.

**Pippa**

If you buy something on **the never-never**, you buy it by making small regular payments over a long period.

**Neil**

And finally, **financial strain** is emotional stress caused by a lack of money to meet your basic needs.

**Pippa**

Once again, our six minutes are up, but if you'd like to know how **debt** is spelled and all the other words from this episode, visit our website, [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com), to find a full vocabulary list.

**Neil**

See you again soon. But for now, it's goodbye.

**Pippa**

Bye!

## VOCABULARY

### **debt**

money a person has borrowed and owes to someone

### **pay back / pay off / clear (debt)**

give back money you have borrowed

### **make ends meet**

(idiom) have just enough money to pay for basic living expenses like food, bills and rent

### **in arrears**

(idiom) still owing money that should have been paid already

### **the never-never**

(informal) buying something with one large payment followed by smaller regular payments which are made until the debt is repaid

### **financial strain**

emotional stress caused by a lack of money to meet basic needs or repay debt