

Words and Their Stories: Losing It

I'm Susan Clark with the Special English program, WORDS AND THEIR STORIES.

Tom Smith is the best hitter on his company's baseball team. For weeks during the playing season, Tom hit a home run in every game the team played. But then suddenly he stopped hitting home runs. He could not hit the baseball at all.

One day he struck out three times in one game. He said, "**I am afraid I am losing it.**"

Mary Jones bought a dress in a woman's clothing store. She felt very happy about buying the dress until she got home. Then she remembered she had left her credit card at the store when she used it to pay for the dress. It was the third time that month that Mary had forgotten something important.

Mary was angry with herself. She said, "**Am I losing it?**"

Emma Cleveland was teaching a class in mathematics at a college. She began to explain to the students how to solve a very difficult problem. She understood it very well. But somehow, at that moment, she could not explain it. Emma said, "**I must be losing it.**"

Americans seem to have a lot of concern about losing it. At least that is what you would think from hearing them talk. They use the expression when they feel they are losing control. It can mean losing emotional control. Or losing the ability to do something. Or losing mental powers.

Word experts differ about how the expression started. Some believe it came from television programs popular in the nineteen eighties. Others believe it began with psychologists and psychiatrists who deal with how people think, feel and act.

One psychologist said, "We Americans have many concerns about controlling our lives. Perhaps we worry too much."

She continued, "In many situations, to say you are losing it eases the tension. It is healthy. And most people who say they are having a problem are not losing it." People may feel more like they are losing it when they are "down in the dumps."

People who are down in the dumps are sad. They are depressed.

Word expert Charles Funk says people have been feeling down in the dumps for more than four-hundred years. Sir Thomas More used the expression in fifteen thirty-four. He wrote, "Our poor family ... has fallen in such dumps."

Word experts do not agree what the word dumps means. One expert, John Ayto, says the word dumps probably comes from the Scandanavian countries. The languages of Denmark and Norway both have similar words. The words mean to fall suddenly.

Americans borrowed this saying. And, over the years, it has become a popular way of expressing sadness.