

Coming Unglued in Russian

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

October 20, 2017



Pixabay

Разболеться: to be very ill or in great pain

Want to know the meaning of закон подлости? It's when you go south on vacation to improve your health and come back a thousand times sicker than when you left. Закон подлости is Murphy's Law on steroids.

Russian to the rescue! Or rather, at least the Russian language allows you to define your level of feeling rotten with precision and emotional nuance.

Usually you start out with the imperfective verb заболевать (to start to become ill). You clear your throat too many times. You feel like you didn't get enough sleep even though you did. Боюсь, что заболеваю (I'm afraid I'm coming down with something), you say.

Then the throat clearing turns into a cough. You feel lousy, but not really sick. This is where you attach another prefix to the basic verb болеть (to be sick, to be in pain) to get приболеть (to be a bit sick). Here's a childhood memory: Мы слегка приболели, ну и школу пропустили, вот нам и не разрешили в гости к друзьям, раз мы в школу не пошли (We were a bit under the weather, bad enough so that we missed school, and since we didn't go to school we weren't permitted to go to our friend's house.)

At this stage you may feel that you can halt the downward spiral. You take homeopathy. You try all those weird Russian home remedies that you once laughed at and now are praying will solve your health problems overnight. Чеснок? (Garlic?) Check. Стопку водки и в постель в шерстяных носках? (A shot of vodka and then to bed wearing wool socks?) Check. Чай с малиной? (Tea with raspberry jam?) Are you kidding? Check and check.

But this time they don't work. So you go back to the prefix за-, only now you use the perfective form of the verb, the "this has now occurred" form: заболеть. Я всё сделала, но всё-таки заболела. (I did everything but I still got sick.)

At this stage you can describe your level of lousiness with the phrase я чувствую себя (I feel)... and then a nice juicy adverb. You might start off with: Я чувствую себя не очень хорошо (I don't feel too well), or the curious Я чувствую себя неважно (literally I feel

unimportant). That may be true, but here *неважно* means “not very well.” Apparently the original notion of “not important” or “insignificant” acquired the figurative meaning of “not well.” To me the concepts are different, but hey — no one asked me.

Then as your cough worsens, your temperature soars, and your sinuses feel as if they are packed with anthracite you qualify “я чувствую себя” with *плохо* (bad); *очень плохо* (really bad); *отвратительно* (terrible); *жутко* (awful) and various euphemisms for obscene words, like *хреново* (lousy).

When you are flat out sick, pull out the word *разболеться*, which means either being in extreme pain or being extremely ill — or both. So you might say: *У меня разболелась голова* (I’ve got a really bad headache). Or you might say: *Как только я заболеваю, я принимаю таблетки, чтобы не заболеть, но в этот раз я разболелась* (As soon as I start to feel bad I take pills to keep from getting sick, but this time I just got really sick.)

One of my friends uses the slangy *расклеиться* (literally “to become unglued”), which is a very colorful way of describing that feeling of a bad cold — when your head is in one place and your body in another. *Прежде я болел, как обычно болят все, а тут расклеился* (In the past I’d gotten sick like everyone gets sick, but this time I just fell apart.)

Ah, that’s my verb of choice. *Расклеилась*. Time to go pick up the pieces.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of “The Russian Word’s Worth,” a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/20/coming-unglued-in-russian-a59327>