

Getting Stronger Every Day in Every Way

The Word's Worth

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

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

Крепись: keep the faith

The other day a friend and I were talking about keeping our spirits up in these dark times. She tried to console me with a well-known Russian phrase: “Нас бьют — мы крепчаем!” (literally “they beat us, we get stronger!” — similar to “when the going gets tough, the tough get going”).

Actually, for the sake of linguistic accuracy and education, I have to admit that she used a different verb at the beginning of that sentence. But the expression is well-known with бьют, if only because that’s the only version that is printable.

In any case, it made my interest in the verb крепчать a lot stronger.

It turns out that крепчать is a very interesting verb. It's associated with the adjective крепкий (hard, tough, strong, resilient) and means to get stronger in some way. So far, so good. But the interesting bit is that крепчать is only used with four nouns, and in most cases the context is negative. The only positive gains in strength are in people and their spirit, like here in the bathhouse: От душистого пара, разная нечисть бежит, а русский дух только крепчает (All sorts of evil beings flee from sweet-smelling steam, and the Russian spirit only grows stronger).

Otherwise, крепчать is used with the wind, cold temperatures, and idiocy.

Неожиданно поднялась метель, стал крепчать мороз (The wind suddenly came up and the cold really began to bite). Ветер стал крепчать, и мы все смылись домой (The wind grew stronger, and we all took off for home).

I have found a very few examples of its use with heat, perhaps because in a cold country heat is generally a good thing to have more of. But as the climate changes, maybe usage will change, too. Right now it's used as a kind of play on words: Жара крепчает. Зной до +35 градусов ударит по Алтайскому краю (It's really heating up. High temperatures up to +35 C will hit Altai).

And finally, here is another favorite expression: маразм крепчает (the absurdity/idiocy/insanity is getting stronger). Once you know this phrase, you will find yourself uttering it a dozen times a day or maybe more, depending on your country of origin.

In English, we describe this with movement: go around the bend, go nuts, go off the deep end, go psycho, etc. I use it to describe the recent decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court: Они же стареют, маразм крепчает (They're getting old, they're off their rockers.)

But it is used by folks in Russia these days, too: Маразм крепчает: гендиректор "Мосфильма" Карен Шахназаров пригрозил стерилизацией противникам войны (The insanity has spun out of control: Karen Shakhnazarov, the head of Mosfilm, threatened to sterilize anyone who is against the war).

And that's it for крепчать — it isn't commonly used with any other nouns. It seems like an old verb form that peaked in usage two centuries ago and is now considered просторечие (folksy, uneducated speech). It's imperfective and doesn't really have a perfective form. It should be окрепчать, but the word doesn't exist. Apparently the perfective покрепчать exists but is obscure. I did find, however: Ветер покрепчал (The wind got stronger.)

But it doesn't mean you can't describe things or people getting stronger in Russian. For some reason крепчать/покрепчать were eclipsed by крепнуть/окрепнуть, which mean the same thing but can be used for just about anything in just about any context.

For example, the verb might be used by a doting mother or grandmother who wants to fatten up the youngest in the family: Котлеты-то, котлеты! Тебе крепнуть нужно. Я завтра мяса ещё куплю (Meat patties! That'll do it! We need to get your strength up. I'll buy some more meat tomorrow). Or it's used by a coach to strengthen someone physically: Тебе необходимо окрепнуть. Постоянные тренировки сделают из тебя мужчину (We need to get you in shape. Constant physical exercise will make a man out of you).

And it can be used for all sorts of emotions and thoughts, some not good: Крепло в русской душе крепостное, рабское начало (The peasant, slave essence in the Russian soul grew stronger). В голосе майора крепло раздражение (Annoyance intensified in the major's voice).

But it can be used with pleasant emotions, too: Надежда вмиг окрепла! (My hope instantly surged!)

Now if you want to encourage someone to hang tough, be strong, and don't give up, use the verb крепиться. With objects, it means to fasten, to hook up: Он купил такой зонт, который, как парашют, крепится к плечам и оставляет руки свободными (He bought a kind of umbrella that fastens to your shoulders like a parachute and leaves your arms free).

With people, it means to be strong, persevere. People might say this to buck someone up after a loss: Соболезнуем. Крепись. (You have our sympathy. Stay strong!). Or to give someone general encouragement after a setback: Ты взрослый человек и должен понимать, что готовиться нужно ко всему. Крепись (You're a grown man and you ought to know that you need to be ready for anything. Hang in there.)

Finally, the last curiosity with Russian strengthening is подкрепить. This verb has the primary meaning of fastening more tightly, shoring up, reinforcing. Надо подкрепить мнение вескими доводами (You need to shore up your opinion with compelling arguments).

But it can also mean to feed someone in order to get their strength up, often in interesting ways: Надо подкрепить больного вином (We must give the patient wine to get his strength up).

Подкрепиться is a lovely word for having a bite of something to keep you going. This is the favorite word of grandmothers everywhere: Впереди дальняя дорога, надо подкрепиться (You've got a long trip ahead. You ought to eat something before you head off). Ешьте. Надо подкрепиться. (Have something to eat. You have to keep your strength up).

It's also very useful when you'd like a snack: Не пора ли подкрепиться? (Isn't it time for a little something?)

This is highly recommended these days. You never know when things might get tough.

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