

Why Superstition Might Be Good For You

Written by Katie Koerner on July 13, 2012

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Illustration by Tanya Burr

A black cat darts across the sidewalk in front of me. I move to the other side of the street so I don't cross its path, then step over a crack so I don't break my mother's back. I may be a superstitious weirdo, but I'm not the only one. **Fifty percent of Americans admit to being superstitious**, meaning they believe in the significance of some event without any rational explanation. While this behavior may seem silly from the outside, we might want to keep avoiding those black cats: Research suggests **superstition can help give us a sense of control over our lives and even boost our confidence.**

Just Another Friday the 13th? — The Need to Know

In the USA, some people think the number 13 is lucky or unlucky; others fear that breaking a mirror will bring them seven years of bad luck; still others never walk under ladders. In China, people planning weddings avoid dates with the number four, which sounds like the Chinese word for "death."

Eng. 8 2

Superstition, a type of “magical thinking,” describes an irrational belief in supernatural influences. And it’s possible that our belief in magic is a product of human evolution. In other words, if an animal hears rustling and sees a predator, every time he hears rustling he’ll think it’s an attack, even if it’s just the breeze. (So if I ace my practice GRE in cat-print pajama pants, you better believe I’m wearing those babies when I take the real exam!)

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People who feel they don’t have a lot of control over their lives are generally more likely to act superstitious, and some research suggests superstitious thinking is a way to increase our sense of self-efficacy. Superstition may also have a lot to do with religion, since moderately religious people of all faiths tend to believe in superstitions and the paranormal more than others. That’s possibly because this group is open to the concept of the unknown, but willing to believe in mysterious experiences that their specific religion doesn’t explain. But that figure floating through the kitchen might be more than the ghost of Christmas Past.

Step on a Crack – Your Action Plan

For some people, the magic of that lucky rabbit's foot isn't just in their heads. One study found **the belief in a lucky ball, or another object, boosted people's confidence levels and enhanced their performance** on everything from sports games to memory tasks. Magical beliefs may also be a useful coping strategy: In another study, women who recited psalms during periods of conflict experienced less anxiety than women who didn't.

And while carrying a lucky charm or whispering a prayer is unlikely to hurt anyone, superstitious beliefs can get out of hand. **Putting yourself in danger for superstition reasons may be unhealthful and unsafe.** (Think wearing the same lucky blue underwear for a week straight — gross!) One study even found highly superstitious taxi drivers were more likely to get into car accidents than others, though it's not clear that superstitious thinking actually caused any risky behavior. Some researchers think superstition can be a symptom of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which involves unwanted, repeated thoughts and behaviors. If superstitious beliefs are interfering with your relationships and daily life, it might be time to speak to a mental health professional. Otherwise let's stick to wearing those lucky socks and throwing salt over our left shoulders — just watch out for those sitting behind you!

THE TAKEAWAY

- Superstitions are irrational beliefs in supernatural influences.
- Half of Americans say they're superstitious.
- Superstitious behavior can help us feel more confident and more in control over our lives.
- Moderately religious people tend to be the most superstitious.
- It's a problem when superstitious behavior interferes with daily life.

weirdo, silly, be open to, enhance, cope, get out of hand, stick to

Do you know any weirdos? What makes them weird?

How much control do you have over your life? What limits your control?

Why is self-efficacy important?

How do you boost your confidence?

What do you think is unlucky? Why do you think so?

Do you have a good luck charm? What is it? Where do you keep it and when do you use it?

What makes you anxious?

What do you do when you feel anxious?

I know it is silly but