

Where Do Superstitions Come From?

1. Setting the Mood

- Have you ever had a lucky charm or object that you believed brought you good luck?
- What are the most common superstitions in your country?
- Are there any superstitions that you (secretly) follow?

2. Tricky Words

These words from the video might be tricky – can you match them with their definitions?

person who works behind the scenes in a theater and operates equipment	pagan	stagehand	forgetful or distracted because your thoughts are elsewhere
aware of your actions, thoughts, or surroundings	origins	absentminded	call upon a higher power, spirit, or idea for help or protection
referring to a religion or a belief often involving many gods or nature worship	conscious	bias	slowly disappear or become less noticeable over time
tendency to prefer one thing over another in an unfair or unbalanced way	invoke	fade away	the place, time, or situation in which something begins or is created

3. Watch and Learn

Read the questions, watch the video carefully, and then answer the questions:

1. What are most superstitions based on?
2. Where does the fear of the number 13 come from, and what is it called?
3. What is the origin of the superstition of knocking on wood?
4. Why do some Italians fear the number 17?
5. Why is the number 14 considered unlucky in many Asian countries that use Chinese numerals?
6. Why do some people still follow superstitions even if they don't believe in them?
7. How come some superstitions seem to work in certain situations?

4. Let's Talk

1. Do you think believing in lucky items can actually help people perform better?
2. How big a role has luck played in your successes or failures?
3. Do you believe in some form of life after death?
4. Is it important to respect other people's beliefs, even if they have no scientific basis?
5. How much do you rely on your gut feeling and intuition?

Transcript

Are you afraid of black cats? Would you open an umbrella indoors? And how do you feel about the number thirteen? Whether or not you believe in them, you're probably familiar with a few of these superstitions. So how did it happen that people all over the world knock on wood or avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks? Well, although they have no basis in science, many of these weirdly specific beliefs and practices do have equally weird and specific **origins**.

Because they involve supernatural causes, it's no surprise that many superstitions are based in religion. For example, the number thirteen was associated with the biblical Last Supper, where Jesus Christ dined with his twelve disciples just before being arrested and crucified. The resulting idea that having thirteen people at a table was bad luck eventually expanded into thirteen being an unlucky number in general. Now, this fear of the number thirteen, called triskaidekaphobia, is so common that many buildings around the world skip the thirteenth floor, with the numbers going straight from twelve to fourteen.

Of course, many people consider the story of the Last Supper to be true, but other superstitions come from religious traditions that few people believe in or even remember. Knocking on wood is thought to come from the folklore of the ancient Indo-Europeans, or possibly people who predated them, who believed that trees were home to various spirits. Touching a tree would **invoke** the protection or blessing of the spirit within. And somehow, this tradition survived long after belief in these spirits had **faded away**. Many superstitions common today in countries from Russia to Ireland are thought to be remnants of the **pagan** religions that Christianity replaced.

But not all superstitions are religious. Some are just based on unfortunate coincidences and associations. For example, many Italians fear the number 17 because the Roman numeral XVII can be rearranged to form the word vixi, meaning "my life had ended." Similarly, the word for the number four sounds almost identical to the word for death in Cantonese, as well as languages like Japanese and Korean that have borrowed Chinese numerals. And since the number one also sounds like the word for "must," the number fourteen sounds like the phrase "must die." That's a lot of numbers for elevators and international hotels to avoid.

And believe it or not, some superstitions actually make sense, or at least they did until we forgot their original purpose. For example, theater scenery used to consist of large painted backdrops, raised and lowered by stagehands who would whistle to signal each other. **Absentminded** whistles from other people could cause an accident. But the taboo against whistling backstage still exists today, long after the **stagehands** started using radio headsets. Along the same lines, lighting three cigarettes from the same match really could cause bad luck if you were a soldier in a foxhole, where keeping a match lit too long could draw attention from an enemy sniper. Most smokers no longer have to worry about snipers, but the superstition lives on.

So why do people cling to these bits of forgotten religions, coincidences, and outdated advice? Aren't they being totally irrational? Well, yes, but for many people, superstitions are based more on cultural habit than **conscious** belief. After all, no one is born knowing to avoid walking under ladders or whistling indoors, but if you grow up being told by your family to avoid these things, chances are they'll make you uncomfortable, even after you logically understand that nothing bad will happen. And since doing something like knocking on wood doesn't require much effort, following the superstition is often easier than **consciously** resisting it.

Besides, superstitions often do seem to work. Maybe you remember hitting a home run while wearing your lucky socks. This is just our psychological **bias** at work. You're far less likely to remember all the times you struck out while wearing the same socks. But believing that they work could actually make you play better by giving you the illusion of having greater control over events. So in situations where that confidence can make a difference, like sports, those crazy superstitions might not be so crazy after all.