

Good Luck Charms and Quirky Pre-Performance Routines: Can Superstition Enhance Performance?

Description

Have you ever knocked on wood? Tossed salt over your shoulder? Went out of your way to avoid walking under a ladder?

Even if you're usually a very logical and pragmatic person, there is probably a quirky superstition or two that you go along with from time to time.

And when it comes to uncertain, stressful situations like performances, competitions, or auditions (particularly those in which you don't feel you have much control over the end result), it may be even more tempting to engage in superstitious behaviors.

You'd be in good company of course, as many successful athletes have been known to have some pretty quirky game-day routines.

Michael Jordan, for instance, is said to have worn his college basketball shorts [underneath his Chicago Bulls uniform](#) for luck (and purportedly inspired the trend of longer shorts in the NBA in order to cover up those blue UNC shorts).

Tiger Woods wears a red shirt on the last day of each golf tournament.

Serena Williams wears the same pair of socks for the duration of a tournament.

And whether it's a pre-concert shepherd's pie (Rolling Stones), campfire song sing-a-long (Red Hot Chili Peppers), or shirt-ironing ritual (Led Zeppelin), superstitious behavior amongst musicians is not unheard of either.

But are these quirks and superstitions actually helpful? Or are they just a waste of time and energy? A precarious psychological dependence on luck, or a "crutch" that we ought to eliminate from our performance preparation?

Putt putt

We know that pre-performance routines (like the way basketball players will bounce the ball a certain number of times before shooting a free throw), can have a [beneficial effect on performance](#).

But a [series of studies](#) conducted at the University of Cologne suggest that even *superstitious* rituals – which have nothing to do with increasing focus or priming motor skills – may have a positive impact on our

performances as well.

Twenty-eight university students were randomly divided into two groups and asked to sink 10 putts. Those in the control condition were handed a ball and simply told “This is the ball everyone has used so far.” They scored an average of **4.75** successful putts out of 10.

Those in the “superstition” condition were handed a ball and told “Here is your ball. So far it has turned out to be a lucky ball.” They scored an average of **6.42** successful putts out of 10. That’s a **35% difference** in performance.

Puzzle time

In a second study, participants were given a puzzle to solve (a plastic cube with 36 little balls inside that they had to pass through 36 holes by gently tilting the cube in different directions), and timed to see how long it would take.

In one group, the participants were instructed to begin when told “on ‘go’ you go.” In another group, the participants were told to begin when the experimenter said “I press the watch for you” (yeah, I know that phrase sounds odd, but it will make sense in a second). And in the superstition condition, the participants were told “I press the thumbs for you” – a German phrase which makes even less sense, but translates to the more familiar English expression “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

Lo and behold, the participants in the “fingers crossed” superstition group outperformed their counterparts by a significant margin – **191.5** seconds (3 minutes, 11.5 seconds) vs. **319.7** seconds (5 minutes, 19.7 seconds) and **342.3** seconds (5 minutes, 42.3 seconds) for the two other groups.

But why?!

So why does engaging in superstitious behaviors seem to boost performance (at least in these cases)?

The researchers conducted a couple follow-up studies, the results of which suggest that activating these superstitions enhanced the participants’ “self-efficacy” or belief in their ability to do well on the upcoming task.

And when we are more optimistic or confident in our abilities to be successful, we tend to do better (and BTW, here’s an [interesting read](#) on the confidence gap between men and women).

So there’s no “magic” involved per se. Just a blend of hard work, smart preparation, and a little luck for an added edge.

Take action

Do you have a lucky ritual, or good-luck charm?

Like anything else, there's a fine line between a bit of harmless (and possibly helpful) superstitious behavior for luck, and developing an obsessive and crippling dependence on some elaborate routine. Indeed, I think there's a lot of truth in the saying "I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it."

But rather than feeling silly and ridiculous or apologetic about your quirky pre-performance ritual, it's probably better to embrace your little quirks, and just go ahead and wear your lucky socks/undies/accessories to your next audition.

After all, you can never have too much luck, right?

Additional resources

I recently stumbled upon *Rituals* – a series of mini-documentaries on various performers like Jeff Tweedy of Wilco and comedian Patten Oswalt, which show some of the artists' private pre-show rituals and routines. Each episode is short, and very cool. Some interesting and valuable lessons to be learned from each one.

Check out the playlist here: [Rituals](#) by Thrash Lab

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