

Bad luck? Knocking on wood can undo jinx: study

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Knocking on wood is the most common superstition in Western culture used to reverse bad fortune or undo a "jinx." Other cultures maintain similar practices, like spitting or throwing salt, after someone has tempted fate. Even people who aren't particularly superstitious often participate in these practices.

A new study from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business finds that these superstitions actually do "reverse" perceived bad fortune.

People believe that negative outcomes are especially likely after a jinx. If someone says, "No one I know will ever get into a car accident," for example, it often feels that a car accident is likely to occur. But people's elevated concerns after tempting fate can be eliminated if they engage in a ritual to undo that bad luck.

Noting that many of the most common rituals for undoing bad luck – knocking on wood, spitting, and throwing salt – all seem to involve movements that exert force away from a person, researchers set out to test whether the avoidant nature of the action is key for reducing the negative expectations and heightened concern generated by tempting fate.

"Our findings suggest that not all actions to undo a jinx are equally effective. Instead, we find that avoidant actions that exert force away from one's representation of self are especially effective for reducing the anticipated negative consequences following a jinx" says Jane Risen,

associate professor of behavioral science at Chicago Booth. Risen conducts research in the areas of judgment and decision-making, intuitive belief formation, magical thinking, stereotyping and managing emotion.

"Engaging in an avoidant action seems to create the sense that the [bad luck](#) is being pushed away," Risen says.

Titled "Reversing One's Fortune by Pushing Away Bad Luck," the study was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Co-authors are Yan Zhang of National University of Singapore and former Chicago Booth student, and Christine Hosey, a current Chicago Booth student.

In five separate experiments, researchers had participants either tempt [fate](#) or not and then engage in an action that was either avoidant or not. The avoidant actions included those that were superstitious – like knocking on wood – or non-superstitious – like throwing a ball.

They found that those who knocked down (away from themselves) or threw a ball believed that a jinxed negative outcome was less likely than participants who knocked up (toward themselves) or held a ball. In addition, the researchers found that engaging in an avoidant action had its effect by leading people to have a less vivid mental image of the negative event.

More information: psycnet.apa.org/psycarticles/2013-28215-001.pdf

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