

UK Superstition Survey

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Summary of findings

- 1) The current levels of superstitious behaviour and beliefs in the UK are surprisingly high, even among those with a scientific background. Touching wood is the most popular UK superstition, followed by crossing fingers, avoiding ladders, not smashing mirrors, carrying a lucky charm and having superstitious beliefs about the number 13.
- 2) Superstitious people tend to worry about life, have a strong need for control, and have a low tolerance for ambiguity.
- 3) There has been a significant increase in superstition over the last month, possibly as a result of current economic and political uncertainties. This is especially true of people with a high need for control and low tolerance for ambiguity.
- 4) The Scots top the UK superstition table, followed by the English, the Welsh and Northern Irish.
- 5) Women are more superstitious than men, and young people more than old.
- 6) The many bizarre personal superstitions collected during the survey illustrate the extent of modern day superstitious behaviour.

1) General levels of superstitious behaviour and belief

Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they were superstitious, and whether they carried out the following superstitious behaviours:

Saying 'fingers crossed' or actually crossing fingers.

Avoiding walking under a ladder because it is associated with bad luck.

Being superstitious about the number 13.

Being anxious about breaking a mirror because it is thought to cause bad luck.

Saying 'touch wood' or actually touch or knock on wood.

Carrying a lucky charm or object.

The results indicate very high levels of superstitious beliefs and behaviour.

77% of people indicated that they were at least a little superstitious and/or carried out some form of superstitious behaviour, and 42% indicated that they were very/somewhat superstitious. To help place these figures in perspective, a 1996 GALLUP poll reported that 53% of Americans said that they were at least a little superstitious, and only 25% admitted to being very/somewhat superstitious.

People were also asked to indicate if they had a background in science. Interestingly, even 25% of people who indicated that this was the case said that they were very/somewhat superstitious.

The rank order and percentages of people endorsing these behaviours and beliefs are shown in the table below:

Rank	Superstition	% of people endorsing each superstition
1	Touch wood	74%
2	Fingers crossed	65%
3	Avoiding ladders	50%
4	Smashing mirrors	39%

5	Carrying charm	28%
6	Number 13	26%

2) What sorts of people are superstitious?

The survey examined the possible relationship between superstitious beliefs and whether people....

...worry about life

(E.g., Do you agree/disagree with the statement: 'I tend to worry about life').

....have a strong need for control

(E.g., Do you agree/disagree with the statement: 'I get quite anxious when I'm in a situation over which I have no control').

....do not like ambiguity in their lives

(E.g., Do you agree/disagree with the statement: 'I believe that there is a clear difference between right and wrong').

The results were striking.

People who tend to worry about life are far more superstitious than others – 50% of worriers were very/somewhat superstitious, compared to just 24% of non-worriers.

People who have a strong need for control in their lives are far more superstitious than others - 42% of people indicating high need for control were very/somewhat superstitious, compared to just 22% of people indicating low need for control.

People who have a low tolerance for ambiguity are far more superstitious than those with a high tolerance - 38% of those with low tolerance were very/somewhat superstitious compared to just 30% of those with high tolerance.

3) Changes in superstition over the past month

The survey examined whether current economic and political uncertainties may have caused people to become more superstitious. The results suggest that this is indeed the case.

18% of people indicated that they have felt much/slightly more anxious over the past month when they carried out superstitious behaviour reputed to bring bad luck (e.g., walking under a ladder).

15% of people indicated that they have carried out superstitious behaviour meant to create good luck much/slightly more frequently over the past month (e.g., carrying a lucky charm).

Of these, the vast majority were those that described themselves as worrying about life, having a high need for control, had a low tolerance for ambiguity and being superstitious. For example, 91% of the people who said that they had become more anxious over the past month when breaking superstitions expressed a strong need for control in their lives. Likewise, 92% of those that had increased their superstitious rituals had a low tolerance for ambiguity.

4) Regional differences

The Scots top the superstition table, with 46% saying that they are very/somewhat superstitious, compared to 42% of the English, 41% of the Welsh and just 40% of the Northern Irish.

Crossing fingers is especially popular in Scotland (72% vs UK national average of 65%).

Avoiding ladders is especially popular in Wales (57% vs UK national average of 50%).

Associating broken mirrors with bad luck is especially popular in Northern Ireland (46% vs UK national average of 39%).

Touching wood is especially popular in England (84% vs UK national average of 74%).

5) Gender and age differences

Women are significantly more superstitious than men – 51% of women said that they were very/somewhat superstitious compared to just 29% of men.

When it came to individual superstitions, far more women than men cross their fingers (women: 75% vs men: 50%), and touch wood (women: 83% vs men: 61%).

These findings replicate other research concerned with belief and gender, and may be due to women having lower self-esteem and less perceived control over their lives, than men.

People become less superstitious as they age – 59% of people aged 11-15 said they were superstitious, compared to 44% of people aged between 31-40 and just 35% of the over 50s.

These findings do not suggest that superstitious behaviour and beliefs will be consigned to the past. Instead, they are strongly held by the younger members of society.

6) Personal superstitions

The survey also asked people about their personal superstitions. Over 500 people responded (approximately 25% of all respondents), with many people described how they wore lucky clothes to exams and interviews, used their lucky numbers when choosing lottery numbers and saluted magpies.

Some of the more unusual superstitious behaviours and beliefs are described below.

I always avoid staying in the bathroom once the toilet has been flushed.

I always draw a smiley face in a free pint of Guinness.

I always leave a house by the same door that I used to enter.

I never have the volume on my car stereo set to volume 13.

When a clock has matching numbers, such as 12:12, I have to say 1212 out loud.

Whenever I see a hearse, I touch my collar until I see a bird.

This range of behaviour supports the notion that new superstitions are constantly developing and evolving, and that there is no reason to expect superstition to decline in the near future.

The results described in this document are based on information provided by the 2068 people who participated in a national superstition survey during 2003 National Science Week.

The survey questions and possible response options are available online at www.luckfactor.co.uk/survey. This website will remain active and continue to collect additional data.

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