

Superstition can boost performance— through confidence, study finds

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Courtesy of the Association for Psychological Science
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Don't scoff at those lucky rabbit feet. New research indicates that having some kind of "lucky" token can actually improve your performance – by increasing your self-confidence.

"I watch a lot of sports, and I read about sports, and I noticed that very often athletes – also famous athletes – hold superstitions," said Lysann Damisch of the University of Cologne in Germany.



New research shows that having some kind of "lucky" token can actually improve your performance – by increasing your self-confidence. Above, a necklace with traditional good-luck tokens.

Michael Jordan wore his college team shorts underneath his NBA uniform for good luck; Tiger Woods wears a red shirt on tournament Sundays, usually the last and most important day of a tournament.

"I was wondering, why are they doing so?" Damisch hypothesized that a belief in superstition might help people do better by improving their confidence. With colleagues Barbara Stoberock and Thomas Mussweiler, also of the university, she designed a set of experiments to see if activating people's superstitious beliefs would improve their performance on memory and dexterity games.

In one of the experiments, volunteers were told to bring a lucky charm with them. Then the researchers took it away to take a picture. People brought in all kinds of items, from old stuffed animals to wedding rings to lucky stones. Half of the volunteers were given their charm back before the test started; the other half were told there was a problem with the camera equipment and they would get it back later.

Volunteers who had their lucky charm did better at a computer memory game, and

other tests showed that this difference was because they felt more confident, she said. They also set higher goals for themselves.

Just wishing someone good luck – with “I press the thumbs for you,” the German version of crossing your fingers – improved volunteers’ success at a task that required manual dexterity, the scientists reported. The findings are published in the research journal *Psychological Science*.

Of course, even Michael Jordan lost basketball games sometimes. “It doesn’t mean you win, because of course winning and losing is something else,” said Damisch. “Maybe the other person is stronger.”