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**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## **Punxsutawney Phil & Superstition**

*Punxsutawney Phil is the seer of seers of groundhogs. Each year, his singular job is to emerge on February 2nd and predict whether we are in for another six weeks of winter. If he sees his shadow, we need to brace ourselves for frigid temperatures and more snow. No shadow means an easy winter that will wind down soon. This year he saw his shadow.*

## Happy Groundhog Day



### [Photo Credit](#)

*Groundhog Day makes the news every year. It is based on a superstitious tradition carried out by the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club for well over a century. Other superstitious beliefs and behaviors are more personal and idiosyncratic. Whether public or private, they are universal. And lest you think you are above such irrational behavior, consider the last time someone sneezed and you said “bless you.”*

**1. What is superstition?** This is one of those words that we all understand in the vernacular. Superstitious beliefs hold that specific actions will directly influence an outcome in ways that defy reason or logic. From a scientific perspective, superstitions are based on an illusory correlation between two phenomena that are, in fact, unrelated.

**2. What is the psychology behind superstition?** Cultural traditions and individual experiences give rise to superstitions. Superstitions derive from a need for control and the

human desire to predict the unknown. We engage in superstitious behavior to restore or create a sense of predictability. High rise buildings skip the thirteenth floor to circumvent risk. The field kicker kisses his corno portafortuna on his way onto the field to ensure the football flies clear through the goalposts. We engage in superstitious behaviors to affect our future; control our fate. [One-quarter of adults](#) in the U.S. can easily identify a superstition that they entertain. Research studies show that the majority of us are inclined to think our actions impact outcomes, even when no relationship exists.

**3. Believe it or not, many superstitious behaviors actually work.** In other words, lucky charms are, well... lucky. It is common for actors to have pre-performance rituals. Tennis great Rafael Nadal has a distinct and precise choreography before every single serve. The research suggests that these [superstitions actually work](#). [One study](#), for example, demonstrated that participants who believed that they had a “lucky” golf ball had more success putting than those who thought they had a “regular” golf ball. In the same study, among individuals who reported having lucky charms, if they were allowed to keep their lucky charm with them during a series of memory tasks, they performed better than those whose good luck charm was taken away. Superstitions may work because they actually create very predictable rituals that reduce uncertainty and increase confidence. This is organizing for our brain, which calms us down and enables us to focus and improve performance of the task at hand.

**4. When are we more likely to be superstitious?** Magical thinking and superstitious behavior increase under [stressful conditions](#). A possible explanation is that stress reduces our sense of control. To regain control, we engage in rituals or superstitions that we imbue with special powers. Elevated stress levels due to economic crises and social upheaval – things like wars and pandemics – have been shown to prime the superstition pumps. [Data](#) from Germany between 1918 and 1940 showed that superstitious thinking rose as people’s perception of greater economic threat increased. Yes, some of us are more superstitious than others. People who feel that they have limited capacity to control their world (a combination of low self-efficacy and high external locus of control) tend to be more superstitious. Higher education levels increase a sense of agency, so more education tends to mean less superstition. Still, even among highly educated people, superstitions are common.

**5. How are superstitions related to mental health?** In general, superstitious beliefs are common across the population and not associated with mental disorders. And for most people, superstitions are fun and harmless. But superstitions can become a burden in

everyday life. For people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), superstitions can manifest as fixations. People with OCD may feel unable to dismiss the superstitious beliefs or behaviors, leading to debilitating obsessive thoughts and compulsive rituals. Superstitions can negatively impact people who have mental health conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder and depression. When superstitions become strong motivators for participating in or avoiding certain activities, or when superstitions dramatically interfere with constructively and productively engaging in life, it could be an indication that an underlying mental health condition is present.

*I treated myself to a new sweater this week given that Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow. My family calls 24 our lucky number. And I promise you that when the Kansas City Chiefs and Tampa Bay Buccaneers take the field for Super Bowl Sunday, many talisman will have been kissed and pre-game rituals indulged. Half of them will be reinforced!*