Think you need luck? Think again

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If Friday the 13th finds you being a little more careful than usual, you're likely one of the millions of Americans who consider themselves to be at least a little superstitious.



> The Freeman School's Eric Hamerman says people are more likely to turn to superstition to help achieve performance goals as opposed to learning goals.

A. B. Freeman School of Business researcher Eric Hamerman studies the impact of superstition on decision-making and his latest paper sheds light on the situations in which individuals use superstitions most.

People are more likely to turn to superstition when they're interested in achieving a performance goal as opposed to a learning goal, he said.

"Performance goals involve somebody else giving me approval whereas learning goals involve an internal sense of competence and mastery," said Hamerman, an assistant professor of marketing at the Freeman School. "Only when looking for outside approval do we bring in outside sources, such as luck, to try to help ourselves."

An example of a performance goal would be a musician who practices in order to receive applause. If the musician were to practice solely for the satisfaction of mastering the piece of music, that would be a learning goal. Similarly, a student who studies to get an A has a performance goal whereas a student who studies to learn the material has a learning goal.

While Hamerman's research doesn't address whether belief in superstition affects one's performance, he said focusing on performance goals tends to make people feel less in control while focusing on learning goals tends to make people challenge and stretch themselves.

"The lesson here is that we should really try to reframe those performance goals as learning goals," Hamerman said. "If we focus on the process rather than the outcome … we'll tend to focus on more rational solutions to become better achievers."

Hamerman's paper "Reliance on Luck: Identifying Which Achievement Goals Elicit Superstitious Behavior," co-authored with Carey Morewedge, appears in the March 2015 issue of Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.