David Robson and David Brooks write about the mimicking of routines and rituals of successful people.

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1 Where would the self-help and business media be without the secret habits of highly successful people? Almost every week there is a new article outlining a high-flying individual's behaviours – with the implied promise that using the same techniques could deliver us fame and fortune, too. Arianna Huffington, the CEO of Thrive Global, prioritises sleep in the name of productivity, including a bedtime ritual in which she turns off all mobile devices and "escorts them out of [her] bedroom". Other inspirational figures are more idiosyncratic in their habits. Bill Gates was very particular in his choice of notebook: it had to be a yellow legal pad. Further back in history, Beethoven counted exactly 60 coffee beans for each cup, which he used to power his composing.

2 Why do successful people follow such eccentrically specific habits? And why are we so keen to read about them and mimic them in our own lives? The answer lies in a powerful psychological process called 'superstitious learning'. The brain is constantly looking for associations between two events. While it is mostly correct, it sometimes mistakes coincidence for causality – leading us to attribute success to something as arbitrary as the colour of our notebook or the number of beans in our brew, rather than our own talent or hard work. And when we hear of other's triumphs, we often end up copying their habits, too, including the arbitrary rituals that they had acquired through superstitious learning.

3 This is not to say the resulting habits are completely devoid of benefits. By giving us a sense of self-determination, the adoption of rituals – including the completely random behaviours that we have learnt ourselves or borrowed from those we admire – can help us to overcome anxiety, and may even bring about a noticeable boost in performance. It offers psychological benefits that logic and science cannot always provide: namely, a sense of control and a sense of meaning. We often rely on such rituals when we are anxious or want to perform well, and though they may not directly have their intended magical effects, these rituals produce an illusion of control and enhance self-confidence, which in turn can improve our performance and thus, indirectly affect our fate.

4 "Superstition is a kind of maladaptive behaviour that arises from what is normally a very good thing – the ability of the brain to predict," says Elena Daprati, a neuroscientist at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. In a 2019 paper, her team showed that individual differences in implicit learning – the brain's ability to non-consciously pick up patterns – can explain why some people are more likely to form superstitious habits than others. In everyday life, this associative learning might lead us to settle on a 'lucky' pen that seems to deliver particularly good grades in exams, or a certain suit that we feel guarantees a good job interview. Creative tasks are especially rife with uncertainty – which may explain why thinkers like Gates and Beethoven adopted such specific behaviours to get their thoughts flowing.

5 Once rituals informed from superstitious learning exist, they can extend their influence beyond their creator. Emilia Rovira Nordman, an associate professor at Mälardalen University in Sweden, highlights an example from academia. According to her, researchers will often find fallacious reasons for their successes and failures in getting their paper accepted by journals. They will then pass on that advice to their colleagues and students – meaning that others will start to adopt the same arbitrary

rules when preparing and submitting papers. Something similar may be occurring on a much grander scale, thanks to the media, when a billionaire, acclaimed author or world-class athlete tells us about their daily routine. Some of their behaviours will have been acquired through superstitious learning – and we may then follow their advice as if it were the gospel truth.

6 A key reason for this is that humans are social creatures; we are primed to look to people of higher status for advice. Various studies over the past decade have shown that we have a tendency to "over-imitate" when we learn from others, copying every action they perform, even if there is no obvious logical reason for a particular deed. Often, we simply do not even question the reason for doing something – we just assume that it must have a purpose. Given this tendency, it may be only natural that after reading a biography of a famous writer or watching an interview with a billionaire businessperson, we are tempted to take on their idiosyncratic rites and rituals in the hope that we can somehow achieve the same success, without recognising how many other factors – including sheer chance – would have played a role in their achievements.

7 In some cases, when spurious associations influence high-level decision-making, superstitious learning may be costly. One 2020 study of Swedish biotech companies found that two CEOs who had come to associate certain marketing strategies with success religiously repeated the same steps in their new start-ups – even though there was no logical reason to think that the specific approach could work again. Nordman suggests that whenever we are making an important decision, we apply our critical thinking to question all the assumptions that we are making and the evidence for them. "You should remain suspicious," she says.

8 Often, however, the rituals that we acquire take very little effort. (There's no real harm, after all, in counting your coffee beans, apart from a slight waste of time.) Whether you have learnt it yourself, or copied it from others, the very act of performing the routine could help you feel more focused and determined. Rituals provide comfort because they remind us we are not alone. Billions of people have done this before as part of the timeless passage of life. Rituals also force a pause. Many wise people divide their life into chapters, and they focus on the big question of what this chapter is for. Rituals encourage you to be more intentional about life. People can understand their lives' meaning only if they step out of their immediate moment and see what came before them and what they will leave behind when they are gone.

9 Daprati suggests that this may even be the reason that we persist in these behaviours. Although the initial association with success may have been illusory, the positive mindset that these behaviours produce really does improve our performance the next time, so we do it again and again. One study showed that basketball players tend to be more accurate in their shots if they first go through a specific "pre-performance routine", such as spinning or kissing the ball. Other studies have found that asking participants to perform small rituals can improve everything from academic performance to pitch accuracy in karaoke singing. In some ways, it is a bit like the placebo effect in medicine – the sense that you are doing something positive can itself change the outcome.

10 Given these findings, we need not be embarrassed by the little rituals that pepper our days; if the action costs nothing and helps you to feel a bit more in control of your day, it is perfectly rational to continue. Whether you have been inspired by past

experience or are mimicking your heroes, your arbitrary rituals may just push you a little bit closer to the success you seek.

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