

Superstitious behavior

You step up to the seven dots on the floor. You have the bowling ball in your hands. You walk your three and a half steps and release the ball. The ball spins and turns down the lane. As it veers away from the middle, your torso starts leaning in towards the head pin. As you lean, the ball changes course a little. You lean farther and the ball leans farther. You get nine pins down!

The next time you bowl, you will most likely lean as soon as the ball leaves you and farther over. Maybe by bending into the lane adjacent you will really curve that ball and get a strike? If this describes your bowling approach, you have performed a superstitious behavior.

If you would have not leaned in the first place you would have still gotten nine pins down. If you would have had your eyes closed you would have gotten nine pins down. The truth on why your ball curved all over the lane was because you had a hook on it as it left your body, not because of what your body did after the ball left you.

A ranch worker is about to feed a horse. The horse starts pawing at the door. The worker feeds the horse. The next time the worker is inside the barn the horse starts pawing at the door, waiting for food. The horse is exhibiting a superstitious behavior, because it thinks in order for it to get food it needs to paw at the door.

You press the elevator door button. The button light turns on. Another person comes to the elevator and sees the light on. They press the button again. You think to yourself how stupid they are, you just pressed the button. Then another person comes up, also sees the light on and they also press the button. Are these people morons? A few seconds go by, nothing happens. You press the button again. The door opens forty seconds later. You have the magic touch. Pressing the button multiple times will did not make the elevator come quicker.

Each of these examples occur over and over because the delivery of something good happened close enough to a non related behavior, that the behavior was accidently reinforced. The delivery of something bad could also happen close enough to a non related behavior that makes you superstitious.

A black cat walks by your path and a week later you do poorly on a presentation at work. It could be easy and foolish to blame the cat for your bad luck. Yet, people and pets exhibit superstitious behavior. Pets show signs of superstitious behavior when they misunderstand what the trainer is asking.

My Moluccan cockatoo is trained to raise her head feathers when I show her a high five. I show her my five fingers and she raises her head feathers and at the end she jerks her head. I do not ask her to do this twitch at the end. The reason why she continually does it is because I give her a treat after she raises her head feathers. Before I can get her the food in her mouth, she does a twitch and she pairs the raising of the feathers and the twitch with a treat, rather than just the head feathers.

For me to break this superstitious behavior I would need to only reinforce the rise of the feathers and give no reward for the rise of the feathers and the twitch.

This past week I discovered a another superstitious behavior. At work we are training chickens to run independent paths during a bird show. We have taught them to follow a piece of AstroTurf. We each have a piece of turf and we call the chicken back and forth. Once we placed the turf on a one foot tall tree stump and the chicken jumped up, which is what we asked. Now whenever the chicken runs in that direction the chicken jumps on the stump rather than to the turf.

To break Napoleon, the chicken, from this superstitious behavior we would not reinforce jumping up on the stump at all. Starting from the beginning point we will only reinforce him when he reaches the end point without touching the stump. The times that he does not get near or touch the stump, we will reward him heavily with treats. But until then, I will cross my fingers.

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