

DR. MARTHA

DURHAM:

Superstitions have been around since the dawn of man. They're irrational beliefs we have and they help us make sense of the world. And so from a psychological perspective, what they do is help us feel like we have some control where we don't have control, and that helps people keep moving forward.

We have superstitions for lots of different times in the year and one of them is New Year's. You eat certain things on the first day of the year. And those all symbolize something, but there's a rich history behind them.

The black-eyed peas and ham hocks, actually, were something that were left behind by soldiers during the Civil War thinking they were animal food, and that allowed people who were starving to have something to eat, and so they think of those two things as very lucky for them, so we've continued that tradition.

The color of cornbread is the color of gold, and so we think about that as bringing wealth into your house, and also with collard greens. A lot of folks will eat that, and that's the color of money, and so we believe that if you eat those things, you will have good luck and bring money into your new year.

So another thing we do is we shoot off fireworks, and that's really one of those things we're warding off evil spirits. If you make all that noise, you will chase them away, and that will have you have a luckier year and a healthier, happier year.

Another thing we think about with the new year and superstitions is starting off fresh, and one of the ways to do that is by having our house look the best it can be. And then there's this other interesting thing-- your first visitor of the new year, you want that person to represent what's going to happen to you in that year. And so really, you want him to be tall, dark and handsome, because that's all good stuff.

Superstitions really work, and that's what's so complicated, because they're really based on irrational thinking. They really don't work, OK? They work because you believe they work, and it's like the placebo effect-- if you really are confident in something, it makes you more confident, it makes you work harder and be more focused.

We have something called intermittent reinforcement, and this is a type of human learning and

it's the most powerful way that humans learn. If you have something happen and it's followed up by an event, you associate those things.

So think about Pavlov's dog. If you ring a bell and you serve dinner, you start realizing the bell symbolizes dinner, and remember, that caused the dog to salivate and expect the food-- that's what intermittent reinforcement is.

So another thing we do at the stroke of 12 on New Year's Eve is we kiss someone. And if we think about intermittent reinforcement, and it may or may not happen, you might as well just kiss, because you may be missing out on that good luck around the corner if you don't.

[MUSIC - "AULD LANG SYNE"]