**UNIT 8 KNOCK ON WOOD**

**1. Answer the questions.**

1. What are superstitions?

2. Do you know anything about superstitions *number 13, ladder, mirror, wood*?

3. How superstitious are you?

**2. Vocabulary. Complete each gap with an appropriate form of the root word in brackets.**

1. This place has such great \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_for me. I remember the wonderful holidays we used to have here when I was a child. (associate)

2. My parents were really happy when my sister got engaged. They gave her their \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ . (bless)

3. Henry? Is that you? I can’t believe you’re on holiday in the same hotel as we are, during the same week. What a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_! (incident)

4. I’m sorry, but I’ve got an \_\_\_\_fear of dogs. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I just can’t be near them. (rational)

5. She uses \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ from the fashion industry to make beautiful handbags. (remain)

6. You think we know what we’re doing? I’m afraid not - it’s all an \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_! (illusory)

**3. Explain what the words in bold mean.**

1. Witches and princesses are female characters in the **folklore** of many countries.

2. The Easter festival has both **pagan** and Christian origins.

3. You must wear shoes at all times here. These people believe that it’s **taboo** to show your feet in public.

4. We’re far more likely to remember things that fit in with our beliefs - that’s psychological **bias**.

5. In some parts of the world, people **cling to** old ideas instead of forgetting about them.

6. We’ve made a **conscious** decision to buy fewer plastic toys for the children in order to help the environment.

**4. Read the text.**

**Superstitions**

Are you afraid of black cats? Would you open an umbrella indoors? And how do you feel about the number thirteen? Whether or not you believe in them, you’re probably familiar with a few of these superstitions. So how did it happen that people all over the world knock on wood, or avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks?

Well, although they have no basis in science, many of these weirdly specific beliefs and practices do have equally weird and specific origins. Because they involve supernatural causes, it’s no surprise that many superstitions are based in religion.

For example, the number thirteen was associated with the biblical Last Supper, where Jesus Christ dined with his twelve disciples just before being arrested and crucified. The resulting idea that having thirteen people at a table was bad luck eventually expanded into thirteen being an unlucky number in general.

Now, this fear of the number thirteen, called triskaidekaphobia, is so common that many buildings around the world skip the thirteenth floor, with the numbers going straight from twelve to fourteen. Of course, many people consider the story of the Last Supper to be true but other superstitions come from religious traditions that few people believe in or even remember.

Knocking on wood is thought to come from the folklore of the ancient Indo-Europeans or possibly people who pre-dated them, who believed that trees were home to various spirits. Touching a tree would invoke the protection or blessing of the spirit within. And somehow, this tradition survived long after belief in these spirits had faded away.

Many superstitions common today in countries from Russia to Ireland are thought to be remnants of the pagan religions that Christianity replaced. But not all superstitions are religious. Some are just based on unfortunate coincidences and associations.

For example, many Italians fear the number 17 because the Roman numeral XVII can be rearranged to form the word vixi, meaning my life had ended. Similarly, the word for the number four sounds almost identical to the word for death in Cantonese, as well as languages like Japanese and Korean that have borrowed Chinese numerals.

And since the number one also sounds like the word for must, the number fourteen sounds like the phrase must die. That’s a lot of numbers for elevators and international hotels to avoid. And believe it or not, some superstitions actually make sense, or at least they did until we forgot their original purpose.

For example, theatre scenery used to consist of large painted backdrops, raised and lowered by stagehands who would whistle to signal each other. Absentminded whistles from other people could cause an accident.

But the taboo against whistling backstage still exists today, long after the stagehands started using radio headsets. Along the same lines, lighting three cigarettes from the same match really could cause bad luck if you were a soldier in a foxhole where keeping a match lit too long could draw attention from an enemy sniper. Most smokers no longer have to worry about snipers, but the superstition lives on.

So why do people cling to these bits of forgotten religions, coincidences, and outdated advice? Aren’t they being totally irrational? Well, yes, but for many people, superstitions are based more on cultural habit than conscious belief.

After all, no one is born knowing to avoid walking under ladders or whistling indoors, but if you grow up being told by your family to avoid these things, chances are they’ll make you uncomfortable, even after you logically understand that nothing bad will happen. And since doing something like knocking on wood doesn’t require much effort, following the superstition is often easier than consciously resisting it.

Besides, superstitions often do seem to work. Maybe you remember hitting a home run while wearing your lucky socks. This is just our psychological bias at work. You’re far less likely to remember all the times you struck out while wearing the same socks. But believing that they work could actually make you play better by giving you the illusion of having greater control over events. So, in situations where that confidence can make a difference, like sports, those crazy superstitions might not be so crazy after all.

**5. Discuss these questions**

1. How many of these superstitions had you heard of already?

2. What’s the most interesting or surprising thing that you learned from the text? In what ways can superstitions be harmful or dangerous? In what ways can being superstitious benefit people?

3. Do you have your own "lucky socks" story? Explain your beliefs around this item. Why do you think it’s more than just psychological bias?

4. How long does it take for a superstition to become established? Have you heard of any modern superstitions relating to mobile phones or other modern technology?

5. Do you think that the movements of the sun, moon and planets can affect people’s lives or do you think that astrology is a type of superstition? Explain your ideas.

**6. We use these words to make predictions about the future, often based on superstitions. Read these sentences and then underline four verbs and circle four nouns that relate to this function.** **Which words indicate negative connotations in these sentences?**

1. A high fever presaged more severe or long-term effects of the disease in some patients.

2. This is a sign that the economy is recovering.

3. High unemployment may foreshadow social unrest.

4. I saw a rainbow on my way to the job interview. This must be a good omen.

5. It doesn’t bode well that the hotel has lost our booking.

6. Many people see this company as a bellwether showing important trends for the future of this market.

7. Some people say that a red sky at dawn is a portent of bad weather.

8. Your marks on the practice exam augur well for the future.