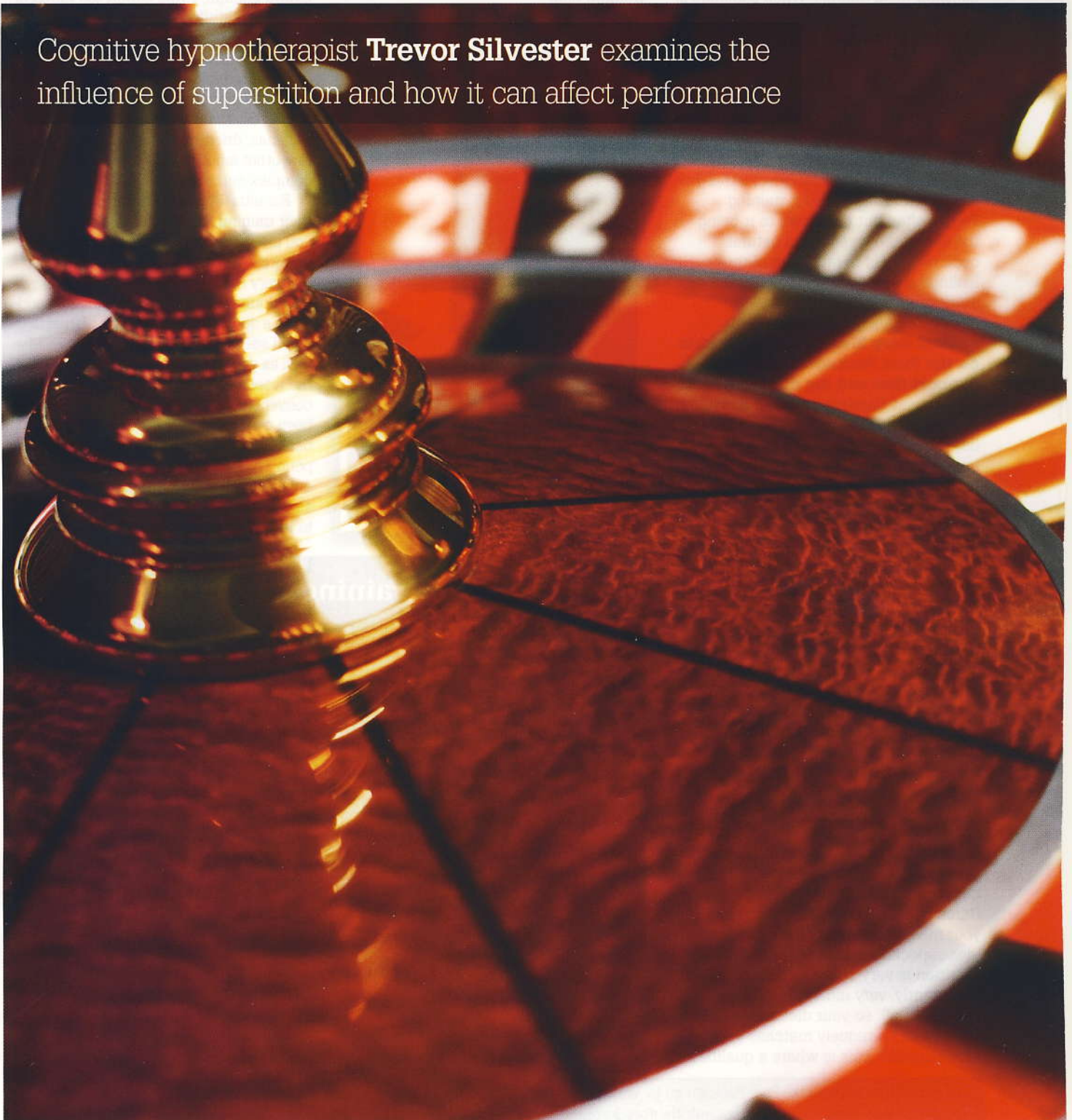


# Superstitit

Cognitive hypnotherapist **Trevor Silvester** examines the influence of superstition and how it can affect performance



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**S**uperstitions are a strange thing. You may not consider yourself susceptible to traditional superstitions, but most people are influenced by them in some way or another – often without even realising it. I consider myself a sane and rational human being, but I won't watch Chelsea play because for some reason I think I'll make them lose! Now, I know I can't possibly influence events like this, but many people share this belief in the irrational. For example, how many of you touch wood or avoid walking under ladders?

In the field of sports, there are many examples of athletes putting a lot of faith in superstitions - footballer Paul Ince always waited until he'd run onto the pitch before he pulled his shirt on and cricketer Jack Russell wore the same cap and pads for most of his entire career. It can even infect a whole sport: Nascar drivers don't carry \$50 bills, drive green cars, nor eat monkey nuts. But, whilst these might sound trivial, superstitions can be time consuming. Tennis player Goran Ivanisevic developed a belief that if he won a match he had to repeat everything he had done the previous day, including watching the same TV programmes, eating the same food in the same place and meeting the same people. One year this meant watching Teletubbies every morning. "Sometimes, it got very boring," he wrote on his website. At least when he got on court he only had to avoid stepping on any of the lines and being the second person to get up from his chair during changeovers.

### Looking for cause and effect

So why are we so susceptible to this way of thinking? Because it's part of how we make sense of the world. Much of the brain's function is to work out what's going on around us and to do that it has to be able to detect patterns. This means that your brain has spent your life building what are called 'causal models' - relationships between objects that give them meaning. One class of these models is 'cause and effect' - the notion that one thing happening will lead to something else happening.

Researchers often describe children as young scientists, constructing ideas of how the world works by experimenting. Watch a child and a parent, they are in a never-ending flow of cause and effect experiments - where the child will do something and then measure the effect against the goal they have and what the parent will do. If a child is refused sweets and starts to scream, the parent needs to recognise that the child has just begun an experiment. If the parent caves in and gives them the sweets, the young scientist has a result, 'If I make enough fuss (cause)

I will get my own way' (effect), thinks the child. Understanding just that simple fact can transform parenting, but what's it got to do with you improving your performance in your chosen sport? The answer is, plenty.

### The invisible link

By the time you're an adult, your brain has millions of these cause and effect relationships that it uses to guide behaviour: if you're hungry you eat, if a traffic light changes to red you stop, if you exercise you feel better about yourself. Linking things together in this way is so natural that it's practically invisible. In fact, right now your brain is saying 'What does this mean, and what will it lead to?' This is because our brain can then work out what's around us and predict what the next best course of action is. In evolutionary terms it is what keeps us safe - we create a range of possible choices from our interpretation of the present situation and use our past experience to choose the best option.

The problem is, when you were a young scientist, you almost certainly made a few errors - and the most common is mistaking

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correlation for causation. That simply means that you connected two things that had no actual relationship to each other.

For example, Paul Ince might have been late for a match when he was a youngster and was still pulling his shirt on when the match started. It happened that he had an exceptional match and his brain looked for the reason - in this case, putting on his shirt. So, next match he does it again and, because he's a good player, or because his confidence is boosted by his 'lucky' ritual, he has another good game. Once the ritual is established, he'll only notice it when it works. If he has a stinker he'll look for another reason why the lucky shirt didn't work, not conclude that the ritual is at fault. He may even add another ritual in response to this experience, to bolster his luck. Wade Boggs the baseball player, eats chicken before every game, takes exactly 150 ground balls during infield practice, enters the batting cage at 5.17pm, runs sprints at 7.17pm, writes the Hebrew word 'Chai' - meaning life - in the batter's box,

swipes the dirt in front of him with his left foot between pitches, taps his glove twice and adjusts his cap. And that's not the full list. This is a man whose brain heavily mistakes correlation for causation.

## Breaking the ritual

So, is this a problem? If following these rituals helps to boost his confidence, why not follow them? I couldn't agree more, but the mind can take you both ways, as exemplified by Serena Williams talking about why she played so badly at the French Open last year. "I didn't tie my laces right and I didn't bounce the ball five times and I didn't bring my shower

sandals to the court with me. I didn't have my extra dress, I just knew it was fate; it wasn't going to happen." Remember, your brain is saying, 'What is the most likely outcome from this situation?' Good rituals will guide your brain towards a positive outcome, which you will feel as a surge of confidence or a sense of everything going as it should, whereas a bad ritual, or the breaking of a good one, will lead to dread, anxiety and fear.

So, whilst you may not consider yourself superstitious, you still have a brain that will somehow be influencing your attitude toward the outcome of something by looking for clues in things around you. Take some time to consider the preferences you have for the way you like things to be when you compete: what you wear, how you like to arrive at the venue, what you do or avoid doing, and you might begin to realise that your brain is still subtly using the 'superstitious mind' to influence your behaviour. It's a software glitch we all share to some degree or another.

## Making it work to your advantage

So, if your brain is going to create these kinds of inferences, how can we make sure it works to our advantage? How can we ensure that these kinds of thoughts will settle us, enhance our confidence and improve our performance, and not turn us into nervous wrecks if a black cat crosses our path?

If you already have a superstition that works for you, use it. Place emphasis on the steps it contains and pay attention to what it requires.

Rituals are safest if they're only dependent on your actions, because then they're completely in your control. If you tie your shoelaces in a certain way, bounce a ball a set number of times before a shot or hum a tune before the start, then nothing much can get in the way of your preparation. If it depends on the actions of someone else, or an object, then you've surrendered some control over your environment. If you need to 'rub Bert's lucky bald head before the race', you've had it if he's sick on the day. If you always wear your lucky pants, or carry a lucky rabbit's foot, then you need to make sure you have them with you. If I'm working with a client who has an 'object' superstition I usually work to wean them off it,

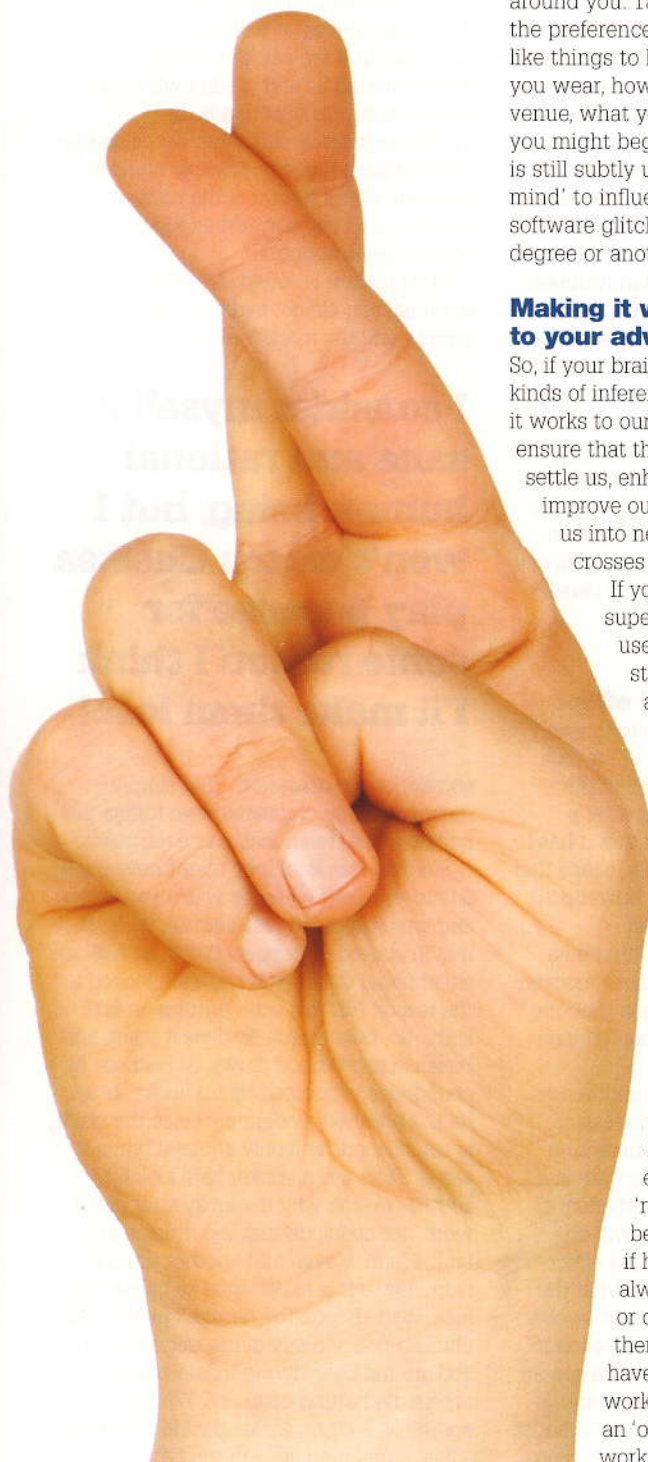
because it is almost inevitable that one day, probably the big day, it'll go missing, break or become unsanitary.

## Going through the motions

Observe Jonny Wilkinson prior to taking a penalty and you'll see that he follows exactly the same ritual for each one, from his setting of the ball to his body posture prior to the kick. He's going through the motions he's practised many hundreds of times until it's honed to a system he has confidence in. This isn't a superstition per se, but it's using the same characteristic of the brain; that sticking to the same set of actions leads to the same result, so it avoids the brain searching for anything that could mean the shot will go wrong.

Look at any facet of your sport that gives you an opportunity to ritualise the approach to it. Set up a series of actions that have a set number of steps and begin to follow them when you practise. When you're competing, don't focus on the thing itself, focus on the ritual. It will help you get into the fabled 'zone' so that by the time you get to perform the action, your unconscious will do it for you. Rituals in this sense can be thought of as a form of active meditation or self-hypnosis.

The famous Serenity prayer says, 'Give us the grace to accept the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other'. This applies to all aspects of our endeavours, and in my line of work, definitely to the way our minds work. We cannot change the fact that our brains work the way they do, but we can change the way it affects us. Focus on your thoughts in the right way and you can use them to help you improve your performance. **UF**



Trevor Silvester is the founder of the Quest Institute which specialises in Cognitive Hypnotherapy and NLP and is one of the largest and most successful hypnotherapy

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