

Only one thing can be predicted accurately for Friday the 13th - it will be an anxiety-filled day for friggatriskaidekaphobes. This label, with its origins in Nordic mythology and ancient Greek, identifies those afflicted souls who possess an overwhelming fear of Friday the 13th.

Where does this unnatural trepidation of Friday the 13th originate, and is there any harm in staying home from work for fear of a bad day or tragic accident?

As any reputable scientist or mathematician will tell you, "luck" does not exist. Good fortune is randomly distributed and not dependent on the day. The superstitious, however, will cite a long history of misfortune associated with the number 13.

As the story goes, in order to understand 13, one has to understand the history of 12. The number 12 has traditionally represented completeness. There are 12 months of the year, 12 gods of Olympus, 12 signs of the zodiac and 12 apostles of Jesus.

One suggestion has it that our counting has traditionally gone only as far as 12 (even the times tables stop after 12x12), and that anything that lay beyond that was an uncountable, unknowable mystery to be feared.

Thirteen exists just one digit beyond 12, and is symbolic of the first departure from completeness or the initial step towards evil. Judas Iscariot was the "13th" apostle, the 13th tribe of Israel was the only tribe left without land, and the ill-fated Apollo 13 space mission was launched at 1313 hours (central time), from pad 39

(the 3rd multiple of 13) and had to be aborted on April 13, 1970.

Like the superstition surrounding the 13 present at the Last Supper, Norse mythology has a superstition surrounding 13 at a dinner table and the bad luck that ensues; the Christian belief may have been partly based on the older story. Apparently 12 Norse gods sat down for a feast only to have Loki, the god of mischief and disorder, gate-crash the party and bring the number of guests to 13 which caused one of the gods to die during the meal.

Practitioners of witchcraft note that 13 lunar months multiplied by the 28 days of a woman's menstrual cycle give 364 days in a year, with one extra day added to make up the solar calendar. (Many stories in European folklore use "a year and a day" as a standard measure of time.) The implication is that the 13 months of the fertility or lunar year led to the pagan reverence for the number 13 and, thus, the Christian dislike of it.

Friday has an equally colorful past. According to the Bible, Eve gave the apple to Adam on Friday, the Great Flood began on a Friday, the Temple of Solomon was destroyed on a Friday, execution day was Friday in Rome, and Good Friday exists because it is the reported day of Jesus' crucifixion. An English schoolboy allegedly proved mathematically that 13, when examined over a 400-year period, falls on Friday more than any day of the year. He was 13 years old, of course.

There are all sorts of things you are not supposed to do on a Friday, including: setting sail, moving house, starting on a journey, beginning new work, writing a letter or even cutting your nails!

But for all the infamy and credence given to bad luck on Friday the 13th, there are many less publicized examples of good fortune. Friday is the Sabbath of the Jewish lunar calendar and the Sabbath of Islam. Scandinavian pagans, Hindus, rural Scots, and Germans consider Friday to be a good day to wed or go courting because it is associated with fertility.

This is because Friday is named after the Norse Goddess Freya who represented fertility and sexual love (the Romans called it dies Veneris after Venus). The reason not to set sail on a Friday was originally not because of bad luck, but as a sign of respect for Freya in her aspect as goddess of the sea. That's said to be one reason why fish were often eaten on Friday, as fertility charms in honor of Freya.

Many of us are pleased to welcome Friday as the end of the work week. Many actors insist on signing contracts only on Friday because it brings good luck. Novelist Charles Dickens habitually began the writing of all his books on a Friday, the day of his birth.

A baker's dozen is considered a fortunate bargain, and if you are Jewish, age 13 is the time for a bar or bat mitzvah. For some Christians, 13 could be considered sacred, since it equals the Ten Commandments plus the Trinity. The Chinese are sanguine about the number 13 because its literal meaning is "alive" (their taboo number is four, because it sounds like the word for "death").

Even with all the fuss over Friday the 13th, the only reality that surrounds the date is that it remains nothing more than superstition. Friday is like any other day of the week that happens to

occur on the 13th of the month. Every year will have at least one, and some as many as three.

Every time it comes around in the calendar, a fuss is made of it. This makes it far more likely that people will remember the "bad luck" that happened on that day, rather than any bad luck associated with other days or even "good luck" to occur on Friday 13th.

It has been common for buildings to eliminate numbers with 13, such as the 13th floor or the 13th apartment, and airlines at one stage would not have a row 13 in their seating arrangements. This is becoming less common, though whether that is due to the dying out of this superstition or a reflection of cultural diversity making it less of a taboo, remains to be seen.

It might be easy to laugh at such foolishness, but this same kind of superstitious thinking operates to support beliefs that can be harmful. It is estimated that the 13th of the month costs the US a billion dollars annually through train and plane reservation cancellation, absenteeism, and reduced commerce.

One can see why philosopher Edmund Burke proclaimed superstition the "religion of feeble minds."

Belief in Friday the 13th is no different from belief in astrology, hauntings or UFOs. None of these claims are grounded in sound scientific evidence.

Unfortunately, the media often promulgates and spreads superstition through uncritical presentations. Television programs and films like the Unexplained, Friday the 13th, Psi Factor and

Unsolved Mysteries contribute to a society of believers in superstition and the paranormal.

It is when people make financial, political and personal decisions based on these kinds of superstitions that we witness the true dark side of Friday the 13th.

Things to do

Next time Friday the 13th rolls around, keep a journal for a week beforehand and a week afterwards noting incidents you think represent good luck and bad luck on a daily basis.

Is there any significant difference on Friday the 13th?

Think about your reactions - are you more conscious of what happens on Friday 13th compared to Saturday the 14th?

Trying telling people that personally you're more worried about Wednesday the 27th, and see how they react.

Material collated from various sources, with special acknowledgement to Joe Nickell, CSICOP.



the new zealand Skeptics guide to Friday 13th

The fish was an emblem of Freyja, and as such was associated with the worship of Love. It was offered by the Scandinavians to their goddess, on the sixth day of the week, i.e., Friday. Unfortunately this worship of Love on the Friday of each week gradually developed - or degenerated - into a series of filthy and indecent rites and practices.

Charles Platt, 1925

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Joe Nickell, CSICOP