

Chatter Box #29 – Urban Legends, Old Wives' Tales, and Superstitions

Transcript

Robin: Hello everyone this is Robin.

Maura: And Maura.

Robin: And we're here at Culips.com.

Maura: That's C-U-L-I-P-S.com, and you can go to our website and you can become a member and check out our Lipservice.

Robin: And in our Lipservice you'll find the transcript and a detailed explanation for this episode, so go check it out.

Maura: Yeah. Today's episode is the Chatter Box episode where we talk about cultural things or interesting news that's going on in Canada.

Robin: Absolutely, and the first thing we're going to talk about today is something called an **urban legend** or an **urban myth**.

Maura: Yes, so we're definitely talking about culture today, and after we talk about **urban legends** or **urban myths**, we're going to talk about **old wives' tales**.

Robin: **Old wives' tales**, indeed. And this is...it's a similar sort of thing. It deals with myths, once again, and stories.

Maura: And if you don't know what it is, keep listening and we're going to explain it.

Robin: Absolutely. And the last thing we'll talk about today deals with **superstitions**. It's a big word, **superstitions**.

Maura: Right, so some general **superstitions** that most Canadians know about and maybe some believe in a little bit.

Robin: Absolutely.

Maura: OK, so let's start with the first topic, which is **urban legends** or **urban myths**. So it's two names for the same thing.

Robin: What is an **urban legend** or an **urban myth**?

Maura: An **urban legend** is a modern story that's a scary story or a horror story. Most of them are scary and you usually hear about them from friends. So a friend tells another friend a story, this scary story, and you don't know where it started, you don't know where the story came from.

Robin: OK, so the really scary stories—are they very crazy and **absurd** stories or are they believable stories?

Maura: Well, they're just a little bit believable and a little bit unbelievable, so you don't really know whether they're really true or not. That's the trick. Where might people talk about **urban legends** or **urban myths**?

Robin: Well, when I was younger, a lot of people would talk about **urban legends** or **urban myths around the campfires**. You go camping and out in the woods in the dark, underneath the moonlight, you would tell these sorts of stories.

Maura: Yeah, because they're scary and it's dark. But I also remember, when I was young, telling **urban legends** at school, on the playground with my friends. So really, kids can talk about them anywhere.

Robin: And it's important to understand that it's mostly kids that **do the talking** about this.

Maura: Yeah, exactly. But because we were all kids once, we still remember them and know about these **urban myths** when we grow up.

Robin: So, can you tell me a little bit about an **urban legend** or an **urban myth** that you came across when you were younger?

Maura: Yes, there's one I definitely remember, and I should warn everybody, it's a little bit scary, like we said.

Robin: Seriously?

Maura: Yeah. So it starts that there is a woman driving home one night **all by herself** on a country road and she notices that there's a big truck following her.

Robin: OK.

Maura: Yeah, and every couple of minutes the truck flashes its lights...right. So this woman starts to get a little bit afraid and worried about this truck that's following her and the driver who's flashing his lights at her.

Robin: What does she do?

Maura: Well, she gets really nervous, she starts to panic, but she decides to just drive home as fast as she can. And she goes up her street and the truck follows her. And she drives into her driveway and the truck follows her too. And she gets out of her car and the driver of the truck gets out of his car too and starts to follow her but yells "Run! Run!"

Robin: Oh no! Why? What happened?

Maura: Well, the truck driver was actually trying to help her, because there was a strange man in the back of her car who wanted to attack her and the driver was following her because he was trying to help her and protect her. And so every time the guy in the backseat got up, he was holding a knife and the truck driver saw the knife and flashed his lights and then the man, the strange man in the backseat, had to hide himself again.

Robin: Oh my goodness, that is a very scary story.

Maura: But do you believe it's really true, Robin?

Robin: I don't know if I believe it. It sounds kind of unbelievable.

Maura: Yeah, and talking about this story with friends, they've heard stories like this, but not exactly this story, which is another sign that this story is an **urban legend**, because there are many variations of it, there's no news source that talks about this story.

Robin: It's **widespread**, everyone's heard about it.

Maura: Yeah, everyone in Canada probably anyways, maybe North America too.

Robin: All right.

Maura: So what about you, can you think of any **urban legends** that you knew from when you were a kid?

Robin: Well, actually there was a restaurant in my neighbourhood that a lot of people used to go to and it used to be very popular, but then one day all of a sudden it shut down and we couldn't understand why. But then word started to spread and people started to talk about how they used to actually cook and serve rats.

Maura: You know what's funny? I think I heard the same story about a restaurant in my town.

Robin: No!

Maura: Yeah.

Robin: Seriously?

Maura: Which makes both of these pretty unbelievable.

Robin: They're probably both **urban legends**.

Maura: Yeah, exactly. And if you want to know some more **urban legends**, you can go to Lipservice and we'll list some more stories that are **classified as urban legends**.

Robin: Definitely, so check it out. One thing we should mention is that there's actually a movie that's called **Urban Legends**.

Maura: Yeah, and in that movie a lot of these scary stories actually happen.

Robin: Mhmm, and you might see...actually, I think there's a scene related to this car thing that you were talking about that's actually put in the film as well.

Maura: Yeah, so if you want to learn more about **urban legends** and you're not too scared, you could watch this movie and find out what some of the North American **urban legends** are.

Robin: But definitely make sure that you're not someone who gets frightened very easily.

Maura: Yeah, or watch it with a friend during the day.

Robin: ...during the day...and sit very close to them.

Maura: OK, so now let's talk about **old wives' tales**.

Robin: **Old wives' tales**, OK.

Maura: Yeah.

Robin: And what are those?

Maura: Well, they're a kind of **urban legend**, but it's not a full story, it's just one sentence, one phrase, that gives you some advice. And we don't know necessarily if the advice is good, or true, or not.

Robin: Mhmm OK, and these sorts of sayings or expressions or phrases are ones that everyone knows, once again, so just like **urban legends**, how they're **widespread**, everyone talks about them, everyone knows them, **old wives' tales** are similar, everyone's talked about them and everybody knows about them.

Maura: Yeah and the name is really strange: **old wives' tales**. This expression started because traditionally these little stories or expressions were told by old women. So **old wives**, and **tales** means stories so that's where the expression **old wives' tales** comes from.

Robin: Can you give us an example?

Maura: The most **classic** example I can think of is: **an apple a day keeps the doctor away**.

Robin: Ah, that's a popular one.

Maura: Yeah, it even rhymes.

Robin: It does. So in that case you eat an apple and you'll stay healthy.

Maura: Yes, which is probably good advice—to eat an apple a day—but it also probably doesn't guarantee you that you'll be healthy.

Robin: Absolutely. I'm sure apples don't necessarily **cure** all diseases.

Maura: Yup. Do you have another **old wives' tale**?

Robin: Well, when I was younger, they used to say, **you shouldn't swallow gum, because if you did it would stay in your system for 7 years**. It would stay in your stomach for 7 long years.

Maura: Yeah, I remember that one too. I think that I was afraid to swallow gum when I was a kid, because I thought it would be in my stomach for a really long time. Another one that I remember is, **don't cross your eyes or they'll stay like that**. Yeah, so to cross your eyes is when your eyes kind of look at your nose at the same time. So your eyes are turned inward, yeah, but that's obviously not true, because lots of people cross their eyes when they're making funny faces and nothing happens.

Robin: There's also **the 5- or 10-second rule**. So if you drop some food on the ground it's safe to eat but only for 5 to 10 seconds.

Maura: Right, so imagine you're enjoying a really delicious piece of cake but you accidentally drop it. But it's only on the floor for about 3 seconds, so you quickly pick it up, it's OK, it's clean, because it was on the floor for less than 5 or 10 seconds.

Robin: You know what Maura, I kind of believe this one.

Maura: Yeah?

Robin: I think it's actually true, provided that there's nothing dirty on the floor, like dirty socks or shoes, I think it's pretty safe to eat food.

Maura: Yeah and if it's a really good piece of cake...

Robin: It's worth it. It's definitely worth it.

Maura: Yeah, there's one more **old wives' tale** that I want to mention, which is that **if you hear ringing in your ears, it means that someone is talking about you.**

Robin: Seriously?

Maura: Yeah, yeah, so suddenly your ear starts making a funny noise, kind of inside your ear, that means that someone somewhere is talking about you and that one's probably not true either.

Robin: Probably not.

Maura: In fact, people nowadays can say, "**that's just an old wives' tale**" and that actually means that something is not true.

Robin: That you should be cautious about believing it, don't necessarily believe what the person says when they say that.

Maura: Yeah, because unfortunately, most **old wives' tales** aren't actually true, they're fun, but they're not true.

Robin: We would actually like to hear from you and to find out, in your country, what types of **old wives' tales** exist. So, if you could write us in and leave a message on our website, we'd really appreciate that.

Maura: Yeah, it's always interesting to know what **superstitions** or **urban legends** exist in other cultures and other languages.

Robin: Hey, you said the key word for our next category.

Maura: Yes, exactly—**Superstitions**.

Robin: **Superstitions**, OK.

Maura: Now, first we should probably say that Canadians are generally not really superstitious. We're not seriously superstitious, but we do have some **superstitions** that most people know and might think about, but only in a fun way. So first, let's define **superstitions**, in case some people don't know what that word is.

Robin: OK. So a **superstition** is a belief that doesn't really make any sense. It's illogical, it's irrational. It could relate to luck, whether good or bad. But remember, it's irrational. It's not based on science, it's not based on someone's experience, and there's no justification for this belief. For example, one **superstition** is: **if a black cat walks in front of your path**, while you're walking, you will have 7 years' bad luck. That's a superstition. Now, if you're a superstitious person, you will believe that.

Maura: Actually, that happened to me just a couple weeks ago.

Robin: Did it?

Maura: Yeah, but I thought "Oh, what a cute little black cat."

Robin: I change course. I do not walk across the black cat's path.

Maura: That's interesting, because I'm really not superstitious, but it sounds like you might be a little bit.

Robin: Well, have you been lucky recently?

Maura: No, but I haven't been unlucky either. But I actually do have a story. I remember when I was very young, when I was a kid, I accidentally broke a mirror and **to break a mirror is 7 years of bad luck**. And I was very upset when this happened. I really believed that I would have 7 years of bad luck. In fact, I think it happened when I was 7 years old, because I remember adding $7 + 7$ and thinking that when I was 14 I would finally be free of bad luck.

Robin: Well, I hope those 7 years weren't too bad.

Maura: No, I think I forgot about it after a week or so.

Robin: OK.

Maura: So let's talk about some other **superstitions** that most Canadians know a little bit about. How about **the number 13**?

Robin: Ah, **the number 13**. This is definitely an unlucky number in North America, you don't want to live on the 13th floor of a building, because that'll bring you bad luck. Or on the 13th day, if it happens to fall on a Friday during a month, it's usually not a very good day.

Maura: Yeah, I think Friday the 13th definitely **creeps** people **out**. There's actually a movie called **Friday the 13th** and it's a horror movie.

Robin: And again, if you are brave, we recommend that you go and check it out.

Maura: But yeah, I think depending how **superstitious** you are, you might not take the unlucky number 13 very seriously. Like me, I don't take it seriously. But Robin, what about you? How do you feel about the number 13?

Robin: Actually, this is one of those **superstitions** that doesn't bother me so much, I'm not afraid of the 13th day.

Maura: Good, I'm glad. OK, let's talk about one more **superstition**, and that goes with the expression **to knock on wood**.

Robin: **To knock on wood**.

Maura: So, can you tell us about what this **superstition** is?

Robin: OK, this one's really, really interesting, because for some reason we feel that if we say something, we might **jinx** it, and what I mean by that is: if it's a nice day and you say, "Oh, wow, the weather has been really nice," by saying that, the weather might all of a sudden turn bad. Why? Because of you. Because you said that the weather was nice. So, in order to prevent that, in order to stop the weather from turning bad, we **knock on wood**.

Maura: Yep exactly. So, sometimes, people actually **knock on wood**, like we're doing, and sometimes they say, "**knock on wood**," and sometimes they do both.

Robin: Sometimes they do both.

Maura: Yeah. So for example, I could say, "Oh, I went for a job interview and it went so well. I really think I'm going to get the job. **Knock on wood**." Right, because I've said I think I'm going to get the job, it might mean that I won't get the job, so I have to **knock on wood**.

Robin: You have to stop yourself from **jinxing** it.

Maura: Yeah, and this expression actually exists in different forms in many different languages and cultures.

Robin: Absolutely. And again, if it exists in your language or in your culture, or if there's a similar expression, write us in and tell us about it, we'd be interested in knowing.

Maura: Yeah, definitely. I find that stuff really interesting.

Robin: Me too.

Maura: OK, so I think that's about it for our episode. Remember, first we talked about...

Robin: **urban legends**, and after that we moved on to **old wives' tales**.

Maura: Yeah, and the last thing we talked about was some general **superstitions**.

Robin: We hope you enjoyed the episode.

Maura: And don't forget to go to our website, Culips.com, and if you haven't become a member and seen our Lipservice, think about it, because there's a lot of good info in there.

Robin: Absolutely. Until next time this has been Robin.

Maura: And Maura.

Robin: And we're signing off. Take care everyone!

Maura: Bye!

Detailed Explanation

Urban legend/urban myth

An **urban legend** or **urban myth** is a story that is usually scary, and sometimes funny, that is passed along from person to person. **Urban legends** are oral stories with no known origin or beginning. Nowadays there are also modern **urban legends** that are passed around by email. These include stories about accidental deaths or scams where people have lost money.

Around the campfire

Robin tells us that urban legends, or kinds of ghost stories, are often told **around the campfire**. If you like to go camping or go to an organized camp, you probably understand that there is a special mood **around a campfire**. The fire is in the middle and people sit **around the campfire** to talk and tell stories. Because many urban legends are scary, this is a perfect place to share these stories.

As urban legends are usually told by kids, or to kids, they are often also told in the school yard or at sleepovers.

To do the talking

This is a simple expression that means *to talk*. **To do the talking** is used when someone is going to speak for some time about a specific topic. In this episode, Robin says that the kids **do the talking** about urban legends.

Here are a couple more examples with **to do the talking**:

Rob: When the police ask us what we saw, let Jim **do the talking**, because he's good at that.

Noah: Good idea. I always feel so nervous.

Todd: Selena **does the talking** while Gary shows the product to the clients.

Olivia: They sound like a good team.

All by herself

To be all by yourself means that you are alone. This is another way to say that no other person is there. For example, we can say, "She was **all by herself**" or "She was alone," and they have the same meaning. We can say **to be all by yourself** or **to be by yourself**. Using the word **all** makes the sentence stronger.

Here are a couple more examples:

Justin: I heard a really scary noise last night and I was **all by myself**.

Kiley: Oh, I hate hearing scary noises when I'm alone.

Paula: Jon got robbed last night.

Ivan: Oh, no! What happened?

Paula: He was walking down the street **by himself**, and some guys jumped out and took his wallet.

Widespread

If something is **widespread**, it means that it is everywhere. It can be everywhere physically or it can be an idea or information that everyone knows. As Maura and Robin talk about different urban legends, they say that some urban legends are **widespread**. This means that these urban legends are known by many people. The word **wide**, the first part of **widespread**, means that something covers a lot of area.

Here are a couple more examples with **widespread**:

Germain: The disease is very **widespread**. People are at risk for miles around.

Ben: I hope that we can stop the outbreak.

Matthew: People really got upset last night.

Lisa: There was **widespread** panic downtown.

Old wives' tales

An **old wives' tale** is a short bit of information or advice. Some **old wives' tales** may have some truth in them, but many do not. Like urban myths, **old wives' tales** are passed along from person to person. The origin is based on older women (**old wives**) who would traditionally give advice about a variety of things, often related to health. It is true that many **old wives' tales** are told by older people to younger people to give them advice. Many parents and grandparents tell **old wives' tales** to their children.

In this episode we also talk about superstitions. Some **old wives' tales** sounds like superstitions and some superstitions could also be called **old wives' tales**. So the line between these two is sometimes not clear.

There are so many **old wives' tales** and they can be different depending on where you are! We talk about a couple of them in this episode, but here are a few others. If you want to know more, a simple search online will give you pages of them!

- A bird in the house is a sign of death.
- Eating carrots will improve your eyesight.
- You'll catch a cold if you go outside (on a cold day) with wet hair.
- Eating the crust of bread will make your hair curly.

There are also a lot of **old wives' tales** that are about weddings or pregnancy.

Classic

When something is described as **classic**, it can mean that it's the best of its kind or the most popular. For example, a classic song is a song that everyone knows (most popular) or a very good song (the best). When Maura and Robin begin talking about old wives' tales, the most **classic** example they can think of is *an apple a day keeps the doctor away*, because it is very popular and very well known.

Here's another example with **classic**:

Dave: Have you seen the movie *Gone with the Wind*?

Sylvie: No, I haven't but I know it's a **classic**.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away

This is one of the most popular old wives' tales that people know. And like many old wives' tales, this one is not 100% true. Eating one apple a day cannot guarantee that you will never have to see a doctor!

An apple a day keeps the doctor away likely originated when people began to realize how good apples are for you. Eating apples may not guarantee that you will never have to see a doctor, but apples are definitely healthy snacks, and healthy snacks help you stay healthy!

Cure

As we just said, eating apples cannot **cure** all diseases. **To cure** is to make better, or to heal from an illness. For example, a person can have an illness and then be **cured**. After they are **cured** they don't have the illness anymore; they are healthy.

We can also use **cure** as a noun. For example, "Is there a **cure** for cancer yet?"

The word **cure** can also mean to preserve fish or other meat.

Swallowed gum will stay in your stomach for 7 years

Like many old wives' tales, there are lots of variations of this one. Some people might say that the chewing gum will stay in your stomach for 5 years, some might say 7. This old wives' tale is one that parents might tell to children so that they do not swallow their gum.

The truth is that gum that has been swallowed will be digested at the same rate as regular food. So this is a good example of an old wives' tale that is not true!

Don't cross your eyes or they'll stay like that

And here is another untrue old wives' tale. Adults might tell children **not to cross their eyes because they will stay like that** if children are making silly faces at an inappropriate time.

People might warn against crossing your eyes too much or making funny faces. A variation of this expression was featured in the movie *One Crazy Summer*, which came out in 1986. In this movie, adults tell some kids that if they make funny faces and someone hits them on the back, their faces will stay like that. Later in the movie, while the kids are making funny faces, someone hits them on the back and their faces stay like that! This shows how strange and untrue this old wives' tale really is.

The 5- or 10- second rule

This rule is about the amount of time you can wait before eating some food that has fallen on the ground. For example, if you're eating something and it falls on the ground, you might be first surprised or disappointed, but then you see that it still looks clean. So you quickly pick it up and say "**5-second rule**" to the people you are with. And then you continue eating it if it looks OK.

Like we've seen with other old wives' tales in this episode, there are many variations. For this one, it could be **the 5-second rule**, **the 10-second rule**, or even **the 3-second rule**. This variation might depend on the how much the person wants to eat the food that has fallen!

If you hear ringing in your ears, it means that someone is talking about you

This is an old wives' tale that has no logic and absolutely no truth. Some people might even say there is a different meaning if the ringing is in your left or right ear. Ringing in your ears from time to time is actually quite common. If someone's ears are ringing a lot, it might mean that they have an ear infection.

This example might also be considered a superstition. As mentioned above, sometimes old wives' tales and superstitions are mixed together.

That's just an old wives' tale

To say that something is **just an old wives' tale** means that it is not true. So many old wives' tales have been found to be untrue that many people do not believe them, even if they might have some truth.

Here are a couple of examples with the expression **just an old wives' tale**:

Theo: My ears are ringing a lot this morning.

Manuel: Oh! That means that someone is talking about you.

Theo: No, that's **just an old wives' tale**. I don't believe that.

Greg: Sally told me that carrots will help improve my eyesight, so I started eating 10 carrots a day.

Antoine: I think that is just an **old wives' tale**.

Superstition

A **superstition** is a belief that something good or bad will happen based on something else with no logical connection.

Superstitions changes from place to place, but some are very widespread and are the same in different cultures and languages. If you want to learn more about superstitions, do a simple search on the web, and you will find tons!

If a black cat crosses your path, it means bad luck

If you are walking down the street, going north, and **a black cat walks out in front of you**, from east to west, this means that you will have bad luck. As mentioned above, there is no logical connection between the bad luck and the black cat.

But black cats are traditionally viewed as mysterious or evil in North America and other places. During the scary holiday of Halloween, many decorations feature black cats.

This seems to be a superstition that Robin believes in! He says that we could definitely cross the street if he saw a black cat crossing his path.

Breaking a mirror brings 7 years of bad luck

This is another superstition that promises bad luck. This superstition exists in many cultures, so you may recognize it in your own. The origin for this superstition might come from the belief that your reflection in the mirror also reflects your soul. So when the mirror is broken, your soul is damaged too.

There are also superstitions about what to do to get rid of the bad luck if you have broken a mirror!

The number 13

This number is unlucky in North America and in other countries too. In some countries it's another number, such as 4, that's unlucky, it just depends on the history. Actually, some people in North America might choose to believe that **13** is actually a lucky number!

There is no clear explanation for why the number **13** was chosen as unlucky, but there are a few theories.

The day Friday the 13th is considered an especially unlucky day. Every few years there is a Friday that falls on the 13th. In fact, Harp's birthday is October 13th and sometimes her birthday is on a Friday!

In this episode, we also mention a horror movie called ***Friday the 13th***. This movie was first released in 1980. Since then, there have been Parts 2, 3, and on. There have also been remakes of this movie as recently as 2009.

To creep out

To creep out a person means to scare them but in a small, less dramatic way. Someone who *scares* another person might jump out and scream. Someone who **creeps another person out** might just act or speak in a way that disturbs the other person.

To creep is to slowly, quietly move, sometimes behind another person. A **creep** is the slang term for a person who gives you a bad, uncomfortable feeling.

Here's an example with **creep**:

Tanya: Look at the guy over there. What a **creep**!

Penny: Yeah, he definitely **creeps** me **out**. He looks so strange.

To knock on wood

You might hear someone say **knock on wood** or see them actually **knock on wood**, or both at the same time, in order to prevent something bad from happening.

This is the situation when someone would use this expression: Someone says something positive that they hope will be true or that they wish will happen. Because they have said it, they are afraid that it may mean that it will not happen. (This is *to jinx*.) Then the person says **knock on wood** or actually **knocks on wood** so that the positive thing can still happen.

Here are a couple of examples:

Ryan: I think that I got my dream job. **Knock on wood.**

Kyle: That's great! I hope it works out for you.

Shaun: It's not supposed to rain today. (knock knock) **Knock on wood.**

Lindsay: Yeah, I hope not. I want to go to the beach.

Jinx

To jinx something is to bring bad luck to it. So in the example above for *knock on wood*, when Shaun says "It's not supposed to rain today," he may have **jinxed** it because he said it. So he knocks on wood to get rid of the **jinx**.

Here is an example with **to jinx**:

Ryan: I thought I was going to get my dream job, but I think I **jinxed** it when I was talking about it the other day. They still haven't called.

Kyle: I'm sure they'll call you soon. Don't worry!

Quiz

1. What is another way to say urban legend?

- a) mythical story
- b) urbanite
- c) legendary
- d) urban myth

2. Where are urban legends traditionally told?

- a) at work
- b) around the campfire
- c) in the library
- d) at the movies

3. Jon is going to tell them what happened. He is going to _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) do the talking
- b) chitchat
- c) talk back
- d) read

4. What do old wives' tales often give advice about?

- a) dancing
- b) health
- c) fashion
- d) school

5. _____ a day keep the doctor away.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) A fruit
- b) An apple
- c) An apricot
- d) A vitamin

6. What is the 5-second rule?

- a) Food is fine to eat if it has only been on the ground for 5 seconds.
- b) Food is fine to eat if it has only been on the ground for 10 seconds.
- c) If you leave food on the ground for more than 5 seconds, you must eat it.
- d) The food was made in 5 seconds.

7. What does the expression *that's just an old wives' tale* mean?

- a) something is true
- b) something is untrue
- c) something is an ancient tradition
- d) something is very old

8. According to superstition, what happens if you break a mirror?

- a) The number 13 is lucky for you.
- b) A black cat will cross your path.
- c) You will have 7 years of good luck.
- d) You will have 7 years of bad luck.

9. Fred: I think I'm going to get the house I want to buy!

Mary: Oh, I hope you don't jinx it.

Fred: You're right! I'd better _____.

- a) knock on the house
- b) knock on the door
- c) knock it down
- d) d) knock on wood

Answers: 1.d 2.b 3.a 4.b 5.b 6.a 7.b 8.d 9.d