

50 EVERYDAY HABITS



why we do that

The curious history of the things
we all do without asking



CURIOSITY SCIENCE

Why We Do That

The curious history of 50 everyday habits

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Every claim in this book is sourced, and the sources are listed at the end of each entry so that you can check them. Where the honest answer is that nobody knows, the entry says so.

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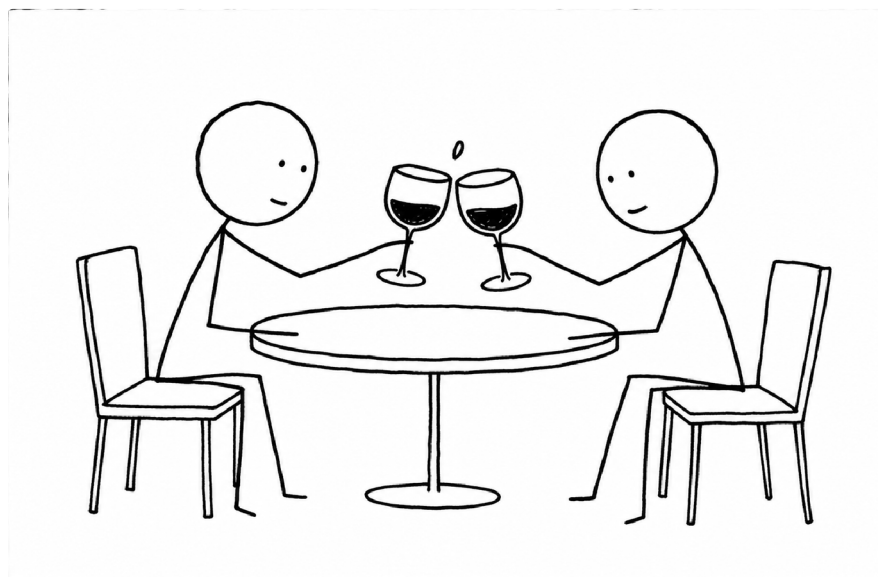
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Why We Clink Glasses

Someone raises a glass. Everyone leans in. For a moment the whole table is reaching across itself, and there is that small bright ring of contact, and then everyone drinks. Nobody decided to do this. Nobody was taught. You have done it hundreds of times without once being told why.



The story you have probably heard goes like this. In less trusting centuries, poisoning a guest was a real career option, so drinkers struck their cups together hard enough to slosh wine from one into the other. If your host had spiked your drink, he had just spiked his own. The clink was a receipt. Drink up, we are both in this now.

It is a wonderful story. It has a villain, a mechanism, and a moral. It is also, as far as anyone can tell, entirely invented.

Look at what it asks you to believe. It needs cups that are full to the brim and thrown together hard, which produces not an elegant exchange of droplets but two wet nobles and a ruined tablecloth. It needs vessels that chime, at a time when most drinking happened out of wood, leather, horn and pewter, none of which ring and all of which dent. Most damningly, it gets the trust logic exactly backwards. In cultures that worried about poisoning, people drank from a **shared** vessel, passed hand to hand, everyone tasting the same wine. When you already share the cup, a splash test proves nothing. Arriving with your own private cup was the suspicious act, not the safe one.

And Rome, which genuinely was anxious about poison, did not solve it with a gesture. It solved it with a person. The *praegustator* was a taster, usually an enslaved man, who drank first and waited. There were enough of them in the early Empire to form a guild. Nobody who employs a professional taster needs to bang his cup against yours.

So the poison story fails on chronology, on materials, on physics and on anthropology. Snopes rates it false. What survives in its place is quieter, and older.

The deep root is libation: wine poured out for the gods before anyone drank. The Greeks distinguished the *spondai*, a small controlled pour for the Olympians, from the *choai*, poured out entirely for the dead and for the powers below. It is there in Homer. Drinking together was never only drinking; it was an act with an audience, and the first share went to something other than you. From honouring gods it is a short step to

honouring the person across the table, which Rome had a verb for: *propinare*, to drink to someone.

Even the word "toast" is stranger than the ritual. It is bread. Actual toast, spiced or charred, dropped into wine to improve the flavour and take up the sediment. Falstaff asks for sack with "a toast in't". By the 1690s the word had jumped from the bread to the person whose health was being drunk, and Richard Steele told a story in 1709 about a celebrated lady at Bath who became, figuratively, the piquant thing in everyone's glass. The bread went away. The name stayed on the woman, then on the act.

And the clink itself? The honest answer is that nobody knows. There is no first appearance, no founding moment, no document where someone explains what they are doing. The best that can be said is that the gesture seems to spread in early modern Europe, once Venetian glassmaking and later lead crystal put a vessel in everyone's hand that actually rings, and once each drinker had a separate cup to begin with. Margaret Visser makes that case in *The Rituals of Dinner*. It is a plausible reconstruction. It is not a record. Wikipedia, which catalogues four competing origin theories, simply states that the origin of the tradition is unknown, and that is the defensible position.

Which leaves the shape of the thing. For most of human history, drinking together meant one cup going round. Then the cup divided, and everyone got their own, and something was lost that nobody could name. And ever since, at the start of every meal that matters, we take our separate glasses and touch them together and make one sound out of them, briefly, before we drink alone.



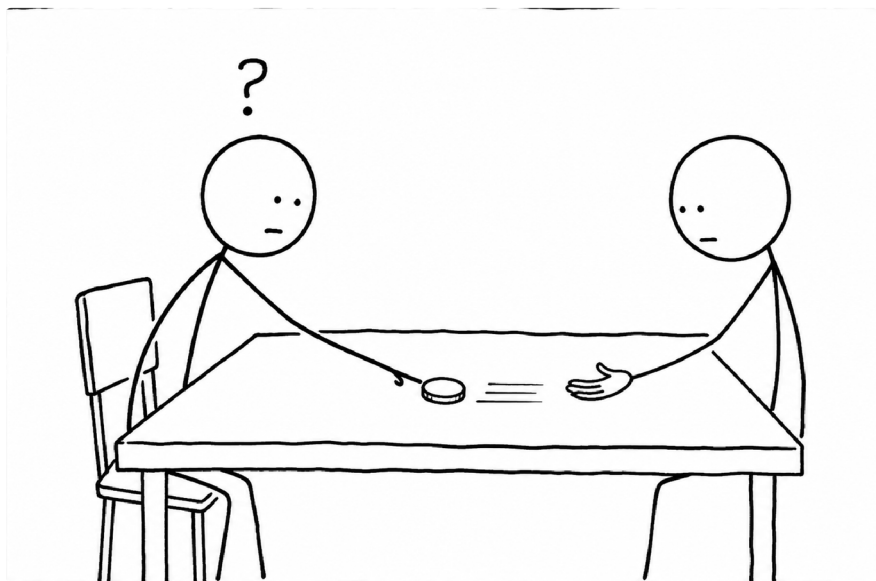
Nobody planned that. It is not what the myth says it is. It might be better.

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Why We Tip

The bill arrives. There is a moment of small arithmetic, a decision that feels moral, and then you leave money on the table for a person whose wage is not your business. You do it without being asked. You would feel bad if you did not.



Almost everything about that reflex was built on purpose, and recently, and not for the reasons you would guess.

Start in England, where the practice has a name: vails. If you stayed at a grand house in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, you tipped your host's servants on the way out, because your visit had made work for them. It was a payment from a superior to an inferior, and it stayed that

way. By the eighteenth century the custom had turned into a shakedown. Guests complained bitterly about the cost of visiting friends. Servants lined up at the door and made their expectations plain, and staff were reported to have threatened guests who paid nothing. Even royalty grumbled.

Now cross the Atlantic, because here is the part that surprises people: Americans hated tipping.

It arrived in the mid-1800s as an import, carried home by wealthy Americans who had toured Europe and wanted to display that they knew how things were done there. The reaction was fury. Tipping was denounced as a relic of feudalism, a bribe, a way of buying a servant class into existence, fundamentally undemocratic, un-American. This was not a fringe view. Several states passed laws against it. There were anti-tipping societies. The dominant American opinion of the tip was that it was beneath the dignity of a free citizen to accept one.

So what happened? The Civil War ended, and slavery with it.

Emancipation released millions of people into an economy that had no intention of paying them. Service work, hospitality, railroads and restaurants were among the first jobs open to freed Black Americans, and a particular arrangement took hold: the employer offered no wage at all, or nearly none, and the worker was to be paid by the customer's goodwill. The Pullman Company built an empire on it. George Pullman hired newly freed Black men as porters, paid them somewhere between twelve and twenty seven dollars a month, and let the tips make up the difference. The customer, not the company, was made responsible for the wage.

That is the moment the tip changed meaning. In England it had been a gift on top of a wage. In America it became the wage, and it became the wage specifically for people who had just been freed and could not refuse the terms.

The Pullman porters organised against exactly this, formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first Black union in the country, and won a guaranteed wage. But the structure they were fighting outlived them, and got written into law: a subminimum wage for tipped workers, still on the books, still meaning that in much of the United States the person bringing your food is paid by you and not by their employer.



The tip feels like generosity. It is the most voluntary money in your life, the one payment nobody can force you to make, and that is exactly why it works. A wage is an obligation on a company. A tip is a feeling in a customer. Somewhere in the 1870s, someone worked out that the second one is much cheaper, and we have been calling it kindness ever since.

Nobody ever decided this. It was never voted on. It just became the sort of person we are.

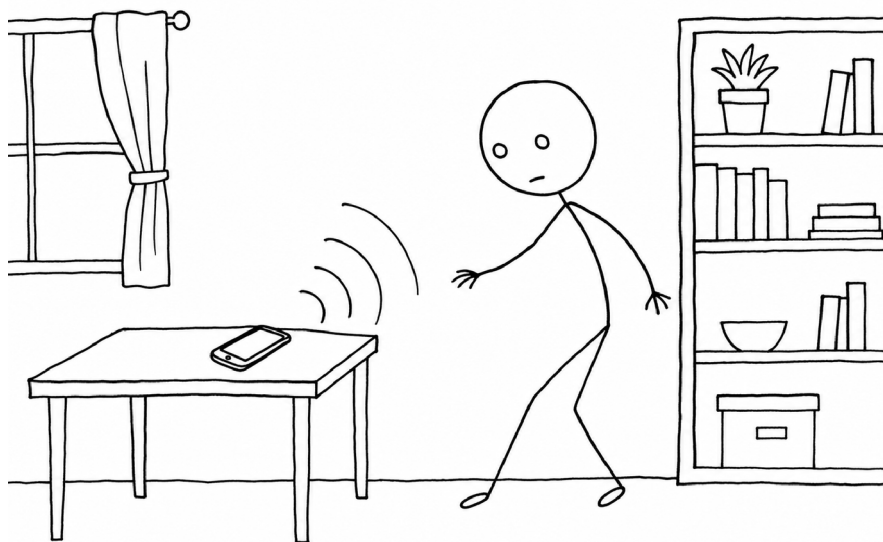
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Why Your Own Voice Sounds Wrong

You hear it for the first time in a voicemail, or a video someone tagged you in, and there is a small drop in the stomach. Who is that. That thin, nasal, faintly ridiculous person. You have been walking around inside a voice you thought was yours, and here is the evidence that everyone else has been listening to someone else entirely.



The explanation is everywhere, and it is almost right. When you speak, your ear gets your voice by two roads at once. There is the ordinary one, out of your mouth, through the air, into your ear canal. And there is the private one: the vibration of your vocal folds travelling up through the

bone and soft tissue of your own skull, straight to the inner ear. A recording only ever captures the first. Take away the second and you are hearing your voice stripped of a component you have never once been without.

That much is solid. What follows it usually is not. Nearly every article you will find says bone conduction adds bass, that it gives you a warm low end that the microphone throws away, and that this is why the recording sounds thin and high.

The trouble is that the people who actually measured it found something else. Pörschmann, in 2000, put numbers on the two paths and found bone conduction winning only in a narrow band, roughly 0.7 to 1.2 kilohertz. Below that, the airborne path was the louder one. Reinfeldt and colleagues, in 2010, built an ear muff that could block airborne sound without plugging the canal, then measured phoneme by phoneme, and found bone conduction dominant between 1 and 2 kilohertz. Their summary is worth having exactly: the two components are of the same order of magnitude, and highly frequency dependent, with each winning at different frequencies.

So bone conduction is not a bass boost. It is a bulge in the low mids. Your self-heard voice is not richer, it is differently balanced, and that is quite enough to make the recording sound like a stranger.

Where does the bass myth come from? Probably from a real effect in the wrong place. Put your fingers in your ears and speak. That boom is the occlusion effect: seal the canal, and the bone conducted sound that used to leak out has nowhere to go, and low frequencies rise steeply, strongest around 100 hertz. That is a genuine, measurable, chest-filling bass boost. It just has nothing to do with talking normally in an open room.

Somebody once described the plugged ear and the sensation got quietly transplanted, and now it is in every article, copied from the last one.

The part nobody prints: the exact filter your skull applies is an open question. Orepic and colleagues, writing in 2023, say plainly that bone conduction is *assumed* to act as a low-pass filter, and that the transfer function of the skull and head tissues has not yet been formally defined. Researchers are still working on it. Anyone who gives you a precise number is making it up.

And there is a second, larger correction, which turns the whole complaint inside out.

In 2013 Hughes and Harrison slipped participants' own voices, unannounced, into a pile of recordings to be rated for attractiveness. Not knowing which one was theirs, people rated their own voice as **more** attractive than independent judges rated it, and better than they rated other people's. They called it vocal implicit egotism. The voice is fine. It is a perfectly good voice. What ruins it is the label. The moment you know it is you, you are not listening to a sound, you are auditing a self, and the sound never had a chance.

Which puts the famous 1966 study in its place. Holzman and Rousey did find real distress when people heard themselves played back: the gap between expectation and reality, attention sliding off the words and onto the voice, a defensive shrug afterwards. That finding is repeatedly observed. Their explanation for it, that recordings leak personality traits you had hidden, is 1960s psychodynamic theory and has never been independently replicated. Report the flinch. Do not report the theory as fact.

The cleanest parallel is not about voices at all. In 1977 Mita, Dermer and Knight showed people photographs of their own faces and the mirror-reversed versions. People preferred the mirror. Their friends preferred the true image. Each side liked the face it had seen more often. Familiarity, not truth.



One last thing, and it undoes the premise. The recording is not "what everyone else hears" either. Other people hear you from across a room, off to one side of your mouth, through that room's echoes, at a distance. The recording adds a microphone, a compression codec, a speaker. It is a third voice. Nobody has heard the real one.

There are billions of people who know the sound of you, and you are not among them.

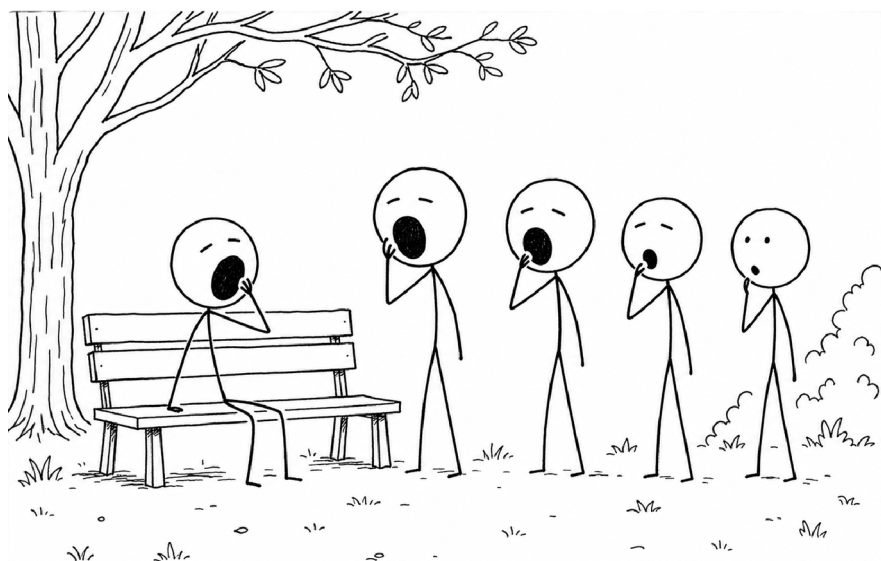
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Why Yawning Spreads

You have almost certainly yawned since you started this page. Not because you are bored, though possibly. Because the word appeared, and reading it was enough.



That is the first strange thing. The yawn does not need a yawn. It will travel through a photograph, a description, a memory, a dog on the other side of the room. It is the only reflex you have that can be transmitted by a sentence.

The second strange thing is that nobody can tell you what it is for.

Start with what it is not for, because you were probably taught this one at school: the yawn is not your body asking for oxygen. It is a tidy explanation and it is wrong, and we have known it is wrong since the 1980s, when researchers did the obvious experiment. They gave people air loaded with extra carbon dioxide, then air loaded with extra oxygen, and counted the yawns. If the oxygen story were true, the yawning should have moved. It did not move at all. The theory that everyone repeats is the theory that failed the test forty years ago.

The best current answer is that a yawn is a cooling system. The jaw stretch drives blood through the head and face, the deep inhalation drags cool air across the blood vessels of the nose and mouth, and slightly chilled blood goes on to the brain. A brain is a hot machine with a narrow tolerance, and on that reading the yawn is a radiator. This is the leading theory. It is not a settled fact, and honest researchers still describe yawning as not fully understood.

Which leaves the contagion, and the part everyone wants to be true.

The popular version says that catching a yawn is a measure of your empathy: the more you feel for others, the more their yawns land in you. There is real evidence pointing that way. Susceptibility to contagious yawning does correlate with empathic ability in some studies, and it does travel more easily between people who are close than between strangers. The mirror neuron system, the same circuitry involved in reading other people's actions from the inside, keeps turning up in the scans.

But the finding is contested, other studies fail to find the relationship, and researchers in the field are openly asking for more rigorous work rather than another headline. If you take one thing from this entry, take

that shape: a real effect, a plausible mechanism, and a conclusion that has been sold to the public with far more confidence than the data can carry.



Still, look at what the yawn does, whatever it is for. It crosses. It moves out of one body and into another without permission, through a wall of skin and self that nothing else gets through. You cannot decide not to catch it. Your friend opens their mouth, and something in you answers before you have any say in the matter.

We spend our lives fairly certain we are sealed units. Then somebody yawns on a train, and eleven strangers quietly prove otherwise.

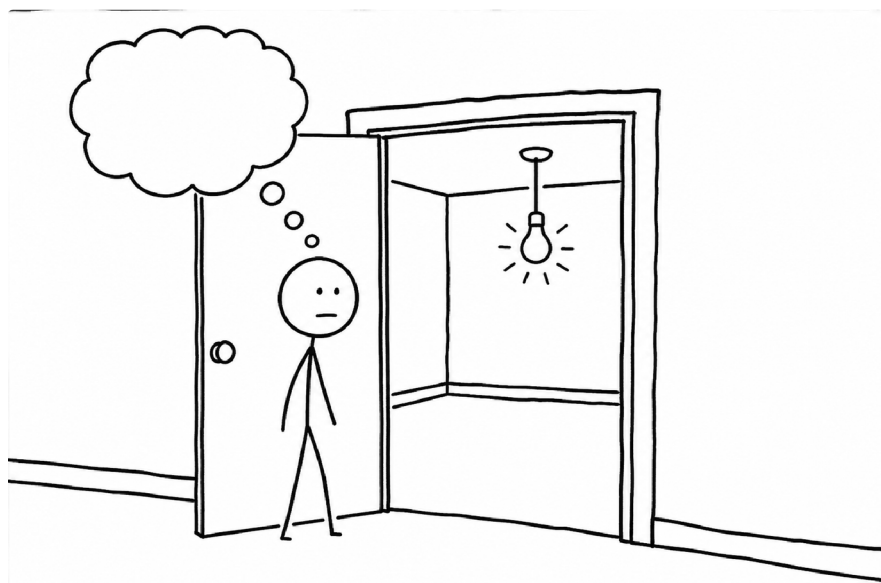
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Why You Forget Why You Came In

You stood up with a purpose. You walked into the kitchen. And now you are standing in the kitchen, looking at the kettle, with nothing in your head at all. Whatever sent you here has been deleted somewhere between the sofa and this exact spot, and the only known remedy is to walk back and stand where you were, at which point it usually returns.



You have blamed your age for this. You have possibly blamed your phone. The likeliest culprit is the door.

Gabriel Radvansky and colleagues at Notre Dame did the work across a run of studies around 2010 and 2011, and the design is neat because it isolates the one thing you would never suspect. People moved objects around in a virtual environment, picking something up at one table and swapping it at another, and their memory was tested along the way. Sometimes they crossed the same distance within a single room. Sometimes they went through a doorway. Same task, same distance, same effort. Passing through the doorway made them worse at remembering what they were carrying and what they were doing.

Then, to their credit, they got out of the simulation and did it for real, with real boxes in real rooms, and the effect showed up again. It was not a quirk of the software. It was the door.

The explanation is that your memory is not a tape. It is a filing system, and it files by episode. Radvansky's phrase for what a doorway does is an **event boundary**: crossing one tells your mind that a scene has finished, so it wraps the last one up and puts it away. Everything from the previous room is still in there, but it has been packed into a box marked *that other room*, and your intention was in the box.

This is not a fault. Almost everything you do is bounded like this, and without the boundaries you would have one undifferentiated smear of a life instead of a set of retrievable events. The kitchen thing is the cost of having a memory that is organised at all.

The honest footnote: this has not been an entirely smooth ride. A 2021 multimodal study found that doorways do not always cause forgetting, and the effect appears to depend on how loaded your attention is at the time. It is real, it is well replicated in the original paradigm, and it is more conditional than the headlines suggested. Which is roughly what

happens to every clean psychological finding once other people get their hands on it.



The best part is the fix, because the fix confirms the theory. Go back. Stand in the doorway you came through, or in the room you started in, and the thought surfaces on its own. You have not searched your memory. You have simply returned to the place where that box is kept, and the box has opened by itself.

You are not losing your mind in the kitchen. Your mind is exactly where you left it. It is in the other room.

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That Was Five of Fifty

You have just read five entries. There are forty five more, and they are built the same way: the habit, the story you have probably been told, what the evidence actually says, and the sources so you can go and check.

Some of what is in there:

- Why nobody smiled in old photographs, which is not the reason you have heard about exposure times
- Why the fork took six hundred years to reach a European table, and the famous sermon that turns out to be about the wrong princess
- Why you cannot tickle yourself, and what the experiment with the tickling robot found
- Why the whole world says OK, from a joke about spelling in a Boston newspaper
- Why you wake at three in the morning, and what people did with that hour before we decided it was a problem
- Why you cannot remember being two, and why the memories did not go anywhere
- Why the years get shorter, and the two clocks that disagree about how long your life has been

Fifty entries. Two to three pages each. Every one with its sources listed.

The full book is at [**whywedothat.pages.dev**](http://whywedothat.pages.dev).

Curiosity Science