



A SKY LANTERN CAN SYMBOLIZE YOUR TROUBLES AND FEARS, FLOATING AWAY.

## THE POWER OF RITUALS

They help soothe our nerves, ease our sorrow, connect us, and much more.

BY ELENI N. GAGE

**AT THE START** of every year, I bake a *vasilopita* cake and hide a coin inside; according to Greek tradition, whoever gets the piece with the coin is guaranteed good luck in the months ahead. This is a ritual I inherited from my parents. Chances are you have your own rituals too: Maybe you say a prayer before bed. Or go for early-morning walks with your girlfriends. Even blowing out your birthday candles counts. By definition, a ritual is a repeated, purposeful action that feels significant to you.

And it turns out that our rituals may be more powerful than we realize. “Only now, in the last five years, [we’ve started looking at the] science of why we do all these things,” says Laurie Santos, PhD,

a professor of psychology at Yale University and host of *The Happiness Podcast*. In a nutshell: “Rituals allow us to feel better.”

It helps to think of rituals in two categories, says Cristine Legare, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. There are instrumental rituals, in which we’re trying to gain agency over our fate, she explains. These include superstitions like knocking on wood, as well as customs meant to be healing, such as burning sage to clear out negative energy. Then there are “collective rituals”—think baptisms and book clubs—which are about engaging in an activity with a group of people. Each type of ritual has unique perks, and by understanding how they work, we can make the most of these intentional, meaningful acts.

### The Calming Effect

If you throw pennies into fountains, or put on a favorite necklace before special dates, you know the fluttering of hope rituals can bring. That hope is part of their power, experts say. Instrumental rituals reassure us.

This is likely why designer Diane von Furstenberg tapes her father’s good-luck gold coin into her shoe before fashion shows. And why Michael Jordan, as legend has it, always wore his North Carolina practice shorts beneath his Chicago Bulls uniform.

These types of comforting rituals may actually work, too—and not for any supernatural reason. Studies suggest they can boost your confidence and motivation, so you’re more likely to succeed at your goal.

A group of researchers observed this effect in an experiment published in 2016, in which they asked participants to sing Journey's "Don't Stop Believin,'" a karaoke classic. Before the challenge, half the participants sat quietly. The other half performed what the researchers described as a ritual: They drew a picture of how they felt, sprinkled salt on it, counted to five, crinkled the drawing, and threw it out. When it came time to belt out the power ballad, the people in the ritual group not only said they felt less anxious but also received higher scores for singing accuracy.

Rituals can bring comfort in times of sorrow, too, says Santos. "Rituals in bad times are particularly useful because they allow you to really feel like you have a sense of control again—that's the psychological effect."

And such soothing rituals can have enduring benefits. Down the road, simply reflecting back on a ritual can be helpful. Michael Norton, PhD, a professor of business administration and director of research at the Harvard Business School, looked into this phenomenon for a study published in 2014. Norton and his colleague asked 247 participants to write about the death of a loved one, or the end of a close relationship; some of the participants were then asked to describe a ritual they used to cope. (One person washed a lost loved one's car every week, "as he used to do.") The participants who wrote about their rituals reported lower levels of grief in the present.

"Rituals are really flexible," Norton adds. "If you're about to perform and are nervous, a ritual can make you feel calm. If someone you loved passed away, a ritual can make you feel less grief. In different situations, they can make you feel the thing that you're most trying to feel."

### Defining Moments

While some rituals soothe emotions, others amplify them. The collective rituals we use to mark major transitions—like the naming ceremony for a newborn, or the

crowning of the quinceañera—have a way of lending these passages a sense of the extraordinary. Rituals can "elevate an average moment into a memorable, charged one," explains Kürsat Özenç, leader of the Ritual Design Lab, instructor at Stanford University's d.school, and author of *Rituals for Work: 50 Ways to Create Engagement*.

Collective rituals have another compelling benefit: They make us feel closer to others, even those who came before us. When you engage in a cultural or religious ritual—such as running in your local Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving, or making a pilgrimage to a holy site—you are joining generations of people who have done the same.

You also feel more connected to the people who are sharing the experience alongside you. It doesn't matter whether you're the one performing the main act or just observing it (at, say, a bat mitzvah, wedding, or memorial). Researchers have found that the participants of collective rituals perceive a state of "emotional synchrony," which fosters a sense of bonding with the other members of the group.

This cohesion can occur among any group you belong to—your church community, college pals, colleagues—but it may be especially important for families. Research published in another 2016 study found that when a person's family practices a ritual on a holiday, the person is more likely to enjoy that holiday.

Rituals can bring greater closeness for couples, too. One recent study suggests that partners who practice a ritual (whether it's ordering Indian takeout on Friday evenings, or just repeating the same greeting every morning) are more committed to each other and feel more satisfied in their relationship than couples who don't have rituals.

So if you're looking for a boost for your relationship, or you need a dose of self-love or self-assurance or connection, choose a ritual that resonates with you, and believe in its power. Because it seems rituals might just hold a little bit of magic. ✕

## THE THREE ELEMENTS OF A RITUAL

If you want to create a new tradition for yourself, or your family or friends, make sure it meets these criteria.

1

### IT'S REPEATABLE

Your ritual might be daily, weekly, or yearly, but it needs to be something you can replicate. "Most rituals follow a script, with a set path that people will follow," says Özenç. It doesn't have to be complicated. (It could be as simple as going around the table at dinner-time to share a funny thing that happened that day.) But it should be deliberate, adds Özenç. "Unlike a routine, rituals are not 'mindless.' They are done with people recognizing that something special is happening, that they are tuned-in to."

2

### YOU CALL IT A "RITUAL"

In a 2016 study, participants who were told to complete a series of actions described as "random behaviors" did not perform as well on a subsequent task as participants who did those same activities and were told they were a "ritual." The word carries weight, and perception seems to matter.

3

### IT'S SIGNIFICANT TO YOU

Need some inspiration? Research your own ethnic background or religion for ideas, or look to borrow from other cultures. "I think of Yom Kippur," says Norton. "You don't have to be Jewish to, on a special day of the year, apologize to people you know you have wronged." Pull from traditions that interest you, Norton suggests. "Start doing things that feel meaningful. If everyone does them together, and you do the ritual again next year, you get resonance over time."