

how we live

ADVICE, INSPIRATION &
A LITTLE PEACE OF MIND

THE MINDSET

THE POWER OF SMALL RITUALS

A special playlist in the morning. A cup of afternoon tea. A feel-good stretch during work. It really is the little things.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY



Amid life's hurly-burly, a ritual can signal to the brain: "Hold up! This moment matters!"

ALMOST EVERY WEEK, Maryam Ajayi goes to her local farmers market to buy flowers. "I walk around, smelling the different types, touching their petals, seeing what emotions they spark," she says. "I let my intuition guide me." When she gets home, she arranges her flowers with care, making the process into, well, a bit of a thing. "It always leaves me feeling more grounded and joyful," says Ajayi, founder and CEO of Dive in Well, an organization that promotes inclusivity in mental health and wellness. And the flowers' impact is long-lasting: "When I look at them during the week, they remind me of nature, the good energy I've brought into my home."

The word "ritual" may make you think of pomp and circumstance, like coronations and christenings, or mysterious ceremonies involving musky herbs and chanting. But rituals can also come in the form of smaller moments, like Ajayi's. They can be as simple as spritzing on a favorite perfume every morning and channeling positive vibes for the day, or reading a go-to poem before bed every night and wishing yourself sweet dreams.

If that sounds a bit woo-woo, trust the science: Researchers are finding that simple rituals have measurable benefits, such as enhancing pleasure in activities, reducing anxiety, and strengthening relationships. And with a little mental energy, anyone can conjure this everyday magic in their lives.

What Makes Something a Ritual and Not Just a Habit

Our urge to create rituals is ancient, spanning cultures, religions, and time periods, says Michael Norton, PhD, a business administration professor at Harvard Business School and the author of the upcoming *The Ritual Effect*. Ritualistic events, like weddings, holiday feasts, and funerals, let us honor milestones, celebrate our joys, and acknowledge our losses. They give us a sense of continuity and community. And performing specific actions, like blowing out birthday candles or turning the tassel on our mortarboard after accepting a diploma, is a way to symbolize our achievements, hopes, and beliefs, to pause and honor them. "Rituals help us make the invisible visible," says Casper ter Kuile, author of *The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices*. "They take an abstract value—gratitude, love, courage—and put it into a physical form."

Yet rituals don't have to be major events. Any practice that focuses your attention, stirs your emotions, elevates the ordinary, and imbues your everyday life with meaning counts as a ritual. What separates these small rituals from habits is the power of our conscious intention, says Juliana Schroeder, PhD, associate professor in the Management of Organizations group at the University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business, who researches the topic. Habits, such as brushing

your teeth, are done automatically, she explains. "Rituals are goal directed and have symbolic meaning for the performer." You might do exactly three jumping jacks in the bathroom before every big presentation to pump up your confidence. Or always ring in the start of the school year with a group trip to the ice cream store for double scoops of mint chocolate chip. Amid life's hurly-burly, a ritual can signal to the brain: "Hold up! This moment matters!"

The Surprising Science-Backed Benefits of Rituals

Studies reveal that rituals can help us enjoy our experiences more deeply. Norton and his colleagues have devised some ways to demonstrate this effect. In one experiment, they doled out lemonade packets to half the participants, instructing them to conduct the following small ritual before drinking: "Pour half a packet of lemonade powder into a glass. Pour in enough water to fill half the glass. Stir the mixture, then wait 30 seconds. Next, pour the remainder of the powder into the glass. Add enough water to top it off, stir, and wait another 30 seconds." The other group just watched someone make lemonade for them. Result? Those who performed the ritual rated the flavor of the lemonade as sweeter and more balanced. Yes, even the simple act of following directions to make lemonade had an effect on people's perceptions, presumably because it focused their

attention and brought more meaning to the experience. Even though the ritual wasn't part of a tradition or something the subjects came up with on their own, it helped them take in the literal and figurative sweetness. Truly anything can be a ritual if done with the right intention!

In another study, subjects had to sing Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" to an audience of strangers. One group just sat quietly before their moment in the spotlight, while the other was told to conduct a ritual: They drew a picture, sprinkled salt on it, counted to five, and crumpled up the paper. The salt sprinklers reported less anxiety and even gave better performances (according to software that recorded their volume and pitch and how long they held notes). "Rituals can calm you by giving you something to focus on so your anxious thoughts don't spiral," Norton says.

Another potential benefit is that rituals can give us a sense of control, which may be why so many writers, athletes, and performers rely on them. Maya Angelou said she prepared for her writing day by going to a hotel room by 6:30 a.m., surrounding herself with little more than a thesaurus, bible, and bottle of sherry. Former Major League Baseball player Nomar Garciaparra famously did an extended routine of toe taps and glove adjustments before batting. Beyoncé once noted that before a performance, she says a prayer and stretches with everyone in her band; she then listens to a specific playlist while in the makeup chair.



Shared rituals can also strengthen our relationships, including our romantic partnerships—even if the ritual is just doing a crossword puzzle together every morning or eating at a favorite sushi place on Tuesdays. In a 2019 study, Norton and colleagues found that couples who did these kinds of activities reported more positive emotions and greater satisfaction than those who didn't. "The rituals get embedded in your life together—you can depend on them," Norton says. "They're an external way to show your internal commitment."

How to Create Your Own

The great thing about designing your own ritual is that it can be whatever you want. "What's important is that it feels meaningful to you," Norton says. While a ritual can be a one-off to mark a special occasion (ringing a gong after completing chemo), repetition (treating yourself to blueberry pancakes every Saturday to close out the workweek) can make it even more significant.

“We attach more meaning to our actions as we repeat them over time,” Norton says. “They gain resonance as we remember all our past experiences.” Here are some ideas and tips to inspire you.

START WHERE YOU ARE The easiest way to begin a regular ritual is to make it part of your current routine. Consider something you’re already doing: Eating your daily apple can become a ritual, says Mara Branscombe, a yoga and meditation teacher and the author of *Ritual as Remedy: Embodied Practices for Soul Care*. “Smell its crisp aroma. What does it taste like on your tongue? Use the act as a tangible way to practice gratitude. Silently thank the farmer. Think of it as a gift of nature, started from a tiny seed.” An evening shower can become a small ceremony if you stop to appreciate it. Add a few drops of lavender essential oil around the perimeter of your shower to make it special. Bonus: That calming aroma becomes an instant cue that it’s time to wind down.

ALIGN IT WITH AN INTENTION Jan Stanley, a Denver-based positive psychology coach and officiant at weddings and other occasions, helps clients design personalized rituals. She suggests using an “I AM” model, which stands for “intention,” “action,” and “meaning.” “Ask yourself three ques-

tions: *What is my intention? What action can I take that will reflect my intention? What personal meaning will I ascribe to this action?*”

Let’s say your intention is to exercise more often. “Get a beautiful jar, and every time you return from the gym, place a stone inside,” Stanley suggests. “As you drop it in, take a moment to reflect on what you’ve accomplished for your health. With repetition, the jar becomes a visible symbol of your progress.” Like magic (sort of), your new ritual helps your new habit take hold.

CONSIDER TRANSITIONS Beginnings and endings are prime times for rituals. Lighting tapers before a meal is one option, Branscombe says. Stanley always starts her day by pausing at the three big east-facing windows in her living room. “There’s a gorgeous glow even on foggy mornings,” she says. “I make a point to stop and really soak in the light and think about what I look forward to that day.” If you work from home and feel like you’re never really off the clock, a small ritual at the end of the day can help redefine those boundaries. Try stretching and closing your laptop. The ritual will signify that the business part of the day is over. And as many of us have learned, there’s something oh-so satisfying about the click of a laptop lid. ■

An evening shower can become a small ceremony if you stop to appreciate it.

READER RITUALS

We asked our Instagram followers to share their go-tos. These are some of our favorites.

Walking through the garden with that first cup of coffee of the day.

@AMIRALLOOLI

A glass of wine on Sunday evening to close out the weekend.

@LINDAUNFILTERED

No cooking on Fridays! We eat out!

@ASCOTTYEG

Sunday soaks. A hot Epsom-salt detox bath with a magazine or good book and candles.

The ideal reset!

@HEYYARNOLD13

My best friends and I meet up every summer for a girls weekend.

@TRAVELCHILD12

Updating my calendar on Sundays. It helps me feel prepared for the week.

@GINGER6685

Going for a walk alone and having my afternoon coffee at home all by myself.

@GIANNAJOANNE