



Rituals for Patients and Families

By: [Glen R. Horst MDiv, DMin, BA](#)

Rituals can help you and your family get through difficult times. Gathering together as a family to take part in a specific activity is one way to bring people together meaningfully. Your family may have a favorite campground, cottage or other special place. Meeting at a place like this to spend a few hours together, setting aside some time to share stories, express thanks or give tokens of appreciation can become a treasured memory for the entire family. Even members of the family who don't share their thoughts or feelings can still feel that they are linked to each other and to a common heritage.

Through ritual, you may gain the sense that your life has meaning and your legacy will live on. Family members may also find strength in knowing that they are a part of a tradition that will carry on even after your death.

Creating your own ritual

You do not need any specific training to create a ritual. You can weave together elements from shared traditions or backgrounds to create a personalized family ritual. Here are some things to consider in planning a ritual

Preparation

If your ritual is going to include a number of people, you may want to ask for their input ahead of time. You may be looking for a way to acknowledge that illness has changed things. Or, you may want to find a way for people to express their love without having to put their thoughts into words. You may be turning to ritual to give you strength. Singing a song, reading a poem or remembering a specific life story may help to achieve all of these things.

Use of elements that carry meaning and connect with memories

If your family has traditions that have become part of family life, these traditions may seem especially meaningful at this time. By drawing upon them now, you are acknowledging the heritage that the family will still have, even after death. Your ritual may be even more meaningful if it allows for the active participation of all who have gathered.

Timing

There is no right time for a ritual like this. It can happen when many family members gather or when only a few are present. Special days like holidays or birthdays may be times when family members are open to marking the occasion in a special way. Usually you can draw children into a ritual if they understand its purpose and see that it is important to the adults.

Leadership

Often, one family member can take leadership in inviting the family into the ritual and providing instructions for participating. This person can speak for the whole family in expressing the need they felt to mark the occasion as a special one. Such openness about illness sometimes translates into a kind of permission for family members to show their feelings.

Using rituals from a religious or spiritual tradition

If you belong to a religious or spiritual tradition, you likely have certain rituals that give you, and perhaps your family, spiritual strength. You may feel a deep need for the rituals of your tradition – rituals such as prayer, chanting, communion, Sabbath candles, smudging or anointing. You may want to attend worship services whenever possible and to participate in the ceremonies related to the special festivals and seasons of your tradition. Rituals can strengthen your sense of connection to the healing strength and care of a higher entity.

Some rituals can be done privately, as individuals or family members. Others are meant to be done in a faith community and may depend on the presence of a spiritual leader. Consider speaking to a spiritual leader from your tradition about rituals that may provide spiritual strength in your situation. If you need help to arrange for rituals, speak to your family, a health care provider or a spiritual leader.

If members of your family belong to several different religious or spiritual traditions, you may experience tension around the use of some rituals. Try to talk with your family about the rituals that are important to you. Invite those who belong to different traditions to join you for those rituals, but respect their wishes if they choose not to. If you need help to talk with your family about rituals that could be helpful, speak to a spiritual care provider on the health care team or another team member.

Rituals that leave a legacy

Rituals do not have to be religious to be deeply meaningful. Creative and spontaneous rituals that express deep feelings and affirm relationships provide strength in difficult moments and create memories that last a lifetime. These rituals become a part of your legacy. Consider the following rituals, or let your imagination come up with something completely different:

- Write a letter to a family member that expresses your appreciation or hopes for that person and plan how the person will receive it.
- Give something of yours that can become a keepsake.
- Make special preparations for a birthday or anniversary that may be your last.
- Arrange a visit to a place that holds important memories.

Once again, if you need your family's help or understanding to plan a meaningful ritual, talk with family members who might give you the support you need.

Family celebrations and ceremonies

If your illness has affected your energy level and general sense of well-being, you may become more selective about the activities you participate in. You may feel apologetic about the special arrangements your family has to make to include you in the private celebrations and public ceremonies that mark the unfolding life of your family. Bear in mind that your mere presence and ability to participate in these rituals are likely as meaningful to your family as they are to you. Even though making these events happen can be challenging, there can be spiritual and emotional benefits for everyone who participates.

Your participation in private celebrations such as birthdays and anniversaries can affirm your place in the family circle and connect you to the various generations in it. Your attendance at a public celebration that marks an important passage for a family member can connect you to the past and future in meaningful ways. For example, an initiation rite such as a baptism, a bris, or a Bar or Bat Mitzvah can be a hopeful sign that your heritage and family life will continue. A wedding can be a moment full of memory and wonder as you experience the enlargement of your family circle. Even attendance at a funeral can be encouraging as you give thanks for the life of the one who has died, and witness how the strength of the community surrounds the bereaved.

Sometimes illness makes it impossible to participate in important family events. When this occurs, you may want to look for another way to connect with the event. Here are suggestions to consider:

- Send a message or gift to express your thoughts and wishes for the occasion.
- Invite the key participants to visit you before or after the celebration or ceremony.
- Arrange for somebody who has attended to tell you about it later or to bring pictures.
- Ask a spiritual leader or spiritual care provider to help you create a private ritual that coincides with the timing of the event.

Content reviewed January 2023