



## McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (MORSL)

---

### MM3: Regular Rituals as Part of Meaning Making

#### The value of Rituals in promoting our well-being

A ritual is a set series of actions that you perform regularly. However, unlike routine behaviors such as brushing your teeth, rituals are meaningful acts you do with intent. Rituals embody what matters to you by putting your values into practice. That in itself will probably make you happier, but performing simple rituals has more value for your well-being.

In addition, when we perform rituals, we are not just recognizing what is there, or what has been handed down to us. Rituals also aid us in constructing meaning. The desire to make meaning comes from our own needs, affinities, spiritual responses and processes that we observe. Rather than just seeing rituals as traditions handed down to us, it is helpful to view them as powerful tools that help us navigate through life more confidently and with more joy. Sometimes it is empowering to take greater ownership of rituals and reshape them to fit us better.

The benefits of performing rituals are diverse. Some of these can be found below.

1. **Rituals translate your values into action.** Daily, weekly or seasonal rituals can help you carve out time for what matters most. Putting your core values into practice does not have to be complicated. If you care about nurturing your relationships, you can turn sitting down for a family dinner each night or taking up a hobby with your best friend into a recurring ritual.
2. **Rituals provide structure and renewal.** By definition, rituals are nourishing routines. Whereas habits can be more or less (un)healthy, we perform rituals because they have a deeper meaning to us. And, because we carry out those meaningful routines with purpose and awareness, rituals are a form of mindfulness put into practice. Rituals can help expectation and hope to be fulfill in our lives an also provide needed structure. Especially in stressful and uncertain times, recurring activities like attending weekly worship experience or visiting your favorite place can give you a sense of control and continuity.
3. **Rituals facilitate change.** People are creatures of habit. As much as our brains love exciting new things, we find actually sticking to new habits much harder. Rituals can help transition lifestyle changes by reducing your need to rely on willpower. Instead of using discipline to exercise and follow a diet, you can also choose healthy behaviors that you like to do, because those actions have meaning to you. For example, if you want to move your body more but hate the gym, you could create a ritual that ties your health goal with other important values. Over time, your healthy ritual will become an automatic behavior, something you do without putting much thought into it. On days when you do not feel like doing it, a ritual will provide rewards, because it also taps into other values that are important to you, like spending time with loved ones or connecting with nature.



## McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (MORSL)

---

4. **Rituals deepens emotional, spiritual, and social connections.** In our fast-paced world, performing simple rituals helps us pause for a moment and reconnect with our loved ones and ourselves. Furthermore, family rituals play their part in shaping our identities and helping us feel that we belong. Some routines are so meaningful they are passed down from one generation to the next and become family traditions. And of course, rituals are widely known for deepening your spiritual connection. Whether you like to pray, chant, light a candle or practice gratitude, rituals can help you honor forces greater than us.
5. **Rituals helps us feel grounded in times of crisis and uncertainty.** During moments of crisis, we feel like the ground under our feet is shifting and our sense of control is escaping us. In such moments when we are all facing both actual and anticipated grief, these idiosyncratic rituals can restore our sense of control over our lives. We feel out of control when we experience loss – we did not want it to happen, but we could not control it. It's usually a very unpleasant feeling to sense that we do not have total control of aspects of our lives. Rituals restore some of that control and keep us spiritually grounded.

In conclusion, we are intensely social and ritualistic beings, sometimes even when we haven't recognized this consciously. Rituals are not only valuable for our well-being, but they define our existence, history, and culture. Embracing and creating rituals in your life deliberately can be an empowering way to connect with your personal humanity and spirituality.

### Resources:

- What is a ritual, and what is its impact in today's society? "What isn't a ritual?" asks Michael Norton in this fascinating talk about the role that ritual continues to play in our lives: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE42C8z9brE>
- This write-up explores the health benefits of performing rituals: <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/good-money/opinion/2018/12/20/why-rituals-are-good-for-your-health>
- For a more focused discussion on rituals marking certain holidays and the role of rituals in meaning making see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh6\\_lrbBpU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh6_lrbBpU)
- For more on the mental health benefits of rituals, see Prof. Norton's interview in which he discusses his research surrounding rituals and how he found that those who use them feel better and more in control. Restorative power of Ritual: <https://hbr.org/2020/04/the-restorative-power-of-ritual>
- This video surveys a variety of rituals by some noted NBA players before they play in a competition. By performing these regular rituals, players provide their reason for doing them: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_yOeymazdVI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yOeymazdVI)



## McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (MORSL)

---

**To find additional Meaning Making  
Workshop resources, visit our website:**

