

Grief Rituals for Healing

By Jeanette Stehr-Green and Astrid Raffinpeyloz

Rituals fill our lives and help us get through challenging times. Most of us routinely perform rituals when we celebrate birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries. Many of us also practice rituals before anxiety-producing events such as a job interview, school presentation, or important sporting events.

Although rituals do not have a direct effect on the events or situations which prompted them, they often have a positive effect on those performing or witnessing them.

Rituals are also a meaningful way to cope with loss, be it the death of a loved one or pet, loss of property or possessions, or loss of a way of life. At these times, rituals can bring comfort. They can offer a space to honor and remember. They can help those affected by the loss regain a sense of control and begin processing the resulting grief.

Grief rituals are also helpful following a community crisis. They can provide a sense of order in the midst of chaos. They can help community members connect to offer each other support. They can give voice to and validate feelings among individuals not directly affected by the crisis but whose sense of security or rightness with the world has been shaken.

Personal versus collective grief rituals

Grief rituals can be personal or collective. There is a place for both.

A personal grief ritual typically involves only the individual practicing the ritual and can include gestures, words, actions, or revered objects. Examples include lighting a candle while thinking of the loss, planting a tree, creating a memory box in honor of the lost person or thing, or writing a message to the deceased that is burned or hung outside exposed to the elements.

Personal grief rituals are more intimate and private than collective grief rituals, often arising from special connections between the person carrying out the ritual and the person or thing that has been lost. Personal grief rituals can be more spontaneous than collective grief rituals and repeated when needed.

Collective grief rituals involve multiple people such as friends or family of the deceased, or members of a neighborhood, organization, or community. Examples include funerals, memorials, and celebrations of life.

Collective grief rituals as opposed to personal grief rituals can facilitate connections between those affected by the loss and encourage mutual support. They can reinforce beliefs and values shared by those gathered and lead to feelings of unity.

Although collective grief rituals tend to be more structured and less intimate than personal grief rituals, they do not have to be. Home funerals are extremely personal as friends and family play an active role in preparing their loved one's body, decorating the container in which the body will lie, and transporting the body to its final resting place.

The traditional Irish wake is similarly intimate, combining mourning with merrymaking. As friends and family gather to stand vigil over the deceased's body, they share stories and tell jokes about the deceased. They wail to release deep emotions and anguish (sometimes called keening). They sing and dance to remind all who attend that life is precious and should be experienced fully.

Common grief ritual characteristics

Although grief rituals are as varied as the losses that they mark, certain characteristics can make them more meaningful.

- Incorporating an element of sacredness helps set grief rituals apart from our normal daily activities.
- The inclusion of a series of steps performed in a certain order provides structure and a sense of order.
- A purposeful action at the end of the ritual such as a hymn or prayer can bring a sense of closure, signaling a return to the day's usual activities.

While grief rituals are not a cure for loss or the impending grief, they can help people address their feelings and begin to process their grief. Grief rituals can bring people together to support each other and become more connected. Grief rituals can also open the door to healing and bring hope for the future.

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