

Why Rituals Are Good for Your Health

By Ari Honarvar

¹I don't know if I could have survived seven years of my childhood without the soul-saving **rituals** of my Persian culture. I grew up amid the Iran-Iraq War, which killed a million people. Besides the horrors of the war, freedom of thought and expression were severely restricted in Iran after the Islamic revolution. Women **bore the brunt of** this as, in a matter of months, we were forced to **ditch** our previous lifestyle and **observe** a strict Islamic attire, which covered our bodies and hair. We lost the right to jog, ride a bicycle, or sing in public. Life seemed **unbearable** at times, but we learned to bring meaning into uncertainty and chaos by maintaining **grounding** practices and developing new ones.

²It helped that in Persian culture we had **ceremonies** to turn to. We **clung to** 3,500-year-old Zoroastrian ceremonies that correspond to the seasons. Several of these rituals take place during the spring because the equinox marks the Persian New Year. Besides a thorough spring cleaning, we jump over a bonfire to cleanse our inner landscape and give our **maladies** to fire and gain vitality from it. On the longest night of the year, winter solstice, we stay up all night eating fruits and nuts, reciting poetry, playing music, and dancing. This is to symbolize survival and celebration during dark times.

³Rituals, which are a series of actions performed in a specific way, have been part of human existence for thousands of years. They are not habits. According to research psychologist Nick Hobson, a habit's **inherent** goal is different from a ritual's. With habit, the actions and behaviors are causally tied to the desired outcome; for example, brushing our teeth to prevent cavities and gum disease and exercising to keep healthy. Rituals, on the other hand, are "goal **demoted**," which means that their actions have no **instrumental** connection to the outcome. For example, we sing "Happy Birthday" to the same melody even though it isn't tied to a specific external result.

⁴Cristine Legare, a researcher and psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, says, "Rituals signify transition points in the individual **life span** and provide psychologically meaningful ways to participate in the beliefs and practices of the community." They have been instrumental in building community, **promoting** cooperation, and marking **transition points** in a community member's life. And as strange as rituals might be from a logical perspective, they have **evolved** as distinct features of human culture.

⁵While it's not clear exactly how they help, rituals reduce **anxiety**, improve performance and confidence, and even work on people who don't believe in them, research shows. In a University of Toronto study, participants who performed a ritual before completing a task **exhibited** less anxiety and **sensitivity to** personal failure than when they completed the task without first performing the ritual.

⁶Additionally, rituals benefit our physical well-being and immune system. According to Andrew Newberg, the associate director of research at the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health, rituals lower cortisol, which in turn lowers heart rate and blood pressure and increases immune system function.

⁷We live **amid** a loneliness epidemic where the lack of belonging and community has been linked to high suicide rates and an increased **sense of despair**. The United States has one of the worst **work-life balance** scores in the world, while more Americans have become **disillusioned** with **organized religion**, as a broad and rapidly rising **demographic** consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Perhaps with fewer opportunities for people to be in community, many shared cultural rituals are falling away and with them a grounding source for connection and mental health.

⁸In Iran during the war, we found uses for rituals when we were faced with **food rations**. We gathered family and friends, **reciting** the ancient story of the poor abused girl who had run away from home and had a vision of being visited by three **celestial** bibis (matrons). The bibis instructed her to make a sweet halva and donate it to the poor. The girl said she didn't have any money, and the bibis told her to borrow or work for the ingredients. This worked well with food rations as each guest brought a few ingredients to make the halva. Like the girl in the story, each participant made a wish and took a bite of the halva. I walked away feeling calmer and more supported.

⁹Stories, such as those told during the Jewish ceremony of Passover Seder, have become ritualized because they are recited in the same way each time. Rhythm and music play a similar role in ritual. Whether we're **chanting** in Sanskrit or singing the national anthem, "our brains tend to **resonate with** those around us, so if everyone is doing the same dance, hymn, or prayer, all of those brains are working in the same way," Newberg explains. "This can **engender** a powerful feeling of connectedness. It also reduces stress and depression through a combination of effects on the autonomic nervous system, which is ultimately connected to the emotional areas of the brain—the limbic system." According to one study, chanting the Sanskrit syllable "om" **deactivates** the limbic system, softening the edge of fear, anxiety, and depression.

¹⁰Psychologist Hobson confirms that rituals aren't just a benefit to our mental health—they're actually essential. "We are an **intensely** social and ritualistic species," he says. "Take this piece out of our modern human **narrative** and you lose a piece of our history and our humanity."

¹¹I moved to the U.S. when I was 14. After living here for two decades, I became a mother and was **confronted with** the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child." But where was that **mythical** village and the rituals that made it **sane**? For example, a pregnant woman in Iran had a rotating menu of dishes made for her by friends and family. A new mother was surrounded by people who took turns assisting with daily tasks. But in the U.S., she was expected to **fend for herself** and her baby immediately

after childbirth. I observed that besides standard holiday traditions, community-building practices were lacking.

¹²So after 20 years of living in the U.S., I decided to create my own community rituals.

¹³I started with my family. At dinners we **banned** books and devices, lit candles, and discussed set topics of conversation. We held weekly family meetings with opening and closing ceremonies and used a **talking stick** to **enforce** respectful communication. At birthday dinners, we took turns saying, "I love you because ..."

¹⁴Candlelit dinners were no longer saved for a special occasion. Using a talking stick helped me listen more attentively and choose my words more carefully. **Huddling** together at the end of each family meeting provided me with a sense of accomplishment. Each ritual, no matter how small, **anchored** me in something bigger and provided a **sense of belonging**.

¹⁵Then we began to build rituals within the larger community. First, we **hosted** a **multigenerational** Sunday potluck with friends and family. Each week, five to 10 of us gathered, shared food, and **recounted** what made us grateful. During each meal, I noticed I was lighter, more engaged with others, and laughed more.

¹⁶Later, we built more community rituals into the week. I posted on Nextdoor, asking our neighbors to join us on Monday evening walks to the neighborhood park and back.

¹⁷In this age of **isolation**, we need **nourishing** and **uplifting** means of creating community by bringing together members of different generations as our ancestors did. From my experience in Iran, rituals can be particularly valuable during hard times. In the U.S., we don't have to worry about bombs and food rations, but we still have challenges to our security that affect our mental and physical health. Rituals can help us, though, by offering our communities opportunities for healing and support.

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