

Developing Personal Rituals Can Help with Grieving

Objective: To find personal rituals that can help you through your grieving process.

They say that “time heals all wounds,” and for most people even the terrible sadness of losing a loved one dissipates over time. George Bonanno, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University and author of *The Other Side of Sadness*, found in his research that that 50 to 60 percent of mourners show no symptoms of grief after one month following the loss. This does not mean that a loved one is forgotten, but rather even after a significant loss, people settle into their old routines or develop new ones, and their lives recover a sense of order. Although they may continue to be sad, their emotions are no longer dominating their-day-to-day decisions.

For others, the loss of a loved one continues to disrupt their lives for months or even years and they say they cannot regain a sense of “normalcy.” They report a sense of meaninglessness, hopelessness, and uncontrollable despair. Prolonged Grief Disorder, sometimes called “complicated grief,” has symptoms that last more than a year after the loss of a loved one. The following is a list of symptoms that define Prolonged Grief Disorder. Put a check mark by any symptoms that describe your grief:

_____ You feel intense sorrow, pain and rumination over the loss of your loved one

_____ You find it difficult to focus on anything but your loved one’s death

_____ You focus excessively on reminders of your loved one or go to great lengths to avoid reminders

_____ You have intense and persistent longing or pining for the deceased

_____ You find that you really can’t accept the death

_____ You feel a numbness or detachment

_____ You are always bitter about the loss

_____ You feel that life holds no meaning or purpose

_____ You have a hard time trusting others

_____ You are unable to enjoy activities, even ones you used to love

_____ You have trouble carrying out normal routines

_____ You isolate yourself from others and withdraw from social activities

_____ You experience depression, deep sadness, guilt or self-blame

_____ You believe that you did something wrong or could have prevented the death

_____ You feel that life isn't worth living without your loved one

_____ You wish you had died along with your loved one

Research is now suggesting that personal rituals can be a great aid in the healing process. Public rituals like wearing black clothing or “sitting shiva” in Judaism (a period of seven days when the bereaved are visited by guests) can help, but personal and private rituals seem to be even more important.

Researchers Michael I. Norton and Francesca Gino at the Harvard Business School studied how people cope with extreme loss. In a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, they reported that personal rituals can play an important role in helping people cope with their grief. The rituals that people found most helpful were usually not done in a social setting or as part of a religious observance. They were private and personal.

This worksheet is designed to help you think about personal rituals which can help you through your grieving process. You might choose to do a ritual every day, or you might only perform rituals on the anniversary of your loss. That is entirely up to you. Use the second worksheet to help you determine if rituals are helping you through your grieving process.

Choosing a Grieving Ritual

Directions: Begin by checking the rituals that sound like they might be helpful. Then add your own personal rituals to this list. Finally, use the second worksheet to record your reactions after performing one or more of these personal rituals. Remember that rituals are designed to bring up strong feelings, but they should also help you feel more in control of your feelings and that eventually your feelings of hopelessness and sorrow will no longer intrude upon your day-to-day life.

- Play music that reminds you of your loved one
- Watch a movie that reminds you of your loved one
- Write a letter to your loved one
- Take flowers and throw the petals into a body of water (particularly a river that will take them away). With each petal say something to your loved one
- Light a candle at special times of the day or week to remind you of your loved one
- Create a memory scrapbook, filling it with photographs, letters, postcards, notes, or other significant memorabilia from your life together
- Spend time listening to your loved one's favorite music or creating a special mix of music that reminds you of your loved one
- Watch his or her favorite movie or a movie that reminds you of the person you lost
- Plant a tree or flowers in your loved one's memory
- Make a donation to a charity that your loved one supported or give time working for that organization
- Visit your loved one's burial site
- Carry something special that reminds you of your loved one
- Create a work of art in your loved one's memory
- Prepare and eat a special meal in honor of your loved one
- Create a memorial to your loved one with pictures and objects that were important to them
- Light a special candle used only for your ritual purposes
- Read or say aloud an inspirational verse, poem, or prayer
- Sing a song to a photo of your loved one
- Chant or pray
- Ring a chime or a bell

___ Other ritual _____

___ Other ritual _____

___ Other ritual _____

___ Other ritual _____

___ Other ritual _____

___ Other ritual _____

Write down dates and times when you think a personal ritual might be most helpful.

Write down people you know who you might want to talk to about your ritual and your reaction.

Write down specific ways you will know that a personal mourning ritual has helped you.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(**1** = not very helpful, **5** = moderately helpful, **10** = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?