

Rituals Enhance Experience

Rituals are those actions we do in a prescribed, ceremonial manner. Looking back over the holiday season, chances are that you engaged in at least one ritual during all that gifting, cooking, celebrating, and church going. Think of the activities you did in exactly the same manner that you did the year before. Was there a prescribed way to open gifts on Christmas morning, prepare meals, send out cards, dress, attend church, ring in the New Year? Rituals of course extend beyond the holidays. Is there a particular outfit you always wear to celebrate a special day, a special restaurant where you order the same meal on your birthday?

Recently researchers at the University of Minnesota and Harvard University conducted a series of experiments to learn more about the basics of rituals by creating simple rituals without any religious or other trappings. In Experiment #1 they required one group of participants to break a candy bar in half without opening it, unwrap one half first, eat it, then open the other half and eat that. A second group simply sat for a moment in the presence of the candy bar before opening it and eating it any way they wanted. Both groups then rated how enjoyable the experience was. **Results.** The ritualized group reported more enjoyment and spent more time savoring the candy bar than did the unritualized group. They were also willing to pay more money (59 cents) for the chocolate than were the unritualized participants (34 cents).

In Experiment #2 participants were presented three bags of carrots. The ritualized group was instructed to engage in a prescribed series of hand movements, followed by deep breathing, before taking out a carrot from each bag and tasting it. They always performed the same ritual before opening each bag. The unritualized group engaged in a randomized set of gestures and breathing exercises before opening each bag of carrots. The ritualized group was also instructed to wait a few moments before eating the last of the three carrots, whereas the unritualized group proceeded to eat it without waiting. **Results.** The ritualized group enjoyed their carrots more than the unritualized group, and they especially enjoyed the last carrot after waiting to eat it.

In Experiment #3 one group of participants was instructed to prepare a glass of lemonade in a fixed, prescribed manner, while another group merely watched the lemonade ritual. Then both groups drank the lemonade. **Results.** The ritualized group rated the lemonade as more flavorful than did the group that had merely watched it being prepared.

Experiment #4 repeated the first experiment with candy bars. Afterward the ritualized group rated the chocolate more “intrinsically interesting” than did the unritualized group, suggesting that the ritual stimulated their interest in the chocolate itself.

Discussion. Rituals have been part of the human repertoire for millennia. These experiments demonstrate that performing even a simple activity in a ritualized manner enhances the intensity of the experience and involves us in it more than merely watching it happen. The researchers

suggest that rituals cause us to be more mindful of what we are doing, which allows us to savor the moment and experience it to the fullest. Performing activities mindfully also clears our minds of distracting thoughts, which reduces stress. Indeed mindfulness may be the key ingredient that distinguishes rituals from habits, which we perform mindlessly. Interestingly, the participants in these experiments completed their tasks individually. Yet many common rituals, from family traditions to religious ceremonies, are performed in synchrony with other people. Recall the What's New article "Are You in Sync?" in which merely having a group of people walk in step while touring a college campus gave them a sense of group cohesiveness. Group rituals may well promote group cohesiveness in addition to enhancing the experience itself.

You can test some of these ideas yourself. First think of daily activities you perform regularly. Do you always perform them in the same way? Do you do them alone or with others? How do they make you feel? Are you mindful of each action as you complete it or do you perform the whole sequence mindlessly? What happens if you vary the routine? Can you create a new ritual for yourself that is meaningful?

Vohs, K.D.; Wang, Y.; Gino, F.; & Norton, M.I. 2013. Rituals enhance consumption. *Psychological Science, Vol. 24*, Pgs. 1714-1721.