



RITUALIZING GRIEF WITH PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

When discussing person-centered thinking and practices, the topic of rituals often surfaces: the need to capture the rituals of relationship (e.g. I always have a cup of tea when I visit with Rose) and the rituals of comfort (I like classical music and a burning candle when I relax) important to an individual. Rituals motivate and move us. They help us define our families, build community, make transitions, and mark important life events. Through ritual we express our joy and sorrow. We do so alone, in private, and together, in relationship with others. In no circumstance is ritual more important than in acknowledging, experiencing, supporting, and healing the grief experienced because of the death of another. Mourning rituals are universal. There is such a wide variety held by different ethnicities, cultures, faith traditions and families, that they can even be contradictory. People perform mourning rituals in an effort to alleviate their grief – but do they work? The research of Francesca Gino and Michael I. Norton, first published on May 14, 2013 in *Scientific American*, showed that they do.

What follows is a guide to planning a grief ritual and some suggestions for items or activities around which a ritual can be designed. These are rooted in neither cultural nor faith traditions and are not meant to replace either; they are meant merely to provide the opportunity to express personal and communal loss in a safe, symbolic, participatory and meaningful way.

How to plan a ritual for people with IDD

- Make the ritual concrete rather than abstract: because of the nature of their disability, people with IDD generally benefit from more concrete experiences that include activities or include the use of physical, representative items
- Use explicit directions, with few words. When possible, providing picture illustrations of the directions and/or modeling should be used
- Keep the ritual simple: rituals that are too complicated or open-ended may be confusing, frustrating and of little meaning
- It is important to maintain an element of symbolism— to have the activity done, or the object used, represent something beyond its literal meaning



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- Use photos (of the deceased or from magazines/ computer images in representation)
- Use storytelling (“I remember when...” or “What I will miss the most about...”)
- Use memory objects (“I brought this cup today because...” or “This reminds me of...”)
- Use a perennial plant or tree (“Let’s plant this tree in her memory and whenever we want to talk to her we can come here” or “Every time this plant flowers we will remember...”)
- Use drawing (“Draw what he meant to you” or “Color your paper heart with a color that shows how you feel right now.”)
- Use music (“Let’s sing/play her favorite song.”)
- Use writing (“Write what you would say to him right now” or “Write one word about him.”)
- Use stones/seashells/tee shirts/pottery/modeling clay for a keepsake (“Paint whatever you want in her memory on this” or “These playing cards were hers, each person take one.”)
- Use light (a candle that can be lit on special days, a nightlight, etc.)
- Use the act of burying an object (personal item, goodbye notes, something symbolic of the deceased or of the feelings of the griever)
- Use food (share a favorite dessert or favorite meal “in honor of”)

To make rituals impactful, design them so the person participates through symbolic gesture or object

To learn more about why rituals work, read the referenced article:

Gino, F., & Norton, M. I. (2013, May 14). Why rituals work. *Scientific American*.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-rituals-work/>

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