

# Why people need rituals, especially in times of uncertainty

April 6 2020, by Dimitris Xygalatas

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Responding to the coronavirus pandemic, most American universities have [suspended all campus activities](#). Like millions of people all around the world, the lives of students all over the U.S. has changed overnight.

When I met my students for what was going to be our last in-class meeting of the academic year, I explained the situation and asked whether there were any questions. The first thing my students wanted to know was: "Will we be able to have a graduation ceremony?"

The fact that the answer was no was the most disappointing news for them.

As an anthropologist who [studies ritual](#), hearing that question from so many students did not come as a surprise. The most important moments of our lives—from birthdays and weddings to college graduations and holiday traditions are marked by ceremony.

Rituals provide meaning and make those experiences memorable.

## **Ritual as a response to anxiety**

Anthropologists have long observed that people across cultures tend to perform [more rituals in times of uncertainly](#). Stressful events such as warfare, environmental threat and material insecurity are often linked with [spikes in ritual activity](#).

In a [laboratory study](#) in 2015, my colleagues and I found that under conditions of stress people's behavior tends to become more rigid and repetitive—in other words, [more ritualized](#).

The reason behind this propensity lies in our cognitive makeup. Our brain is [wired to make predictions](#) about the state of the world. It uses past knowledge to make sense of current situations. But when everything around us is changing, the ability to make predictions is limited. This causes many of us to [experience anxiety](#).

That is where ritual comes in.

Rituals are [highly structured](#). They require rigidity, and must always be performed the "right" way. And they involve repetition: The same actions are done again and again. In other words, [they are predictable](#).

So even if they have no direct influence over the physical world, rituals [provide a sense of control](#) by imposing order on the chaos of everyday life.

It is of little importance whether this sense of control is illusory. What matters is that it is an efficient way of relieving anxiety.

This is what we found in two soon-to-be-published studies. In Mauritius, we saw that Hindus experienced lower anxiety after they performed temple rituals, which we measured using heart rate monitors. And in the U.S., we found that Jewish students who attended more group rituals had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

## **Rituals provide connection**

Collective rituals require coordination. When people come together to perform a group ceremony, they may dress alike, move in synchrony or chant in unison. And by acting as one, [they feel as one](#).

Indeed, my colleagues and I found that coordinated movement makes people trust each other more, and even [increases the release of neurotransmitters](#) associated with bonding.

By aligning behavior and creating shared experiences, rituals forge a sense of belonging and common identity which transforms individuals into cohesive communities. As [field experiments](#) show, participating in collective rituals increases generosity and even makes people's [heart rates synchronize](#).

## Tools for resilience

It is not surprising then that people around the world are responding to the coronavirus crisis by creating new rituals.

Some of those rituals are meant to provide a sense of structure and reclaim the sense of control. For example, comedian Jimmy Kimmel and his wife encouraged those in quarantine to hold [formal Fridays](#), dressing up for dinner even if they were alone.

Others have found new ways of celebrating age-old rituals. When the New York City Marriage Bureau shut down due to the pandemic, a Manhattan couple [decided to tie the knot](#) under the fourth-floor window of their ordained friend, who officiated the ceremony from a safe distance.

While some rituals celebrate new beginnings, others serve to provide closure. To avoid spreading the disease, families of coronavirus victims are holding [virtual funerals](#). In other cases, pastors have [administered the last rites](#) over the phone.

People are coming up with a host of rituals to maintain a broader sense of human connection. In various European cities, people have started to go to their balconies at the same time every day to [applaud health care workers](#) for their tireless service.

In Mallorca, Spain, local policemen gathered to [sing and dance in the streets](#) for the people in lockdown. And in San Bernardino, California, a group of high school students synchronized their voices remotely to form a [virtual choir](#).

Ritual is an ancient and inextricable part of human nature. And while it may take many forms, it remains a powerful tool for promoting

resilience and solidarity. In a world full of ever-changing variables, [ritual](#) is a much-needed constant.

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