

# Rituals at End-of-Life



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## KEYWORDS

- Rituals • Rites • Ceremonies • End-of-life • Deathbed • Child death • Perinatal loss • Sacraments

## KEY POINTS

- Rituals include activities that involve gestures, words, and objects performed in selected places and sequences of time.
- Rituals at end of life (EOL) enhance the quality of life and support those dying and the living who grieve.
- Rituals at EOL contribute to the strength, capacity, and health of professional providers who cope with multiple death events.
- Rituals help the living to create continuing bonds with those dying, help with coping skills by increasing feelings of control and power, and assist with the finding of meaning in life.

## BACKGROUND: RITUALS AT END OF LIFE REFLECT, APPRECIATE, AND HONOR LIFE

One of the major themes to emerge from reports of dying patients and their surviving family members is the extreme importance of rituals at EOL.<sup>1–5</sup> A ritual has been defined as a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects performed in a specific place and sequence of time.<sup>6</sup> Rituals help participants to cross from their present situation to another and, therefore, describe an important change in status.<sup>5</sup> Rituals encase memories and link the past with the present.<sup>7,8</sup> Rituals are an antidote to powerlessness.<sup>9</sup> Rituals help patients find meaning in life, enter into a comfort zone, create memories that confirm life accomplishments, assuage a sense of loss, and create a roadmap for dying “the right way.”<sup>1,2,10,11</sup> Rituals address the need to comprehend existence in a meaningful way, establish relationships, attach order, and posit a place in the wonder and the mystery of life.<sup>8,11</sup> Rituals can help the dying focus on living rather than the processes of dying, giving richer meaning to each day of life.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of rituals for the dying not only are important to patients but also to family members and caregivers.<sup>1,8</sup> Rituals can involve religious themes and the use of material objects (such as rosary beads); and for those who

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claim no religious beliefs, rituals become an important substitute (such as the observance of a holiday, cooking special meals, or creating a legacy book). The search for meaning that can be found in rituals does not need to be overtly philosophic or religious on the grand scale; the search can be circumscribed, such as, "What has been the importance of my life for my family?" Rituals are multidimensional; they include any ceremony, rite, procedure, or behavior that is performed in a set manner. Rituals can be simple or complex, formal or informal, cultural or religious, instructive or constructive, private or public, individual or corporate, one-time or repetitive, passive or active, or rigid or flexible.<sup>3,7,11</sup>

Rituals allow expressing emotions; feeling secure in the midst of chaos; ordering experiences outside our control; reinforcing group ties; communicating thoughts, ideas, and feelings; reinforcing values; entering into a change of status; marking a rite of passage; expressing grief; articulating meaning and purpose; and transforming what is ordinary into the extraordinary, sacred, and holy.<sup>7</sup>

### **THE SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE OF RITUAL(S)**

Life-threatening illness is a crisis time for many who are laden with medical, psychological, social, and family ramifications.<sup>4</sup> As people approach death, there is also the distinct possibility for a spiritual crisis.<sup>12</sup> Spirituality is a human need and people have a variety of ways in which they find, or fail to find, transcendent meaning in the world around them.<sup>13</sup> The religious and spiritual realms can be hard to define, differentiate, and distinguish because they are often elusive concepts and carry many meanings. The National Consensus Project for Quality Palliative Care identifies spirituality as an essential domain of care.<sup>14,15</sup> Ferrell and Borneman<sup>15</sup> state that quality care for patients and families is not possible without quality spiritual care. For the purpose of this article, definitions of key terms follow.<sup>12,16</sup>

#### ***Spirituality***

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Spirituality is personal, individual and eclectic and reflects one's deep inner essence. Spirituality is a search for meaning; it is often ineffable and includes what is considered valued, important, and memorable. Spiritual practices may include prayer and the use of ritual.

#### ***Religion***

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Religion serves to delineate the beliefs that are shared by a group or a community of faith. Religion often specifies the ways that individuals or groups are to behave or act and may teach about some form of continuity after death. Religious rituals provide comfort to the bereaved in communal practices.<sup>13,17</sup>

Spirituality may be shaped by religious beliefs and is also impacted by cultural perspective and personal experiences during a lifetime. When confronting life-threatening illness, dying, and death, spiritual and religious beliefs may be called into question. Both religion and spirituality can play a key role in helping to make sense of illness, find strength, and create meaning.<sup>18</sup> The realms of spirit and belief can reduce feelings of fear and minimize uncertainty.<sup>12,18</sup> Many individuals benefit from the social support and pastoral care provided by the ministries of chaplains, clergy, spiritual advisors, and faith communities. Religious and spiritual factors may have positive effects on health, including enhanced positive coping skills, enhanced self-esteem, and increased feelings of control, hope, and strength.<sup>12,19</sup> Religious and spiritual factors may also have detrimental effects, including increased death anxiety, guilt, and fear to the point that health may be further

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