

## ► Releasing Through Ritual

Whether moving from one decade of life to another, letting go of a lost love or overcoming fear, rituals help us let go and allow a better version of ourselves to emerge



**FROM THE MOMENT WE'RE BORN,** rituals become a part of our lives. Birthday parties, weddings, graduation ceremonies and more have become traditions for many of us, helping us mark a time where we transition to a new stage in life — from one year to the next, from single life to sharing our life, or when leaving school for the working world.

We find comfort in these rituals, and often share them by celebrating with others. But what about applying this practice to other events in our lives, such as the ending of a love relationship, starting a new job or ending an old one? For these and other rites of passage in life, the practice of a ritual can help us let go and leave the past behind so we can emerge as new and better individuals.

In her book, “Transitions: How Women Embrace Change and Celebrate Life,” Abigail Brenner, MD, a board-certified psychiatrist and ordained interfaith minister, shares examples from

her own life and the lives of her clients on how rituals heal. She also offers several guided meditations to help along the way.

*Elevated Existence* spoke with Brenner on how and why rituals work, how to use them to let go of the past, and what should be included in them.

### **Elevated Existence (EE): How and why do rituals help us heal and move from one point in our life to the next?**

**Abigail Brenner:** First, a ritual is a specific action(s) consciously taken with intention to mark and honor a significant event in one’s life such as a rite of passage or life transition, a personally meaningful event or milestone, annual holidays, religious observances and seasonal events. But in reality, rituals can be created for any number of events or transitions that one deems personally meaningful. Often people can’t move forward in their lives because they simply don’t know what to



Abigail Brenner,  
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do next. The idea that we can actually do something in response to an event that happens to us, to a change that is occurring in our lives, is very powerful. Rituals allow for the beginning of movement forward.

Aside from the idea of taking action, rituals accomplish several other things. They provide an ongoing way to structure our lives. In an ever-changing often chaotic world, rituals provide a sense of stability and continuity to our lives. In addition, rituals remove us from the ordinary flow of life and allow us to enter sacred space. It's out of the realm of ordinary time and space that rituals create their magic through the mystical language of symbolic enactment. In other words, rituals encourage us to engage all of our senses and when we do, we are often able to bypass the intellect in favor of what we know intuitively. The result: creative solutions to difficult problems are often found.

**EE: What is the difference between performing a ritual alone or with a group? Should they be used for different things?**

**Brenner:** The important thing is the intention you set for the ritual or rite of passage, but it's totally up to the individual whether they perform a ritual alone or in a group. Milestones such as birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death — the big 4 — are often performed in community with others, for these are the major events of a lifetime that almost all individuals go through within the context of the culture or society in which they are raised. However, some people choose to mark

these major life transitions apart from their community — for example, a couple privately exchanging marriage vows apart from the big celebratory party.

Some rituals, and especially rites of passage, are better performed alone. An example of this is a vision quest — spending time alone in the wilderness to reflect on one's life or to seek answers. Another is a pilgrimage or a journey of self-discovery, for example when one is traveling alone. Many people mark major transitions in both ways: in community where prescribed rituals may already be in place, and with a personally created ritual to mark the event alone.

**EE: Besides birthdays, weddings, graduations — what other rites of passage do you recommend people create a ritual for and why?**

**Brenner:** Rituals can and should be created for almost any life event, milestone, turning point or revelatory experience. Examples of these are coming-of-age celebrations, starting a new job and/or promotion, moving one's home, ending of a relationship and/or divorce, grieving after death (apart from the funeral), joining or leaving the military, blending families together, and many, many more (including same-sex union, abortion or stillbirth, incarceration, entering a religious order apart from the religious ceremonies, etc.).

Creating and performing rituals for significant events grounds you solidly in that event. Again, the creation and performance of rituals appeals to one's intuitive side. After a person deals with the practical and logical consequences of a transition, ritual enactment further enhances the transition's meaning and significance, allowing for a holistic understanding of what that transition means on every level.

**EE: What are some examples of rituals you or your clients have created to help them through a difficult period?**

**Brenner:** There are several that come to mind. One woman created a "house blessing" ritual to mark the end of her marriage and the beginning of a new life as a single mother. She enlisted the aid of a Hindu priest to come to her home and



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perform several rituals to bless her new home and her new status. She utilized many ritual elements including fasting prior to the ceremony. During the ceremony, there was music and chanting; fire; fruit and flowers to make offerings; and prayer. This was a highly transformative experience for her.

Another woman wanted to mark her 50th birthday in the company of several close women friends. She crafted an elaborate ritual that ended with a fire ceremony. More than a celebration, this was a woman's coming to terms with the events (many difficult ones earlier in her life) leading up to this milestone, and the sharing of her story and gratitude for what she had achieved. Each participant was given a task to complete during the ceremony. Prior to the event, all of the participants were invited to bring offerings to be consumed by the fire (any object, picture, letters, etc.). This woman's goal was not only deeply personal but was meant to bring people together in community, to be witnesses for each other's lives.

Another interesting ritual centers on coming-of-age. Many cultures have ceremonies and celebrations for a young person's achieving adult status within the community. Instead of making this just a one- or two-day event, the idea is to create projects and rituals throughout the year leading up to the actual event that allows the young person to begin to assume responsibility for themselves as well as the community.

**EE: So many people have difficulty letting go of the past, especially when it comes to ending love relationships. Is there something you could recommend for processing this and opening up to a new relationship?**

**Brenner:** To let go of a relationship or to let go of the past can be a very painful experience, even if it's in our best interest. Whether we make a conscious decision to end a significant relationship or the decision is made for us, we're

bound to feel a sense of loss, and often anger and hurt. Before any ritual can be performed a person has to deal with the loss and allow themselves plenty of time to grieve.

Prolonged or incomplete grief may lead to bad choices in future relationships. If a person has not spent the time reflecting on what happened in the relationship, what went wrong, there may be "carry-over" from the past relationship into the present. In addition, individuals may enter into a relationship self-protective and hyper-vigilant and this may limit how loving, trusting and open they're willing to be in this new relationship. So the first part of this is about taking the time to reflect and understand what happened in order to complete, or put closure on the loss.

Then a ritual that symbolizes this understanding can be performed that will signify this closure and will allow for the ability to successfully move forward. Sometimes, something as simple as going on a trip alone, for example to a place of solitude, or on a retreat, may be enough to process and honor this transition. Or as one woman did, creating a more elaborate ritual: spending several days at home alone around the New Year reflecting on the meaning of the loss; reflecting on memories; collecting pictures and papers tied to the relationship; and taking care of herself. When all of that was completed, she offered her "gifts of the past" to the fire.

**EE: In the book, there is a story about Maggie and her fear of flying. How can someone use a ritual to get over fear or anxiety about something?**

**Brenner:** While I'd love to say that performing a ritual can totally take care of one's fear or anxiety, I can't. However, as in Maggie's story, there are practical steps that are needed to help conquer fear and anxiety at first. If you follow Maggie's story, there was a great deal of determination on her part to conquer those things that had so limited her life. This is Maggie's setting her



intention unconditionally. You'll note that she enlisted expert help with this problem. Within the program she chose to help her accomplish her goal, there were "ritualistic" things to do, methods she was taught, to overcome her fear. She practiced these and eventually was able to fly. For her, the "rite of passage" was her flight to iconic Paris.

So my first and probably most important point is to get whatever help you need to accomplish the task at hand. After you've received the necessary tools to accomplish your goal(s), probably using the traditional model of a rite of passage is best. That means setting the intention, leaving the familiar, moving into the unknown, and returning to your life, but transformed in and by the process. Although you may not know what will happen along the way or what the outcome will be, if you understand the stages along the way, you'll know that you're moving in the right direction and that completion of the process is inevitable.

**EE: How does someone go about creating a ritual? What things need to be included?**

**Brenner:** Before you perform a ritual you must set your intention. What do you want the ritual to accomplish? It's important to get completely clear about this point. There may be many things you may wish to accomplish, but it may be easier to specifically focus on your most important goal.

Ritual elements are the essential tools for creating a ritual or ceremony. These elements are basic categories:

- **Purification:** cleansing with water, smudging, anointing with oil
- **Calling on Spirit:** prayer, seeking the blessings of ancestors
- **Calling in the Light:** lighting candles, holding a fire ceremony to consume the old
- **Sacrificing:** fasting, practicing silence, meditating
- **Gathering in Community:** giving or exchanging gifts, feasting
- **Worshipping:** praying, making offerings, creating altars
- **Communing:** singing, dancing, making symbolic gestures to commune with Spirit

- **Exorcising:** getting rid of the negative by burning, burying or severing
- **Symbolically Dying:** crossing a threshold, moving in and out of a circle
- **Rebirth:** taking or receiving a new name, dressing in symbolic clothing

You can choose one or several in combination to create your desired ritual or more elaborate rite of passage.

When will you perform your ritual? Once you've set your intention and created your ritual, it's time to perform the ritual. You have to make sure you have enough time without distraction or interruption to accomplish your task. Of course, it gets much more complicated if more people are involved, so you may have to plan far enough ahead to accommodate everyone.

Your next step is to separate yourself from the familiar. This means you are now moving from the profane to the sacred; from the ordinary into the extraordinary. Essentially, you are allowing yourself to transcend time and space as you think of it in the usual sense. When you perform a ritual, nothing else matters.

The ritual enactment now allows you to cross over the threshold, stepping into the unknown, into uncharted territory. Here, you allow yourself to move from the old into the new.

Finally, the ritual completed, you return to your life transformed by the experience.

**ABOUT ABIGAIL BRENNER, MD**

Abigail Brenner is a board-certified psychiatrist and an ordained interfaith minister. She is the author of "Transitions: How Women Embrace Change and Celebrate Life" and "SHIFT: How to Deal When Life Changes." She is currently in private practice and lives and works in New York City and San Francisco. For more information, visit [www.abigailbrenner.com](http://www.abigailbrenner.com). **EE**

