

# THE POWER OF RITUALS

→ If you're looking to cut stress and boost wellbeing, the answer could be as simple as adding a meaningful habit to your daily routine

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**A**rianna Huffington famously follows an elaborate four-step bedtime wind-down every day. Tennis lovers will know the intricacies of Rafael Nadal's 19-step court ritual before a game. But it's not just celebrities who like a good ritual. Even among us regular folk, more and more of us are making like civil servant Jeannine Ritchot, who religiously starts every day at 5.30am running with her sheepdog Fergus, before heading into the office. You'd think she'd be exhausted by the time she gets there, but this morning ritual is, in fact, her secret weapon. 'I clear my head and map out how I'm going to tackle the day's challenges,' she says. 'It makes me feel a million times better.'

And she's far from alone. While hurtling through a park at dawn may not be everyone's cup of tea, Jeannine's daily run reflects a growing interest in the power of rituals to help us cope with and improve our lives. Recent years have seen many bestselling titles offering rituals that promise to transform our lives – including Hal Elrod's *The Miracle Morning* (John Murray, £10) and Arianna Huffington's *The Sleep Revolution* (Harmony, £8.99). There are also mobile apps, including *Rituals* (free; iTunes or Google Play), which helps you take moments of 'me-time', and *Fabulous* (free; Google Play) for reaching your fitness, diet, sleep and motivation goals.

## Ritual vs routine

Starting a ritual is a chance to introduce positive change to your lifestyle, says media psychologist Emma Kenny. 'Unlike routine behaviours like brushing your teeth, they're meaningful processes that you do with

intent. Rather than just going through the motions, you consciously choose to make a ritual part of your life.' You don't necessarily have to do them daily: 'It could be something you do on the weekend, or at a certain time of year – like a spring clean,' she adds.

While routines might have a neutral or even negative effect on our health (like an excessive wine habit), rituals are, by definition, good for us. Coaching psychologist Jessica Chivers (jessicachivers.com) explains, 'Rituals are nourishing, whether that's in ►

Laying out your kit is an easy way to elevate exercise from a daily chore into a positive action





a literal sense, like eating a healthy breakfast every day, or a psychologically enriching activity, such as keeping a gratitude journal.'

## Why now?

Far from just a 21st-century fad, the notion of 'ritual' has its roots in traditional religious ceremonies like the Catholic Mass. According to Kenny, wellbeing rituals function in a similar way: to give our lives a deeper meaning. 'As we become more secular as a society, our personal rituals help create order and purpose. The difference is that we focus on ourselves as individuals, rather than as part of a religious group.'

Rituals are also closely connected to another growing macro-trend: mindfulness. Kenny says, 'It's a practice that's full of rituals, from mindful breathing and eating to walking and gratitude – it's about being in the moment. This helps us to feel like we're living with purpose, not just existing.'

Chivers agrees. 'At its most simple, mindfulness is about focusing on one thing at a time. If you've committed to a ritual, you're likely to be doing it in a mindful way,' she explains.

## Make your own rules

While there's no shortage of highly publicised rituals to follow, Chivers stresses that it's important to create your own: 'Take celebrity rituals as your point of inspiration. But remember they have a different body, mind and set of resources. Choose

## Jessica Chivers' tips on creating your own ritual

**FIND BALANCE** 'A ritual can act as a counterbalance to a busy life. 'For instance, if you're a mother looking after young children, then a ritual might be based on self-care'

**THINK ABOUT THE END GOAL** 'Ask yourself, "What outcome do I want?". This might be joy or relaxation. Mine is the latter so for 10 minutes a day, I listen to Tibetan singing bowls and breathe deeply.'

**KEEP REPEATING** 'The "right" ritual is one you'll want to do over and over.'

something that works for you.' (Check out her tips above for creating your own rituals.) Beginning a ritual is much like setting up a healthy eating regime or an exercise plan, adds Kenny. 'The biggest lie you can tell yourself is that you will start tomorrow. Start small, but start now.' And if you miss a day or two, don't worry. While rituals are, by nature, repeated behaviours, Chivers says that a 'degree of flexibility' is important. 'Don't be too hard on yourself – the world won't end if you miss it.' The trick, she says, is to remember why you are doing the ritual. 'Say you're learning to play the piano to bring some beauty into your life, and you can't play one day. If you go to a concert, or listen to music, you've achieved your goal in a different way.'

So why not harness the power of a ritual this year and see what it can do for you?

## 'THE RITUAL THAT CHANGED MY LIFE'

'Every evening, wherever I am, I stare at a wall for 10 minutes – preferably a white one. My husband thinks it's hilarious, but it helps me to be mindful.'  
**Emma Kenny, psychologist**

'As a working mum, wearing different "uniforms" helps me to put up boundaries between my professional and private

roles. When I get home from the office, I immediately change into my "Mum" clothes.'  
**Olivia Horne, happiness coach**

'After my morning coffee, I go for a jog – even if only for 10 minutes. This centres me all day, and I'll get writing ideas.'  
**Jill Weisenberger, dietician**