Using Private Rituals with Clients for Personal Transformation After Loss

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“Talking with a nice lady on the phone. She has a case of the midwinter spiritual rot. And a terminal cold she's had since September 1.

‘Well,’ rasps she, ‘you don’t ever get depressed, do you?’

‘Listen,’ says [Fulghum], ‘I get lows it takes extension ladders to get out of.’

‘So what do you do?’ asks she. ‘I mean, what DO YOU DO?’

Nobody ever pinned me down quite like that before…” (1986, p. 110)

What Do I Do Now?
How do we help our clients (and ourselves) create transformational change?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Orientation/Assumptions About Human Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive-Behavioral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconscious</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Private Rituals

Client-Centered & Emotion-Focused
Psychodynamic & Psychoanalytic
"How I keep a peaceful energy in the prep room: First, I say in my mind I guess what you could call a prayer. I tell the deceased what I'm about to do and why I'm doing it to help their family ... and apologize in advance for anything I might have to do that is less than graceful....Our job may be scary to some, but we are not scary people. None of us could do this work without a lot of love.”

– Kellen Stromsider (Picture & Quote from Facebook. Used with permission)

What is a “Private Ritual”

* (def): any meaningful, symbolic action done while alone or in a small group

* Need only be meaningful to the individual
* Need not be formal or lengthy, but may be
* May be done once or recurring
* May or may not incorporate aspects of public, religious rituals

Habit vs. Ritual?

Habit = Mindless
(That’s not inherently a bad thing)

Ritual = Mindful
“Since 2014, I have been observing a ‘tech sabbath’ – twenty-four hours of not using my laptop or phone from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown.... As darkness comes, I stand in front of my window and watch the sky for a few moments. Then I light a candle, and while holding it, I sing a song I learned in childhood to enter the magical and mysterious sabbath time.”

Quick Reflection

Using my definition, do you have any daily “habits” that are actually private rituals? (Add to the Chat)

Private Ritual:
any meaningful, symbolic action done while alone or in a small group

How Can Private Rituals Help Us & Our Clients?

11 Universal Challenges

1. I’m wounded
2. I feel empty
3. I feel cut off
4. I’m an imposter
5. I feel stuck
6. I’m grieving
7. I’m adrift
8. I feel alone
9. I feel orphaned
10. I feel blocked
11. I feel small

11 Universal Intentions

Begin Healing
Cultivate Renewal
Find Reconciliation
Mark Beginnings
Navigate Transitions
Integrate Losses
Seek Purpose
Bond With Your Tribe
Honor Legacies
Express Creativity
Transcend Oneself

Feedback?
What's so great about rituals?

1) Give Us a Sense of Control
- “What do I do now?”
- Funerals & after

2) Give Us Symbolic Actions & Objects
- Overcome practical limits imposed by loss

3) Provide a Time- & Place-Limited Container
- Focus for a set period of time
- Birthday of Loved One

4) Validate Our Actions
- Permission to say things that often go unsaid

How Do We Help Clients with Rituals?
- Understand the benefits of rituals
  - 5 Features of Rituals
  - Advantages of private rituals
- Share examples of the most common types of rituals
  - 5 Archetypal Rituals
- Help brainstorm & plan their rituals
5) Teach Us About Ourselves
   - “I didn’t expect to react that way”

Advantages of private rituals (I’m Not Anti-Public Ritual)

- Public rituals are challenging because we must:
  - coordinate a time
  - reserve a place
  - agree on the rituals, symbols, traditions
  - find an officiant(s)
  - plan the specifics
  - make time to travel & attend
  - cover any costs

Advantages of Private Rituals for the Bereaved

- Can be done just for 1 person or small group
- Can focus on their unique needs
- Easier: timing, preparation, implementation
- Don’t have to agree on meaning/symbols
- Gives them a sense of control
- No public pressure
- Can include “complicated” reactions & situations

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5 Archetypal Rituals

These rituals can take many different forms, can be seen in many cultural traditions, and can be used for all of the 11 Intentions.
Archetypal Ritual #1: Pilgrimages

Not just for religious quests
Power of Special Places
Rare vs Recurring
Holy Places

“As I sat in my truck at Grandview Cemetery in Maryville, Tennessee, this morning listening to the rain and waiting for the sun to rise, I realize how bloody busy my life is. So today, I’m taking it slowly. I’m looking around me for the beauty that’s always been there. I’m stopping to smell the smells, see the sights, feel the love.”

(Facebook Post)

Holy Places

“It’s never too late to visit your mom on Mother’s Day! 11:45 at night in a cemetery is so relaxing for some reason.”

(Facebook Post)

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Universal Intentions

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Pilgrimage to...

- a retreat center for 5 days of silence
- spring training w/your brother each year
- tell them you’re sorry in person
- visit prospective graduate programs
- take a walkabout or “gap year”
- visit gravesite to share new realizations
- tackle the Appalachian Trail post-divorce
- a concert or following a band
- revisit your childhood home/town
- a writer’s retreat to start your book
- the Camino de Santiago or Hajj

Quick Reflection

Where have you gone for a pilgrimage?

(Type in the Chat)

Archetypal Ritual #2: Linking Objects

Objects associated with memories & sense of connection
Linking Objects

- Mementos, tokens, keepsakes, etc.
- **Caution:** Difference between objects that facilitate healthy continuing bonds versus a substitute for our deceased loved one...
- For example, the difference between a locket reminding me of my mother versus the locket fully replacing my mother

Quick Reflection

Do you have any linking objects?
(Type in the Chat)

Archetypal Rituals #3: Daily Rituals
Don’t have to be elaborate or public

Quick Reflection

What are some daily or recurring rituals you use?
(Type in the Chat)
Archetypal Ritual #4: Artistic Expression

Archetypal Rituals #5: Writing

Kindred Spirits Mailbox
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Helping Clients Prepare & Process

- Preparing for a Ritual
  - Brainstorm ideas & trusting intuition
  - Revisit themes/concerns they’ve mentioned before
  - Consider which of the 11 Challenges they are facing
  - In the office vs. Outside the office?
  - Realistic Expectations/Permission
  - Ownership of their own ritual & timeline

Helping Clients Prepare & Process

- Processing the ritual
  - How’d it go? Thoughts, feelings, reactions, etc.
  - What will you take forward?
  - Recurring?
  - Other rituals?

Private Rituals

- We have 11 common challenges
- Private rituals help bring together thoughts, actions, feelings into meaningful, personal transformation
- Can be tailored to the needs of the individual
- 5 archetypal rituals can be used for countless needs & situations
- Our role is to help clients plan & process the experience
Questions

Thank You

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