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OPINION - Choose to reshape your Christmas rituals

- Angela Reeve and Michael Kelly



Rituals: Relationships Australia say we should focus on the positives during a different Christmas in 2020. Picture: Shutterstock.
Rituals.

Why do we have them? Why are they important to us?

There are many reasons.

Rituals comfort us - they are familiar to us and can give us a sense of connectedness and togetherness.

They are often an expression of how we see ourselves and how we choose to live our lives - of what's important to us.

So, they express our identity.

They can provide a sense of contentment, security and expression.

Through rituals we build our families and communities. We are motivated and moved by them. We are ourselves.

Various studies show that people need rituals particularly in uncertain times.

In fact, the more pressured or stressed we are, the more we rely on, and cling to, rituals to give us structure, predictability and control.

The most important events in our lives are marked by rituals and ceremonies - births, weddings, anniversaries, special holidays, and yes, Christmas.

But what will Christmas 2020 look like and how will it be different as a result of the restrictions made necessary by COVID-19?

How will the rituals we have with families and friends for this special holiday season be disrupted or affected - and how do we manage or cope with these changes?

There will be differences.

There may be limits to our capacity to see family and friends interstate.

We may be reticent to travel or holiday as we usually would.

Usual festive events may be downgraded or even cancelled.

Those that do go ahead will do so under the restrictions of social distancing.

We will continue to live under the shadow of the pandemic at a time of year usually marked by joy and sharing and congregating.

So how do we keep the spirit of Christmas alive this year, and how do we remain positive and uplifted?

What measures can we introduce to ensure that Christmas 2020 remains a joyous occasion?

The spirit of Christmas crosses community divisions and becomes about all of us living together - COVID-19 has only emphasised this.

An inclusive Christmas spirit is about making connections with community across the fence and down the street, supporting newcomers to our communities or those who have struggled this year to learn or be reminded of the rituals we do well, and who we aspire to be.

Rituals of inclusivity and generosity of spirit increase our sense of well-being and safety. People might consider, for example:

- Go for a family walk and talk with neighbours. Kids being prepared with appropriate 'Dad jokes'.
- Deliberately connect with those living alone, the elderly, solo parents and those who may need some additional support. Then do it every year.
- Go the extra step and connect with someone who you have been meaning to get in touch with!
- Do one kind thing, make it a ritual and share it.

Positive psychology considers the value of focusing on what builds strengths as opposed to focussing on psychological weaknesses.

Instead of focusing on relieving the negative aspect of our lives, positive psychology encourages us to focus on building the positive and observing the ongoing effects this has on the neurochemical drivers of mood.

If we consider this in terms of what we can contribute to our Christmas rituals:

- Humour should never, ever be underestimated! Choose games and activities that make people laugh. The endorphins released in the brain from laughter are the feel-good chemicals and laughter decreases stress-making hormones. So, have some fun, charades is back, or Pictionary, or build strawberry houses with toothpicks or dust off the Twister game.
- Grow a Gratitude Tree in the workplace or the home. Borrowed from Thanksgiving traditions, a 'Gratitude Tree' grows from the accumulation of handwritten messages of thanks and appreciation as an interactive display of shared gratitude. Imagine the rush of positive endorphins from a tree full of heartfelt, personal compliments.
- Or, simply include a genuine compliment when giving a card or sending a message

Notice that when we articulate sentiments of love and connection, we can feel a little awkward, a little vulnerable.

We can recognise the bravery this requires and foster this in those around us.

A powerful sense of positivity and being uplifted arrives soon after.

This year of challenge and change has provided us with the opportunity to choose joy, to reinvent and reconsider.

Rituals that reflect resilience, gratitude, adaptability, inclusivity and humour will assist us to reflect on what is important to us and those close to us, to readjust our sails and to acknowledge what it is that makes meaning in our lives.

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