



Revering in routine

Routine can be the difference between success and failure and can even improve your wellbeing and propensity to live a happy, meaningful life.

Words MARIE ROWLAND

In an age of disruption and chasing spontaneity there's still something to be said for predictability and process. However, when the notion of routine is raised, a shudder of boredom is the response. Many creative types or innovators feel that the drudgery of routine is an enemy of the imagination. One of the most iconic and revered of American writers, John Steinbeck, lamented, "It's a hard thing to leave any deeply routinized life, even if you hate it." Yet, when novelty is all you seek, you forget the subtle power of routine and how it can be woven into your life to enhance it and stabilise you.

Finding your groove

While variety may be the spice of life, in times of adversity, having those rituals and routines can be the glue that keeps our lives intact. It's not merely the routine that shores us up but the acknowledgment that our values are stored in these very habits.

Routine allows you to default to auto-pilot when life throws you a curve ball. When couples are going through a separation, for example, the daily and at times mundane routines of making school lunches, dropping kids at soccer or going for that early-morning run can actually save them from falling apart.

A routine not only can act as an effective coping mechanism but it also reminds you of what matters to you: your kids or your health, for instance. Falling back onto a routine can help make sense of what can be an incomprehensible situation at the time.

Indeed, a well-rehearsed routine can even save you from yourself. When your emotional life is in turmoil, it actually affects your physiology. Stress hormones deliver messages to either run away or make a stand. You can become confused

Marissa's tale

When mother-of-two Marissa learned one evening over dinner that her husband of 12 years was leaving, she went into a depressing tailspin. She suddenly had to process information she couldn't make sense of. Yet in the back of her mind she knew she had to proverbially keep the show on the road.

While dealing with this news, she found comfort in the everyday activities that had to be undertaken and that she could carry out without thinking. Even in the boring tasks she found reassurance and by simply performing them on a daily basis she gained a sense of purpose and dignity.

Marissa did make changes, though. Always a runner, she found the cardio pace agitating as it spiked her adrenaline levels, leaving her at times overwhelmed. So, at the age of 44, she tried yoga for the first time. It wasn't easy and she found the mantras all a bit silly.

Then one day it just clicked. She was going through the motions of a Sun Salutation, a sequence of poses to create a flow of movement. She'd initially found it repetitive and boring but, as she felt the heat generate through her body, she was suddenly struck with an inner peace and sense of acceptance. Her practice had saved her and what was once routine became ritual — a ritual that brought joy, a new community of friends and a regaining of self.

and disoriented as you try to create order out of chaos.

You brace yourself and, beyond needing love and support from others, you fall back onto your own store of resilience as you resist or accept change. This is where well-established routines can be your salvation.

Routine is child's play

Research shows that children and adolescents are experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression. The diagnoses of children with ADHD where medication is dispensed indicate how fast their world has become.

Just when you got used to the term Millennials, along comes the descriptor Linksters, coined for those born after 2002. This generation has grown up knowing technology literally from the day they were born; it's highly likely they peered into a screen before a page. Unlike their generational predecessors, they are dealing with or will soon face the avalanche of social media, smartphones, TVs, apps and virtual concept games. Now, more than ever, those in this cohort, also known as Generation Z, require boundaries and routines.

Routines and boundaries actually keep children safe and relieve them of the pressures of always being online emotionally and mentally. Soccer on Monday and violin on Wednesday means they can be liberated from idle cyber play and they know what is going to happen each day. Some kids even request the same lunch day after day, week after week, term after term, simply because they gain solace from the reliability found in their lunchboxes. They are facing so much change that this regular fixture in their lives provides comfort in a world of disruption.

When repeating yourself is a virtue

How irritated do we get when people say something over and over? Isn't it "nagging"? The words "repeat", "routine" and "regular" evoke a sense of tedium. One of the all-time greatest tennis players, Martina Navratilova, shunned



Regularly practising yoga or meditation is a beneficial routine to keep you grounded amid any uncertainty you're facing in life.

routine as a motivation killer: "Follow an exercise routine in which there is no routine. Whenever something becomes routine, you don't pay attention to it any more. I rarely do the same routine twice, which keeps me interested and focused."

Undoubtedly, the advice from a world-class athlete such as Navratilova should not be sneezed at. But you can rest assured that while she was making her way to the top her whole life would have been regulated by a strict routine. That's how she became number one.

The late author, essayist and commentator Christopher Hitchens would agree with the sports star. He was even more vehement in his critique of routine when he stated, "Try your hardest to combat atrophy and routine." For him routine was akin to wasting away.

Yet there are those who would eschew these condemnations of routine. The famous British author Graham Greene had the inviolable habit of writing 500 words every day for 20 years. This routine

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meant he never had to find motivation — he just did it. His routine was so sacrosanct that he would stop, even in the middle of a sentence or scene, if he had reached his quota.

A century earlier, another of his countrymen, Anthony Trollope, had a similar approach to his writing. A humble postal worker, he wrote for three hours every morning before going to his fulltime job. He is considered one of Britain's greatest authors.

It can be said that this approach sounds painfully boring and submitting to routine inevitably sacrifices spontaneity, but what's so great about being spontaneous? Life is about momentum and, if you have to constantly invent excitement to stay motivated or feel creative, then you are continually in stop-start mode. All you are doing is thinking and trying to come up with better ways to find fulfilment. Routine allows you to find a rhythm or flow where you not only get things done but are relieved of the pressure to constantly reinvent the wheel — or, even worse, reinvent yourself.



Many who disparage this approach would rightly say this is process driven as opposed to outcome driven. To counter this notion, it could be argued that life itself is a process and death is the outcome. So being committed to the process means you can be in the now, where things get done. Further, when creative brilliance strikes, you have systems in place to receive and act on this piece of white lightning.

Routine as respite

Sometimes it's not brilliance that strikes but disaster. When you face an unexpected crisis, what actually occurs is a disruption to self and you scramble to restore your former life and all you value.

This is no more evident than when a natural disaster hits and there is the trauma of both financial and physical loss. In a single day, your fundamental life pillars are dismantled and all structure crumbles. In these instances, when you are scrambling for survival, you lose all your touchstones and are robbed of the ability to think and plan. As a result, your values that are stored in these routines are lost and you can lose sight of all that matters to you. At times like this you crave those routines that anchored you to a life that made sense to you.

The loss of structure is not confined to physical disasters but can apply to all versions of loss, from losing a job to losing a loved one. This is when you miss routine the most. If you stick to your routines you have time to think; you can create space for joy and recovery to occur. The English have a time-honoured ritual of having a cup of tea when it all gets "a bit much". In times of tragedy, this may seem like a wholly inadequate response — but it's the very simplicity of this set play that allows you to combat the overwhelm so equanimity and calm can be restored.

When routine becomes ritual

The Japanese take tea making to even greater lengths as they intrinsically understand the value of this ritual. It's about honouring and sharing the human experience. By slowing time, you can be present, bearing witness to your own life and appreciating those who inhabit your world, giving it value and purpose. In these types of ritualistic



acts, people make choices to plan to protect what they can't replace: their relationships.

It's when routine becomes ritual that you find restoration and peace. Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and even the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) are all steeped in ritual and ancient traditions. Modern-day philosopher and avowed atheist Alain de Botton, in his book *Religion for Atheists*, acknowledges the beauty of ritual in religion and how it affords a sense of meaning and belonging.

Religions and spiritual or mystic practices use rituals to bring people together as they form a community. Whether it be the five daily calls to prayer in Islam or the chiming of the bells on Sunday morning in the Christian faith, there is that sense of inclusion and comfort as people congregate in common belief.

Indian yogi and guru Paramhansa Yogananda, born in 1893 and responsible for introducing the teachings of meditation to Westerners through his book *Autobiography of a Yogi*, made this simple philosophical observation and, whether you are spiritual or not, there is a beautiful truth implicit in the words: "You must methodise your life. God created routine. The sun shines until dusk and the stars shine until dawn."

The benefits of being stuck in a routine

Not kicking a habit can be the healthiest choice you ever make. While there may be many naysayers, it can be said

that routine frees you from the need to constantly be inspired and make choices. In any case, who needs more choice nowadays? Indeed, in a world that worships spontaneity, routine is a bit of a novelty but it is undoubtedly a path to anxiety mitigation. Indeed, it can be liberating as it gives you an orbit of control in your world.

Much has been written about the power of habit. After all, at a primal level we are all creatures of habit. This need to create and to conform to behavioural patterns has been with us since hunter-gatherer times.

As a concession to those who would cry that routine is the death of creativity and fun, they are right in saying that people who get stuck in the rut of routine can become close-minded and unprepared to try new things. Routines should never get in the way of open-mindedness or the ability to regard change without hostility.

Often, couples lament that their lives have become routine but it may be that they have stopped looking at each other with fresh eyes. Routines are there to support the personal and professional ambitions of people and to provide comfort when life goes awry.

If variety is the spicy curry of life, then routine is the rice that complements that dish. Remember, life can have routines without becoming routine. 🍋

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