



A Death Anniversary Ritual

by Hope Edelman, author of *Motherless Daughters* and *The AfterGrief*
with ritual & ceremony inspiration from *Be Ceremonial*

The following ceremony was developed with the support of **Be Ceremonial** to commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's death. It was co-created by a group of women in the Motherless Daughters Community and the founders of Be Ceremonial, an App that empowers people to create their own ceremonies.

As the seasons change and the calendars turn over, year after year, the anniversary of a loved one's death – or a “deathiversary”, as it's been called – keeps coming around.

The larger culture doesn't have a way to spend this day, so it's usually up to us to come up with a plan.

The first two death anniversaries may feel particularly important, since they occur while we're still trying to adjust to a day-to-day world without our person in it.

These can be days of contemplation or renewed sorrow, as we revisit the events around a loved one's death. The feel of the air, the flowers in bloom, the slant of the sun, any of these sensory events can trigger memories of that time.

It's perfectly normal to experience a dip in functioning as the one-year anniversary arrives. That's when we realize we've made it through a full year of “firsts” without the loved one – only to discover that we're now facing another year without them.

It's also normal to experience an emotional dip at the two-year point, too. Studies show this is often when the true permanence of a loss sinks in.

Some religions and ethnicities have rituals to help mourners mark an annual passage of time. These rituals are important because they offer structure and meaning, and create a container for natural emotions.

Ritual also helps establish continuity between past, present and future: A past in which the relationship existed in the physical world; the present in which our lives continue without them; and a future in which they'll be remembered. This can be a beautiful way to honor an ongoing connection with a loved one and acknowledge that this person still occupies an important place in our hearts.

A ritual doesn't have to be elaborate. It only needs to be meaningful to those who perform it. Visiting the cemetery every year, lighting a memorial candle, or getting together with loved ones to share stories are all examples of simple rituals. Perhaps you are doing some of them already.

It's been 40 years since my mother died in the dark hours of a July morning, and every year on the anniversary of her death I still try to do something meaningful to honor the relationship we shared. That might mean showing photos of her to my daughters, sharing stories with my siblings, or getting my nails done, which was something we liked to do together. My mother always had the most beautifully manicured nails.

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The suggestions below are descriptive, not prescriptive, meaning you are invited to add your own elements, beliefs, and experiences to make this your own. We recommend including all of the components in your ceremony for the full experience, yet you can also choose individual items that are meaningful to you.

Ceremony Preparations

This ceremony was curated for an individual. If you'd like to invite others to join you, you can adapt the rituals accordingly. Either way, please be sure that you have emotional support leading up to and following the ceremony.

Prep Time: 15 minutes

Ceremony Time: Approximately one hour

Ingredients

- A small tray or table, and a tablecloth
- Significant objects or mementos connected to your loved one
- Flowers, candles, a special song to play, or other elements to add to your ceremony space
- A photo or visual representation of your loved one
- A piece of paper cut in a circle
- A marker
- A glass jar with a lid

Opening Ritual: Setting the Tone

- Choose a spot for your ceremony that holds meaning or feels comfortable for you. Set up a small table in your ceremony space to display the items you've collected.
- Consider placing a scarf or tablecloth down on a small table or on a tray and adding elements that bring beauty or intention to the space such as flowers, candles, or incense. You can play a special song, ring a bell, or spray an essential oil to help you drop into a ritual mindset.
- Feel free to introduce items from nature or from a special place you associate with your loved one's life or death. Ideas include soil, sand, or water from a significant spot, or a rock, feather, or flower you notice as you're preparing for the ceremony.

Honoring the Past: Acknowledging What Was

- One by one, hold each object or memento that you chose in connection to your loved one. As you place it on the table, write or speak a story you associate with that object, or acknowledge what it represents to you.
- Allow yourself to feel the full range of emotions that come up – happiness, sadness, regret, anger, humor, appreciation, longing, whatever you feel. Let the emotions well up and then pass through you and then move on. Imagine them being carried away by a rushing stream and being deposited into a calm sea.
- After each item has been placed back on the story altar, you can move onto the next ritual.

Being Present: Acknowledging What Is

- Cut a piece of paper or cardstock into a circle. Write the word GRIEF on one side of the coin, and the word GRATITUDE on the other side. You're welcome to choose two other, seemingly opposing words as well.
- Hold the coin in your left hand with the GRIEF side facing up. Picture your grief as you feel it today in as much detail as you feel comfortable doing. What color is it, is it heavy or light, does it have a taste or smell? Sit with your grief for as long as you choose.
- Now switch the coin in your right hand with the word GRATITUDE facing up. Think about what you're grateful for that may be associated with or may have resulted from the loss in as much detail as possible: What does it look like, where in your body can you feel it most, does it have a taste or sound? This does not necessarily mean being grateful for the loss, but rather opening up to the possibility of feeling gratitude for anything that happened in the aftermath. Sit with your gratitude for as long as you choose.
- Finally, bring both your hands together, by your heart or in your lap, with the coin in between them and acknowledge the tension and the connection that exist between these

two polarities. Recognize that you can hold both at the same time, that they can both be true at once. Take a few deep breaths as you find room for them to coexist in a state of grace.

Intentions for the Future: Acknowledging What Will Be

- Think about who your loved one was, not only to you, but to others in their life. (You can invite friends and family to send in their thoughts or memories as well.) If you don't have many memories of your own, or if your memories are complicated, you're welcome to imagine what they might have been like or who you hope they would have been to you and in the world. You can choose single words, sentences, sayings, or quotes.
- Write down each word, thought, or message on a small piece of paper and place it into a glass jar that closes. You can use any container you have around the house, so long as it closes tightly and feels special to you. You can also decorate the jar if you're so inspired.
- Whenever you want to connect with your loved one, simply shake the glass jar, open the lid, and pull out a piece of paper. Sit with that word or message and consider what it stirs up in you. Maybe it reminds you of a story or a memory, or perhaps it invites you to consider something that's happened in your life recently.
- When you're ready, place that word back in the jar. Repeat this process whenever you want to fold your loved one's legacy into your daily life or your future.

Closing: Completing the Circle

- Carefully touch each piece on the altar or hold it for a moment. Acknowledge again what that object represents or means to you.
- If you played a song or released a scent during your opening rituals, you can repeat these actions as a way of bringing the ceremony journey full circle.
- If you lit a candle, blow it out now and watch the smoke dissipate and the wax harden.
- Thank yourself for the care and thought you put into this ceremony.

Post Ceremony Reflection

After the ceremony is complete, you may want to share what you experienced, either by writing it down in a journal or bringing it up in conversation with close relatives or friends.

Think about what the ceremony helped you realize or what it offered you. Remember, you can draw on the energy this ceremony created whenever you need to, and you can repeat any of these rituals, or adapt them, when you want to reconnect with the emotions you released or the feeling of being in your loved one's presence again.

Marking the End of the First Year of Mourning

The first anniversary after someone dies holds special significance. You've completed a year of so many firsts, such as a first birthday and a first holiday season without them.

To honor this transition, consider doing something or going somewhere for the very first time. Perhaps it is something they always talked about doing, or something you've wanted to do but held off on. It could be something as simple as sampling a new food or watching a movie they liked for the first time.

However you choose to honor this first anniversary, allow space for all of the emotions that surround the conclusion of your year of firsts. You might also consider creating a symbolic threshold, such as laying a piece of string or a long stick across the ground that you can step over to mark this transition from one period of time to the next. Take a deep breath and step across. You made it. You are a person who can do hard things.