

Your Life Is the Product of Your Rituals

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I just returned from a two-day conference where the only choices I had for lunch each day were sandwiches with a side of potato salad or chips. After eating this lunch, I found myself far less productive than I was in the morning. The meal was too heavy for me. In fact, for years I did not eat lunch at all, but when I am in a group, I often feel obligated.

I have never liked eating a big lunch during the workday. The very process of eating lunch slows me down and makes the rest of my day less productive. It is not that eating lunch is bad for me—it is just that through years of conditioning I have come to associate this particular ritual with all sorts of negative stuff.

My mother worked very hard when I was in elementary school. She left early for work and she didn't have time to make my lunch. Instead, I would generally have to ask her (or if she did not have the money, scrounge for change between couch cushions) for \$1.50 for a "hot lunch" at school. From my perspective, there were several problems with the hot lunch:

- First, the hot lunch food was terrible. Even six-year-olds easily understood that they were being served a substandard form of macaroni.
- Second, there was a bit of a stigma associated with getting the hot lunch because most of the kids who ate it got it for free due to their parents being on some form of welfare or public assistance.
- Third, because my mom couldn't make my lunch, I often didn't feel taken care of. Other kids at the school lunch table would get all sorts of homemade sandwiches, chips, and other goodies that their parents would pack for them. Not having this was depressing for me and created various unpleasant feelings of sadness, envy, and so forth.

When I got to junior high and then high school, it wasn't the hot lunch I didn't like but the multitude of choices for where to sit. There were the tables for athletes. There were the tables for good students. There were the tables for the druggies. There were tables for the good-looking people who did not play sports or use drugs. There were so many tables to choose from it was positively confusing. It was as if where you sat determined the sort of life you were going to have!

I was never comfortable where I was sitting. I didn't want to sit with the good students because girls did not like them. I didn't want to sit with the athletes because they were boring. I didn't want to sit with the people who used drugs because I did not want to be associated with them.

Regardless of where I sat, I was never 100% satisfied. I just did not want to define myself in one way or another. It did not seem worth it. When I was in ninth grade, I found myself not eating lunch and wandering between tables during lunch break. When I got a car, I started going out to lunch with people on a daily basis. I enjoyed this more—but still I never really liked lunch much at all.

When I was practicing law, I had lunch each day at a Chinese restaurant that was not too far from my office. I would usually go with a few colleagues who did not like their jobs, and the discussion would revolve around how bad work was or office gossip or some other trite topic. Also, the food at this particular Chinese restaurant contained MSG and I would come out of lunch feeling tired and depressed about my job. After a while I realized I needed to be careful not to eat lunch with the people who were getting into trouble at work. I did not like this either.

In a work environment at least, I have never been able to get lunch right. In fact, as far as I am concerned going to lunch is the worst part of the day. It is all downhill from there. After lunch I am generally tired, a little bit down, more cynical, and less motivated than I was before lunch. Regardless of the reasons for feeling the way I do, my opinion is simply that I am much better off not eating lunch.

Are there parts of your life that sap your energy? If you find yourself feeling a particular way on an ongoing basis—whether good or bad—it is probably the result of some ritual that you are following. How we feel, how productive we are, and the results we get in our lives are always the result of a ritual that we take part in.

On the second day of this conference I was attending, after eating two roast beef sandwiches, a bag of chips, and an chocolate chip cookie at lunch, I was really tired and feeling generally unmotivated. I loved the people I had lunch with. It was the meal that did me in.

At that point I decided the best thing to do was to get a group of people together and take them to a Bikram yoga class. Practicing Bikram yoga is one ritual that has always made me feel good. Afterward I feel relaxed, centered, awake, and alert—just generally good. Since I was hosting the conference, I made sure we stopped it a little early so that we would not miss the yoga class. I took several people to the class and afterward one of the participants came up to me and said:

"If I could feel this way all the time I would love it!"

Shortly after that, another person came up to me and said something very similar.

When I heard these two statements I realized that I was using this particular ritual—going so far as to end a conference early—so that I could feel the way I always feel after taking one of these Bikram yoga classes. I was doing my best to replace a negative emotion with a positive emotion—a negative ritual with a positive ritual.

- Many people exercise because—for them—it is a positive ritual.
- Many people read books because—for them—it is a positive ritual.
- Many people spend time with their families because—for them—it is a positive ritual.
- Many people go to church or temple because—for them—it is a positive ritual.
- Many people spend time with pets because—for them—it is a positive ritual.

- Many people watch their diets closely because—for them—it is a positive ritual.

In fact, if you look at most people's lives, you will see that their lives are defined to some extent by the rituals that they follow. The rituals you follow will determine, in large part, the ultimate quality of your life. These rituals will also determine the level of success you have (and/or the level of failure).

For me, going to lunch is a ritual that really does me no good. I do not like it and it makes me unhappy. This is a bad ritual for me. For most people going to lunch is not a bad ritual. For me, though, it is.

In terms of your job, it is very likely there are certain rituals that are benefiting you and others that are not.

- It could be the amount of socializing you do outside of work with your coworkers and superiors—this may or may not benefit you.
- It could be planning your workday—this may or may not benefit you.
- It could be demanding of yourself that you make a certain number of sales calls each day—this may or may not benefit you.
- It could be getting up early and exercising before work—this may or may not benefit you.

Whatever rituals you choose to follow (or not follow) are going to affect your ultimate destiny and the quality of your life.

While the particular ritual I have adopted of not eating lunch may sound silly, in reality it is quite serious. Eating lunch slows me down mentally and saps my energy. If I were to eat lunch on a daily basis, the odds are pretty good that I would not feel as good the rest of the day—or be as productive. Over the long term, this would add up to reduced productivity, reduced happiness, and a reduced quality of life.

Any emotion you have on a consistent basis is likely the result of some ritual you are following. If you look at the quality of your life and the results you are getting, you will generally see that a ritual is behind it.

For more than a decade, I have run a legal recruiting firm. Through the years I have generally demanded that the recruiters I employ work in an office outside of their home. I require that the recruiters get up each day and go to an office where they are available to take phone calls, meet with people, and get their work done. I have certainly made exceptions when there are extenuating circumstances, but this is my general policy.

My reason behind this policy is that I have noticed over and over recruiters who work from home rarely succeed. In fact, the odds are severely stacked against them. In more than 90% of the cases where a recruiter works from home, that person ends up failing at the job. Conversely, in the substantial majority of the cases where the recruiter works from an office, he or she ends up succeeding in the job. The reason for this, I believe, is the power that comes to the recruiter from the ritual of working in an office and being available at all times. The ritual of going into the office focuses the recruiter in a way that working from home does not.

Most of the people who failed seemingly did not know why they failed. Through my years of experience, I could almost guarantee it had to do with their working from home. This turned out to be a bad ritual for them, but they couldn't see it. It comes down to this: Change your rituals, change your life.

What happens to most of us is that we get so stuck in various rituals it becomes difficult for us to change. We become addicted to our rituals and the feelings they create. We can be just as addicted to negative emotions as we can be to positive ones. Even though consciously we may not want to feel certain negative emotions, we have become addicted to the rituals that bring them on. We have to work harder to break these negative rituals.

Create rituals for your life that empower you, make you stronger, and lead to good feelings and results in your life. Really think about what you are doing that leads to your negative feelings and search out the rituals behind them. Then do your best to avoid the rituals that do not create the results you want for your life. In order to reach your full potential, you must concentrate on creating rituals that drive you forward and create positive feelings.