

# THE BEAUMONT BLOG

**Beaumont**® | **HEALTH**  
**SYSTEM**

## SINGING 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY' IS ICING ON THE CAKE

by Howard Belkin, M.D., Beaumont psychiatrist



Have you ever wondered why people love singing happy birthday or blowing out candles before cutting into a birthday cake? Or why sitting in your normal chair at the dinner table makes having a family meal more enjoyable? Researchers at Minnesota University looked into those very questions and came up with some interesting observations. Participants in their study were divided into two groups – one group who performed a ritual before eating certain foods and a second group that did not. Their study demonstrated that those subjects who performed the rituals actually felt that the food tasted better than those who did not perform any such rituals.

We live in a society that has become increasingly social and increasingly participatory. As humans, we are more

attracted to things that are special and out of the ordinary than we are to normal, mundane activities. Foods delivered with a special appearance, flashy wrappings, ceremonial songs or presentations make even ordinary foods appear special. People feel good when their level of excitement and level of interest is raised because they feel that they are about to enjoy something very special.

When our level of interest is increased by ritualistic presentations, special events and the like, we unconsciously assume that what we are going to receive is extraordinary or exceptional. When we are children, we are taught that things presented in an extraordinary manner must be special and better than what we experience during an ordinary meal or experience. That ingrained belief becomes a kind of very positive self-fulfilling prophecy and we enjoy what we eat or what we receive much more than we would otherwise. As observed by the authors of this research project, positive ritualistic behaviors performed by patients prior to surgery may be able to help speed their healing and reduce the pain they feel after surgery. Telling a child how delicious medicine tastes and making a spoon appear to fly into a child's mouth makes even the unpleasant act of taking medication much easier for a child.

Try making your own rituals before doing things that are generally ordinary and you may see that these things do become much more special.