

How to Build an Altar & Facilitate a Family Gathering

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Build an altar as a family project

- 1. Get the family together to talk about creating a family altar for Day of the Dead.** Communicate that the purpose of building this altar is to honor and remember loved ones who have died. Who might you want honor? Do you want to build a small altar a larger one? Where do you set it up? When do you work on it? What might you need?
- 2. Select the space for your altar.** Ideally, you want to create a space of beauty for those you want to honor, so the location you select is important. The altar can be on existing shelf, on top of an existing table, or you can bring together a combination of portable tables and boxes to construct a larger altar.
- 3. Seek photos and mementos of the persons you wish to honor.** As part of the honoring process, locate a favorite photo of your loved ones and possibly mementos that remind you of them. Maybe you have one of their favorite cups, a book, a baseball cap from their favorite team, or a kitchen utensil that reminds you of them. As you bring these items together you might share stories with family members about why you chose this person. This is a time for talking story about our loved ones.
- 4. Gather your altar cloth and other decorative items for your altar.** You might gather several items that can serve as the altar cloth. It is often wise to bring out several possibilities to determine which ones look or work best. There are several items that are traditionally found on altars that you might consider. For example, candles, sugar skulls, skeleton figures, vases for flowers, are an array of objects that remind you that it's Dias de los Muertos time.
- 5. Create a space of beauty.** The central principle to consider when organizing your altar is to make it a space of beauty that truly honors your loved ones.



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Organize a Family Gathering

For many the most enjoyable experience of Days of the Dead is bringing family and friends together to share honoring words and stories about our loved ones who have departed. Presently, with COVID-19 we must be careful to keep our gathering safe and virus free. However, small family gatherings or virtual or Zoom gatherings are possible.

Home Gathering

Decide on a good evening to gather next to the altar and share stories about your loved ones. Usually someone volunteers or is drafted to be the facilitator, (the person that guides the sharing). A traditional gathering lasts an hour or more depending on the number of people involved and follows the general format below.

- **Opening words & prayer.** The facilitator shares the purpose of the gathering, i.e., to honor our loved ones and express our love for life. Someone maybe invited to open with a prayer.
- **Invitation to share.** The facilitator invites the group members to share who they desire to honor this year. Say their name, a fond memory about them, and possibly what was one of the gifts this person left us, e.g., good memories, support, teachings, how to appreciate life, etc.
- **Take the best forward.** It is the responsibility for the facilitator to ask, “to honor this person what will you take forward in their memory?” This provides participants the opportunity to make a commitment on behalf of their loved one, e.g., as kind as they were, to live more in balance, etc.
- **Closing.** The facilitator invites all to share their final feelings, or thoughts. Often gatherings are following by a dinner including favorite foods of the departed.



Virtual or Zoom Gathering

Today we need to learn how to have family gatherings using our computers. If we cannot physically meet, we can Zoom together. This is the program I now use to connect with my family for parties or meaningful gatherings. Someone needs to initiate the call and then we all get to see and speak with one another.

Here is how you can organize a virtual Days of the Dead gathering and an altar visit gathering.

Again, someone needs to be the initiator and facilitator. Most likely, it needs to be you and a helper you recruit. Here is a list of necessary steps:

- 1. Reach out and get support.** Maybe your family has recently lost a family member, or you feel it's time to honor a deceased parent, grandparent, or friend. Call others and invite them to consider a virtual Days of the Dead gathering. With a free Zoom account, you can bring people together for a 45-minute experience.
- 2. Set date, invite, and inform.** Explain the intent is to honor a particular person or the various family or friends who have passed. Participants are invited to share caring words about any person or special pet that was important to them. Once they have committed, you have support for the idea. In preparation for the call, invite them to create a mini-altar near them that might include photos of the persons they seek to honor.
- 3. The facilitator guides the call.** The facilitator will open with the welcome, explain the plan, and guide the interaction. Depending on the number of persons, the facilitator might instruct participants that they each have up to five minutes to share. To help monitor the group I often use a rattle to remind folks when its about time to transition to the next speaker.
- 4. Be open to positive surprises.** I have already facilitated several Zoom gatherings. Participants have reported feeling that they truly honored loved ones, a greater connection between one another, and general feelings of inspiration and love.



We organize our altars to honor loved ones. We bring out their photos, mementos, and food that they liked.



By expressing memories of their departed, children & adults connect with their love

