



In search of closure

It's easy to feel stuck when ruminating over past events and struggling to find answers as to what happened and why. Here, we explore some of the ways that can help loosen the ties to difficult events, making it easier to move forward

Tom* sat in my office, nervously frowning at a tissue. He had been referred to me by law-enforcement professionals after being charged with stalking a former partner. 'I just wanted closure,' he pleaded. 'I only wanted to find her so I could talk to her and understand why the relationship ended. She wouldn't speak to me and I couldn't move on without closure.' In this last aspect, Tom isn't alone. In fact, many people voluntarily seek professional help in pursuit of closure after complex events. Whether it's harmful relationships, career pathways that have stagnated, friendships beset by toxicity or bad business decisions, people often find it difficult to understand, heal and move on from difficult episodes in life.

But what is meant by closure? As a term, psychological closure has been embraced by the popular media, usually in the context of the end of romantic relationships. It involves a sense of psychological completion, including cognitively understanding why and how an event occurred, processing it, and finding meaning in it.

Historically, the concept of closure derives from the work of a Lithuanian-Soviet cognitive psychologist and psychiatrist, Bluma Zeigarnik. In the 1920s, Bluma discovered that people who were interrupted during a task retained a better memory of the task than those who completed it. From a cognitive perspective, this implies that we have better memory for

matters we perceive as incomplete or unfinished than for those we see as completed. Similarly, a 2010 study found that this also affected how people processed emotions, and that they often regretted and thought more about inaction than about actions they had completed. This seems to suggest that situations left unexplored or somehow incomplete, can weigh heavily on the human mind. Contemplating the 'what-ifs?' is a natural human tendency, but it can also stop people from laying an experience to rest, as it directs focus away from the tasks of closure to ongoing rumination about what happened.

Achieving closure

Closure involves a number of different components: cognitive – how much and how often we think about an event; emotions – how we feel about it; and memories – the recall of that event. Overall, to find closure, it's important to arrive at a helpful understanding of the situation, find a way to create some meaning from it, and allow and process any emotions that might arise.

Bonnie Albrecht, a forensic psychologist at a private practice in Melbourne, Australia, says: 'Closure is a self-compassionate process – and possibly one that never actually "closes". We can never control what another person will do or how they may change,



AHONA'S THREE-PART PROCESS OF CLOSURE

When trying to find closure, it's helpful to engage in three main tasks. These are: fully understanding a situation; exploring and expressing the difficult emotions that might have arisen; and allowing time and distance from the event, so it can be viewed as one episode in a life narrative, rather than the sole defining event

1 Understanding what's happened

It's helpful to spend time thinking about the event in a constructive manner. Instead of aimless rumination, this is targeted thought, which is designed to help explore and learn from a situation. It's important to set some clear parameters around this process, such as reserving an afternoon for it and then wrapping up the time by journaling or writing yourself a letter. Thoughts are focused on trying to learn and grow rather than blaming (self or others), defending or denying the reality (for example, it shouldn't have happened this way).

2 Exploring emotions

The main tasks here involve recognising that a range of difficult feelings might arise and allowing all these emotions to exist. People sometimes try to escape difficult feelings and numb themselves, or engage in intellectualisation as a way of avoiding them. But it's important to attempt to accept the feelings, to sit with them and express them, through crying, talking, drawing or writing, for example. Strong emotions can feel scary, but they can settle with time if expression has been allowed.

3 Creating distance

Allowing time and distance from a painful event is essential. This might involve practical steps, such as moving house or deciding on a period of no contact with an individual. Equally, it might also include allowing and acknowledging pain and remembering that it will usually abate with time. One question to ask yourself might be: 'Will I feel this way in five years' time?' The answer is usually 'no'. This step might also involve taking a plunge into the unknown and looking to what lies beyond the difficult experience. To create closure, it's helpful to physically contain the experience. Researchers have found that writing about a difficult episode and placing it in a sealed envelope or box can help people process the experience quicker. It's worth considering whether you could engage in a similar task.

Finding closure can be difficult, but by understanding a challenging experience, allowing emotional processing and finding meaning, we can create great reserves of psychological resilience and emerge with a deeper and more compassionate understanding of ourselves and the things that matter to us.

so closure needs to be focused on the self, and the learnings and growth that one can take from any given situation or event.'

Why do we get stuck?

Sometimes, people become stuck in the process of finding closure. This can happen for several reasons. Some experiences are overwhelmingly distressing and it can be challenging to experience and process all the emotions that have arisen. Situations that involve complicated or intense grief, such as an unexpected bereavement or an especially difficult divorce, can also bring up overpowering feelings and questions to which there might not be any answers. This makes it difficult for people to find cognitive or emotional closure.

There are also occasions when an event feels completely out of a person's control, such as a break-up they didn't instigate or desire. In these circumstances, it's common for people to try to seek answers in order to regain a sense of control. Tom, who we heard from at the start, believed that if he could understand why his partner had left him, he'd be able to convince her to return. Then he could stop feeling hurt and sad. Often, the most challenging events from which to find closure are those that involve being wounded by other people. Negative and very recent situations are also more likely to remain unprocessed, as are those requiring a leap of faith, such as moving from the

comfort of a relationship into the unknown. The latter can bring about anxiety and a desire to remain in the space of the known, which manifest as difficulties with letting go.

Seeking closure involves a tacit understanding that you might never fully gain the answers you're seeking from others and that it might instead be a gift you need to give to yourself. Finding closure is ultimately an exercise in meaning-making, in determining the meaning and impacts of a difficult experience, understanding how to integrate the experience into your world view and sense of self, and the lessons you need to take away from an experience. 'Closure is an opportunity to identify a self-compassionate and meaningful conclusion to an event,' says Bonnie, 'and then to carry this learning forward to apply to the next chapter of our lives.'

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Turn over for advice on creating your own closure toolkit

*CASE STUDY IS AN AMALGAM OF REAL CASES - NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED FOR PRIVACY.



