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Is Closure Possible?©

**We view closure as an end point, an outcome.
What if it is a process?**

We all seem to treat closure as some clean final state, an accomplishment. It turns out to be more of an ideal than a reality.

"I just want closure."

"If I only had closure. I need an explanation and then I will have closure."

"Tell me what happened. If you explain it, I'll have closure."

In many cases, complete closure -- where all lingering questions, pain, or uncertainty vanish -- may not be realistic. Instead, what often happens is that individuals learn to integrate difficult experiences into their lives, even if some emotional residues remain. So, it's not a closure, but rather some partial resolution.

So, what if closure is less about achieving a neat, final state and more about an ongoing process of understanding and acceptance? What is expecting a definitive, permanent end to all feelings tied to a challenging event may lead to disappointment?

A more balanced perspective is to focus on gradual healing, where you develop resilience and learn to live with, and even appreciate, the complex tapestry of your past experiences.

Ultimately, while moments of clarity and understanding can offer temporary "closure," it is more sustainable—and realistic—to view closure as an adaptive, continuous process rather than a one-time accomplishment.

Exploring Closure: Unpacking Its Many Meanings

The term "closure" often evokes images of neatly tied-up endings—a final, satisfying

resolution to an emotionally charged experience. It means no longer having feelings about it anymore.

At its core, **closure refers to the process or feeling of resolution following an emotionally significant event.** Closure spans emotional, psychological, narrative, and even legal dimensions.

Emotional and Psychological Closure: This is what we usually think of when we talk about closure. In relationships, trauma, or grief, closure means *resolving the emotions until they are no longer troubling

*gaining understanding and a newly revised sense of meaning

*accepting a situation as it is

*experiencing the event as historical rather than still highly present and reactive.

Closure isn't a sudden "aha" moment. It's a gradual journey of integrating loss or disappointment into one's life narrative.

Narrative Closure: In literature and film, narrative closure refers to how storylines are wrapped up. While a story might provide clear answers to its conflicts, some narratives purposefully leave threads open to reflect life's inherent ambiguity. Maybe movies and literature are where we get the idea the narratives in our lives can be wrapped up neatly. Movies have to resolve the story in 2 hours or a mini-series can wrap it up in 3 to 8 episodes. Life does not fit a script.

Legal and Procedural Closure: In legal or organizational contexts, closure might mean the formal ending of a case or project. While this form of closure brings procedural finality, it doesn't always equate to personal or emotional resolution.

The Nuances of Emotional Closure

Emotional closure is perhaps the most celebrated yet least defined form of closure.

People often look for a conclusive moment – a conversation, a ritual, or even an explanation – that will "set things right." Yet, the emotional landscape is rarely so tidy. Instead, closure is often a layered process:

- **Understanding and Acceptance:** Moving toward closure frequently begins with understanding the factors or causes of an emotional event or the intentions or motives of others who were part of it. This might involve reflecting on a relationship breakup or unpacking the stages of grief after a loss.

- **Integration of the Experience:** Rather than erasing memories, closure integrates the experience into one's life story. The painful event becomes a part of who we are, contributing to personal growth.
- **Getting Past:** I prefer "getting past" to "letting go" of residual emotions or unmet expectations. It rarely happens overnight. It often involves ongoing self-compassion and sometimes professional support.

In many ways, these pieces resemble Viktor Frankl's idea of meaning in "Man's Search for Meaning." We arrive at a new concept of our significance and the value of our lives.

Examples

Case Example 1: Finding Closure After a Relationship Breakup

The Story of Maya

Maya had been in a long-term relationship that ended abruptly when her partner decided to move on without a clear explanation. In the aftermath, she was left with a maze of unanswered questions and lingering pain.

Seeking Understanding: Initially, Maya tried to find closure by seeking answers. Hoping to obtain the clarity she needed, she reached out to her ex-partner. However, the conversation provided only half-truths and vague reasons. That left her feeling more confused.

Internal Reflection: Turning inward, Maya began Journaling about her experiences and emotions. By that process, she clarified and articulated her feelings of betrayal, loss, and confusion.

Professional Support: Recognizing the complexity of her emotions, Maya started seeing a therapist. Through guided conversations, she learned that closure wasn't about a single conversation or answer. Rather it was more about understanding her own emotional responses. Those include beliefs about herself, not all of which derived from the breakup. Some were much older. As long as she held those beliefs, namely, that she might not be lovable and that if something does not go right then she must be at fault, then she could not reach a resolution of her hurt.

Integration and Growth: Over time, Maya integrated the lessons from her relationship into her identity. Rather than waiting for a definitive moment of "closure," she embraced the gradual healing process. This ongoing journey helped her eventually get past the

past and open herself up to future relationships.

In Maya's case, closure was not a definitive endpoint but a fluid process of self-discovery and healing.

Case Example 2: Embracing Loss and the Ritual of Remembrance

The Story of Thomas

After the sudden passing of his father, Thomas struggled with a deep sense of unresolved grief. The loss left him with an overwhelming need for answers and a desperate longing for finality. He felt emptiness and lack of purpose.

Rituals as Anchors: Thomas's family decided to hold a memorial service that included personal tributes and the sharing of family stories. For Thomas, the ritual was a tangible way to honor his father's life and mark a transition in his grief.

Community Support: The collective remembrance, shared with friends and family, provided a community-based form of closure. Listening to others' stories helped Thomas see his father's impact from different perspectives, slowly knitting together a narrative that made sense of his loss. That also performed the important function of building memorable sense of the positives in their relationship and his concept of his father. Building a positive recollection after a loss can be important to healing.

Ongoing Remembrance: Closure, in this context, was not about forgetting. Instead, Thomas learned to live with his loss by creating new traditions – like an annual family gathering – to keep his father's memory alive. This ongoing ritual became a source of comfort and a way to integrate the grief into his life.

Personal Acceptance: Over months and years, Thomas reached a place where the pain of loss was lessened and transformed into a quiet, enduring love and respect. He realized that closure was less about a conclusive ending and more about continuously evolving acceptance.

Re-commitment in Life: His therapist asked him to search for a new purpose by taking the time to go through magazines and newspapers, looking at the ads and articles, and cutting out whatever was most interesting to him. Then, he was to do some research to find anything he wanted to study in more depth. That included going to places, such as museums or a political office, etc, to follow up. At some point, his new involvements

became a source of enjoyment and purposes. He envisioned his father pleased with his new commitments.

Thomas's experience illustrates that closure, particularly in the face of loss, is a dynamic process – a blend of ritual, communal support, and personal growth.

Conclusion: The Elusive Nature of Closure

Whether it's the ending of a relationship or the passing of a loved one, closure is not a one-size-fits-all concept. It's a personalized, evolving process that can manifest in different forms – through conversations, creative expression, rituals, or simply the slow passage of time. Understanding that closure might never be a neat, final moment. But it can free us to embrace our experiences fully and integrate them into a richer, more resilient self.

Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a major mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and most other psychological problems, we work extensively with children & families and with substance use problems. Our DBT program has three groups – for younger adolescents, older adolescents, and adults – and has openings. We also accept referrals for substance abuse care from clinicians who are not comfortable with that population. Call 414-540-2170.

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