

The psychology of closure – and why some need it more than others

October 9 2018, by Pam Ramsden



Breakups often result in a lot of soul-searching. Credit: [Bart Booms/Flickr](#), [CC BY-SA](#)

Imagine your partner unexpectedly changes their Facebook status from "in a relationship" to "single" and then refuses to communicate with you. This sounds awfully cruel, completely robbing you of your right to find out why you have been dumped so that you can get some closure and move on. But it is actually becoming so common that Facebook [has created new tools](#) to help people manage their Facebook profiles after a breakup and interact with former partners.

The need for [closure](#) doesn't just apply to relationships. The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, status or a way of life are other examples of

painful endings. Letting go of something that was once important can be difficult, and many people seek closure in doing so. But does it actually help? And can you really expect other people to give you closure? Let's take a look at the evidence.

The social psychologist [Arie Kruglanski](#) coined the phrase "[need for closure](#)" in the 1990s, referring to a framework for decision making that aims to find an answer on a given topic that will alleviate confusion and ambiguity.

When we seek closure we are looking for answers as to the cause of a certain loss in order to resolve the painful feelings it has created. In doing this, we appear to form a mental puzzle of what's happened – examining each piece and its relationship to the overall puzzle. Closure is achieved when we are satisfied that the puzzle has been assembled to our satisfaction, that the answers have been reached and it is therefore possible to move on.

When people most need closure it is usually because the termination of the event is significant to them, holding particular value and meaning. Let's take a breakup as an example. If you find that the explanation is that your partner is choosing to end the relationship to begin another, you may find closure straight away without further explanation. However in the world of social media, where people are often "ghosted" – where someone simply disappears from contact without any explanation – feelings are left unresolved.

Ultimately, having answers about past endings can help us maintain our identity and learn something about the behaviour of ourselves and others. This is partly the reason why we often feel like we are better at picking partners with age. Similarly, many elderly people take a [more relaxed view about death](#) than younger people – they have often lost several loved ones and have had to find closure in doing so.

Individual differences

The need for closure exists on a scale – with some more prone to seek it than others. Some people even have a [desire to avoid closure](#) at all cost. This could be because they don't want to end up feeling guilty, rejected or criticised by others. Vagueness has its advantages, as soon as you have established exactly what happened, you are also subject to criticism – from yourself and others.

But even among people with a similar need for closure, what may be a satisfactory answer to one person will not be sufficient for another. Every person's need for closure [is different](#) and appears to vary as a function of the situation as well as personality characteristics and values. When we are under stress for example, our [need for closure increases](#).

Research indicates that certain types of personalities are different in the ways they approach closure. One study found that people who prefer order and predictability – having a more rigid way of thinking and a low tolerance for ambiguity – [struggle when they are unable](#) to find the answers to help them move on. In contrast, people who are more open minded, creative and comfortable with ambiguity are better able to cope with not achieving closure.

Psychologists have also found that people who are consistently able to find closure usually have value systems that can easily incorporate answers to validate their world view. A [religious ideology](#), for example, explains many questions as "God's will", with no further explanation necessary.

Individual differences in the need and ability to achieve closure can also play a crucial role in the potentially detrimental effects of not obtaining closure. This includes psychological distress, such as feelings of anxiety and depression, with individuals questioning themselves – in particular

their judgements, skills and abilities.

What to do

So what are you to do if someone ghosts you? It is important to remember that you are in charge of obtaining closure – you can't really get others to do it for you. Even if you get an ex-partner to talk about what went wrong in the relationship, there's no way of really knowing that they are being honest or correct in their assessment.

A good starting point is therefore to take responsibility for your own actions and interpret those of others as best you can. If someone doesn't want to communicate with you, that says something too. You also have to accept that you may never have the perfect [answer](#). But you can nevertheless give yourself some time to be sad, try to figure out what happened and finally learn and move on. Research has also shown that a type of writing that allows people to examine their loss through a redemptive lens without blame and which focuses on the positives [can be useful useful in helping achieve closure](#), whereas simply writing and searching for meaning has been found to be ineffective.

Ultimately, closure is a complicated cognitive process and the key is learning to live with the ambiguity when it cannot be achieved. Sometimes, things go wrong and although it does not feel fair, and it is very hurtful, life goes on.

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