

The Importance of Closure

Do you have a task list that never seems to get finished? Or several DIY jobs that are left neglected? Or alternatively; did someone start 'ghosting you' without a warning? Have you had a break-up that you struggled to process? All of these are examples of situations or tasks the conscious (and subconscious) mind would deem incomplete.

In order to understand the importance of closure to the mind we need to take a trip back in time to the 1920's. At this time the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin made a discovery about the behaviour of waiters. If a tab was open and bill was to be paid then the waiter would have a good recall of the transaction. However once the bill had been settled and the customer left, when the waiter was asked to recall the transaction they had much less success. Lewin's take on this was, 'As long as the transaction was incomplete, it lacked closure and generated tension, maintaining memory, but as soon as closure was achieved, the tension and the memory disappeared. 'One of his students, a Russian psychologist named Bluma Zeigarnik, decided to test his idea in an experiment. In this experiment the participants were given tasks to complete. They were allowed to complete some tasks and in others they were interrupted from completing them. The experiment found that the participants remembered the interrupted tasks better than the uninterrupted tasks. This phenomenon is known in psychology today as the 'zeigarnik effect'.¹

This effect is employed in TV series which use cliff-hangers at the end of each episode, and especially at the end of each series, to entice the viewer to keep watching the show. (This may well explain the motivation behind net-flix style 'binge-watching'.) On a personal level, procrastination over completing a task list, or not getting round to pesky DIY jobs, can create an inner tension which leads to unhelpful thoughts, anxiety and low mood created by the lack of completion. We each hold a deep drive within us to keep pursuing resolution and closure

So... What about unfinished business on an emotional level? I once met a lady who was diagnosed with early onset dementia. If you have spent time with dementia patients you may notice that they sometimes keep tracking back to a similar subject almost as if the mind is on a loop. She told me about her children and then sadly of one son who took his own life. She then went on to something else but kept looping back to her lost son. She had not been able to fully process what had happened and therefore her mind had left this issue as an 'open-file'. Our subconscious as well as our conscious mind is often driven by and at odds with unfinished business right until the end.

The psychologist Hadassah Lipszyc said, 'Completing tasks successfully can provide a sense of accomplishment whilst increasing one's self-esteem and confidence.'² This may sound simple enough but why do we often struggle to do it? We can and do our own barriers to feeling internal success. Is our task list achievable, is it flexible and is it realistic? Sometimes our expectations of ourselves can swing from high to low and fall outside of reality. Plus sometimes life has a way of

proving that you are not really in control sometimes and this also gets in the way. We can require flexibility and adaptability to get to our goals. Perhaps you want to exercise more and therefore signed up to join the gym. Then you sustained an injury which means you need to rest. Do we entirely write off our original goal, do we adapt it or do we seek a different goal? We need to have the ability to change our goals and time-schedules and make peace with the changes. If we go underneath the surface of these experiences we may also discover that we have a fear of failure that creates a barrier to certain completions.

On an emotional level how can we find closure within unfinished emotional issues or situations? One way can be by marking our achievements. In the Zeigarnik effect the participants quickly forgot the tasks they did achieve. By allowing the time to focus on our successes and achievements we can truly appreciate the terrain we have already covered. As humans we can often beat ourselves up after we have encountered certain issues, even if we have successfully dealt with them. If we keep ruminating on a situation we send a signal to our subconscious that we haven't learnt all we need to from it. Then rather than having achieved a 'completed' learning, we create an 'open-file' in the mind that then creates a drive to find an answer. Perhaps there is a missing piece that gaining more self-awareness could help with? Certainly the lady who I mentioned earlier could have found great benefit if she had taken the time to explore therapy work in relation to her loss earlier in her life. As psychologist Hadassah Lipszyc states, 'a person who can find closure for stressful events or tasks will likely experience a long-term positive impact on their psychological well-being.'⁽²⁾

On a personal note, some years ago I remember a broken night's sleep once where I kept reliving an experience which had a destructive outcome. I wasn't sure why as I had already examined and thought I'd dealt with the reasons behind why this had come to pass. I then tracked through my thought processes one by one to try and discover what was underneath. I found that although I had the logical answers behind what had happened, I still struggled to forgive myself for walking in to and therefore being a party to this experience in my life. Once I started to affirm silently to myself that I was now forgiving myself, I then found that my mind released the thoughts and I was able to drift in to sleep.

References:

1. The story of psychology, Norton Hunt, 1993
2. www.independent.co.uk/life-style/procrastinating-how-to-stop-zeigarnik-effect-phenomenon-at-work-now-a8247076.html