

## CHAPTER 9

# Closing

Closing is a brief time at the end of a meeting or a defined online timeline when each member shares thoughts and feelings about what has happened and what they would like to happen next. Closing brings each individual's intent and commitment together with the group's principles of solidarity.

The main purpose of closing is to strengthen the group and each individual. Closing provides an opportunity for everyone to end the time together knowing what is going on for each person in the group, and it helps the group to plan for the future.

Like check-in, closing is only a brief part of the time invested in a group's process, but it is the most important part of Peace and Power. Until your group gets used to closing and experiences the benefits of closing, it may be hard to take the time and energy needed to do it.

Traditional groups often get caught up in what they are doing and do not set aside time to reflect on what they are doing, how, and why. Closing accomplishes this and more, making it possible to form better understandings among everyone in the group. Closing is not always easy to do and initially can feel risky. During closing, feelings that were simply undercurrents during discussion may be expressed openly, something that is not customary in typical groups. Ironically, feelings of caring and appreciation are also usually not expressed openly in groups. Angry or hurt feelings are especially avoided because they are simply not supposed to be acknowledged openly.

During closing, group members acknowledge their feelings in constructive ways so that everyone in the group can develop a fuller understanding of one another and of the group. When this happens, everyone has the benefit of knowing what is really going on, internally for individuals and within the group. Every time your group practices the skills involved in closing, you are building an important foundation for the skills of conflict transformation (Chapter 10).

Closing a gathering or an online discussion using this process ensures that the group remains open to envisioning and exploring alternatives and uses the experiences of the group to form the future. Use closing to end gatherings, to end a lengthy or intense discussion on a single topic, or to signal a transition in an online discussion from one time frame to another. To have the benefit of closing, everyone who has participated in the gathering or the online discussion needs to speak or post a closing message online.

Once you begin to experience the benefits of closing, your group will become very dedicated to setting aside the time you need for closing. One way to estimate the time you need in a face-to-face group is to plan for each person to have a few seconds to speak during closing.

Or, for a 1-hour meeting, plan about 10 minutes for closing. For a gathering of a day or longer, set aside a half hour or so for closing.

In a face-to-face group, one way to start closing is to take a few minutes for each person to silently reflect on what has happened during the discussion and to review notes about the gathering. In an online group, you can agree in advance that everyone will post a closing message every few days, or weekly. When it is time for closing, each person shares their appreciation, critical reflection, and affirmation.

## **Appreciation**

Appreciation acknowledges something that someone did or said, or a positive group interaction. It is a brief but meaningful statement. This is a time to nurture one another actively by sharing your ideas about specific ways in which you and the group benefited from something that happened. For example, if someone's comment in the discussion was a turning point to help clarify an issue for you, or moved the group discussion to a different level, you might state your appreciation for the comment, and share with the group how or why this comment was so important to you and the group.

Appreciation includes the following elements:

- The names of individuals who are responsible for what it is you appreciate.
- A brief description of their specific acts or behavior.
- Sharing what this means to you as an individual within the group.
- Your ideas about what this means in terms of the group's purposes or principles of solidarity

## **Critical Reflection**

A constructive critical reflection that encourages and supports growth includes these components<sup>7</sup>.

- "I feel . . ." (your own feeling about what has happened)
- "When (or about) . . ." (a specific action, behavior, or circumstance that is the focus of your thinking)
- "I want . . ." (specific changes you want to happen)
- "Because . . ." (how your concern connects with the group's principles of solidarity)

Critical reflection is careful, precise, thoughtful insight directed toward transformation. It is

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<sup>7</sup> This guideline for a four-part criticism is drawn from *Issues in Radical Therapy* in 1976 in a small handbook by Gracie Lyons, *Constructive Criticism: A Handbook*. In 1988, it was republished in a revised edition by Wingbow Press. The revision remains one of the best resources for developing this important skill. The Peace and Power approach to critical reflection draws on Gracie's practical guidelines. In addition, many of her suggestions are integrated into our approaches for conflict transformation.

a tool for becoming aware of actions and behaviors that maintain an unjust society. It flourishes as a positive group process when everyone understands that your collective intention is to support one another in a constructive way, and when you consistently treat one another respectfully.

When you use critical reflection with commitment to Peace and Power values, you practice a powerful skill to move toward agreement on what will be done and why. Even when you have disagreements and doubts and the going gets rough, critical reflection makes it possible for your group to remain cohesive and to continue to work together

Being critical in Peace and Power does not mean passing judgment or casting a negative light on someone or something that happens in the group. It does not mean that you are proclaiming a “correct” view. Instead, critical reflection means that you are being thoughtful, careful, and committed to making sure that the group is doing its very best.

Critical reflection is the most important skill involved in Peace and Power, and is at the heart of the process of conflict transformation (Chapter 10). If everyone regularly practices the art of critical reflection during closing, then you will build a strong foundation for dealing with conflict and for bringing disagreements into the open early when they are the most easily addressed. Because critical reflection involves insights that come from deep within, you will find times when you need to prepare ahead of time. Later in the chapter is a section devoted to the “homework” needed to develop the fine art of critical reflection.

### **Affirmation**

The conclusion of the three-step process of closing is a statement of affirmation that gives the group a sense of the ways in which you are working to grow as an individual and as a member of the group.

An affirmation is:

- A positive, simple, “I” statement.
- Stated in the present tense.
- Grounded in your present reality, but also provides a bridge to the future you seek.

Affirmations are simple statements that speak to your deeper self. They concentrate your energy on the healing, growth-supporting aspects of your work with the group. They are powerful tools for creating change and growth in a direction that you desire<sup>8</sup>.

An affirmation reflects something that is not yet fully a part of your life, but you state it as if it has already happened. For example, at a time when you feel uncertain about a decision, your

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<sup>8</sup> Margo Adair, *Working Inside Out: Tools for Change* (Berkeley, CA: Wingbow Press, 1984).

affirmation might be: “I trust my own inner sense and the wisdom of our group.” When a conflict has disturbed you, an affirmation to help transform the conflict might be: “I reside in the care that we have for each other.”

Affirmations offered during closing grow out of your experiences in the group, and often relate to your specific appreciations and critical reflections. Affirmations can also grow out of internal work that you do apart from the group and your experiences in the group. This work involves shifting your attention away from frustrations and problems to possibilities for growth and change. As you reflect on these possibilities, you will begin to form affirmations that provide a message to your inner consciousness that you are receptive to the energy of change moving in a creative, healing direction.

Because your inner consciousness is responsive to repetition, repeat affirmations to yourself, using the same wording again and again, with shifts in the wording as you find what is most comfortable for you. Repeat the affirmations while you are doing rhythmic activities, such as exercising, cleaning, or walking. When you reenter the group, you will bring with you the deep inner resources that you have developed within yourself to participate more effectively in the group.

Initially you may find it difficult to affirm yourself. Until you are comfortable creating your own, use an affirmation that someone else suggests. As your sense of self-affirmation grows, you will create your own. As you become accustomed to using affirmations as a source of directing your energy to create change, you will become skilled at expressing an affirmation during closing that moves you and the group from the circumstances of the present into a future you choose and create.

## **The Art of Closing: Getting Your Head and Heart Together**

Getting ready to participate in closing requires thoughtful reflection so that you are clear about the content of what you want to say before you speak. Once you are clear about the content of your three-part closing statement, you can state it briefly and simply.

People in traditional groups rarely if ever have a chance to share their inner responses with the group when everything is going along smoothly. Therefore, doing so does not come easily or naturally, and practice is important! Even more important is a supportive, aware group that is fully committed to each member learning this and other skills involved in practicing Peace and Power. Personal notes that you have taken throughout a discussion can be very helpful at the time of closing. Productive gatherings are rarely uneventful, and in the intensity of the discussion you are likely to have thoughts and feelings about what happened and how it happened. Perhaps your perspective has shifted now that the discussion has ended. You may have become aware of an insight and are reaching a new understanding as the discussion comes to a close. Your notes provide words and ideas that you write as these things happen so that you will not forget, and

you can review your inner process when it is time to close.

## **Responding to Closing**

Once everyone has completed closing, everyone takes ownership for making any responses open and clear, rather than hidden. The most difficult thing to learn about both appreciation and critical reflection is how to accept them! Hearing statements of appreciation or critical reflection is not easy, especially in front of a group, no matter how skillfully they are delivered.

Most often what people share during closing requires no immediate response. If something very emotional or heavy comes up during closing, the most important response from the group is to acknowledge what has been shared, clarify to make sure everyone understands the message, and assure everyone that the concerns will be addressed in good time.

In face-to-face interactions, you often sense right away if something you say or do during closing creates a confusion or misunderstanding. But online, your closing message can be easily misunderstood with no easy way to know how the message was received.

Peace and Power closing messages call for careful reflection, for mindful attention to what you say or write, and for full disclosure of your thoughts and feelings. In an online group, you have the advantage of taking the time you need to compose your closing carefully, reflect on what you want to say and how you want to say it, and connect your thoughts and feelings with the group's purposes and principles of solidarity. In a face-to-face group, everyone has the advantage of sensing together that something has struck a nerve.

As you receive the appreciation and critical reflections of others, you have the following responsibilities:

- ❖ *Remain attentive; listen or read carefully. Do not interrupt or respond impulsively.*

If what you hear is welcome and appreciated, a simple thank you is sufficient, saving your more enthusiastic response until after the group meeting. Keep the focus on the person who has expressed appreciation and resist any temptation to detract from the growth-encouraging intention of a positive closing.

If what you receive is difficult to take in, or if you have a different viewpoint to share, let the group know how you feel and be sure the issue is placed on an agenda for a future discussion. Refer to Chapter 10 to ground your thoughts and feelings in the constructive values that the group shares.

- ❖ *Keep any response to a minimum so that you do not drag out a meeting or online discussion past the time it is supposed to end. Remember that almost everything can wait.*

## **CRITICAL REFLECTION AS HOMEWORK**

Artful critical reflection arises from your deepest inner awareness, is energized by your

emotions, and is finely crafted by your clearest thinking. It is shared with others in a manner and at a time when you can call upon full awareness (including thoughts and feelings) to address the issue.

Sometimes you cannot think clearly and speak or write artfully at the time of closing. Often, people can only do so after some time has passed. This gives you the opportunity to do your own internal work at home, especially when it comes to critical reflection. If you sense during a meeting that there is a critical reflection you need to develop on your own, during closing describe the nature of your concern, and ask the group to wait for a fuller discussion later, either during check-in or as an agenda item.

The homework required to do this includes getting in touch with the full range of feelings that you experience around the issue and thinking about all of the facts and circumstances that are a part of the situation. It requires thinking through similar circumstances that you have experienced to search for a perspective that comes from that broader experience and envisioning future possibilities that might emerge from this experience.

Constructive critical reflection is placed in the context of the purposes of the group. One way to do this is to take time to review the group's principles of solidarity. Think about the present situation in light of each principle and how addressing the issue you are studying can strengthen the group.

Weigh carefully many possibilities. Imagine what might be different in a similar circumstance in the future and possibilities for what might now emerge from the situation as it is. Think about how you and the group might move forward in a direction that you choose carefully rather than a direction that just happens.

As you reflect on the situation, write down ideas and thoughts. You can go over these notes to sort out which of your ideas are beneficial and constructive and rethink ideas that may not be constructive. Once you see your ideas on paper, you can explore different ways of saying things and make sure everything you need to say is there. When you share your ideas with the group, the notes you prepare at home can help you to remain focused and include your full range of feelings and thoughts stated in constructive and beneficial ways.