

What to Do With the Questions That Don't Have Answers

You can carry an unanswered question without continuing to organize your life around finding its answer.



Some questions have answers. You can look something up. Ask someone. Find the document. Remember what happened. Gather more information. Have a conversation. Then there are other questions.

Why did she do that? Did he ever really love me? Why wasn't our friendship worth saving? Why won't my child speak to me? What would she have said if she had lived? Why did he choose someone else? Why didn't they tell me? Did I matter as much to them as they mattered to me?

You can ask these questions for years. And sometimes reality remains silent.

Wanting an Answer Is Reasonable

We should begin there. You are not foolish for wanting to understand. Important relationships shape our lives. When one ends unexpectedly or painfully, the mind naturally wants coherence. An answer seems as though it might put the pieces back into some kind of order.

Oh. That's why.

Sometimes it does. Information can change everything. But sometimes the answer is unavailable.

And sometimes the answer you receive does not do what you hoped it would.

Some Answers Belong to Other People

This creates an immediate limit. You can know what you experienced. You can know what someone said. You can know what they did. You can know what happened afterward. But another person's private motives belong partly to them.

Why did they make that choice? What were they thinking? What did the relationship mean to them? Did they regret it? Do they miss you?

Perhaps they will tell you. Perhaps they won't. Perhaps they don't fully understand themselves.

Human beings are not always reliable narrators of their own motives. Sometimes the answer you want exists inside another person and you simply do not have access to it. That is frustrating.

It is also reality.



Death Leaves Questions That Cannot Be Asked

When someone dies, the limit is absolute. There will be no final conversation. Perhaps you wanted to ask about something from childhood. Understand a decision. Clarify a family story. Know what they really thought. Ask why they never said something. Tell them what you finally understand. Death closes access to information we may not have realized we still wanted.

That can become part of grief itself.

You are not only missing the person. You may be missing the possibility of ever knowing something only they could have told you.

Sometimes the Person Is Alive and the Answer Is Still Unavailable

This can feel even more difficult. They could answer. They simply won't. Or their answer is vague. Contradictory. Defensive. Incomplete.

Perhaps they have stopped responding altogether. The possibility of an answer seems tantalizingly close.

If they would just talk to me.

But another person's physical existence does not guarantee emotional availability. Someone can be alive and still be unavailable for the conversation you need. That is one of the harder realities of relationship loss.

You May Receive an Answer and Still Have the Question

Perhaps you finally ask. And they answer.

"I just needed a change." "I wasn't happy." "I've been busy." "I don't know." "I needed space." "I thought it was best."

You leave the conversation thinking:

That's it?

The answer may even be truthful. But it does not match the size of the loss. You wanted an explanation large enough to make the consequences understandable. Instead, you received an ordinary human explanation from an ordinary human being who made a consequential decision. Sometimes there is no explanation emotionally proportional to what happened.

The Question Underneath the Question May Be Different

This is worth exploring gently.

Why did he leave?

may contain:

Why wasn't I enough?

Why did she choose them?

may contain:

Was I replaceable?

Why didn't my friend try to repair this?

may contain:

Did our friendship matter?

Why won't my child speak to me?

may contain:

Was I a terrible mother?

Sometimes answering the factual question would not resolve the deeper one anyway. Because the deeper question is about you. Your worth. Your lovability. Your judgment. Your place in someone's life.

Those questions may need a different kind of answer.



Another Person Cannot Deliver the Final Verdict on Your Worth

Suppose someone says:

"Yes. I left because I preferred someone else."

What does that prove about your worth?

Very little.

It tells you something about their preference and their decision.

Suppose a friendship ends. That tells you something about what happened between two people. It does not produce an objective measurement of your value as a friend. Suppose your adult child becomes estranged. There may be important things to understand about the relationship.

There may be responsibility to examine. But another adult's decision about contact is not a final verdict on the totality of your life as a parent or your value as a human being. Other people's choices give us information. They do not possess the authority to define us completely.

Some Questions Are Really Requests for a Different Past

Why didn't she call? Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't they try harder?

Sometimes beneath the question is:

I wish they had.

That is different. The question sounds intellectual. The pain underneath it may simply be grief. You may understand perfectly well why someone did something and still wish they had chosen differently. No explanation can make that wish come true. Sometimes we do not need a better answer.

We need permission to say:

I wish this had been different.

Some Questions Are Requests for Justice

Why did they get away with it? Why did everyone believe them? Why did I have to live with the consequences? Why didn't anyone see what was happening?

These questions may point toward genuine injustice. You do not need to pretend otherwise. But justice and explanation are not the same thing. Understanding why someone harmed you does not repair the harm. And knowing that harm occurred does not guarantee that everyone else will recognize it.

Sometimes the unanswered question contains a longing for the world to acknowledge:

That was wrong.

You may never receive that acknowledgment from everyone you want it from. The wrong does not become right because the jury failed to return the verdict you deserved.

Some Questions Keep the Door Open

This is subtle.

Why did they leave?

can quietly become:

Perhaps if I understand why, I can change something and they will come back.

Why did the friendship end?

can become:

Perhaps there is one more thing I could say that would repair it.

Why won't my child speak to me?

can become:

Perhaps if I finally identify exactly what I did wrong, I can fix everything.



Sometimes relationships are repaired. Doors reopen. People change. But an unanswered question can also become a way of standing in the doorway. Waiting. Watching. Searching. Not quite leaving.

You can leave the door open without standing in the doorway.

There Is a Difference Between an Open Question and an Active Question

Perhaps you will always wonder. That is okay. An open question can remain part of your story.

I never understood why she ended the friendship. I still don't know what he was thinking. I wish I knew why my father made that decision.

You do not have to force an answer. An active question is different. It demands attention. You revisit it. Investigate it. Organize decisions around it. Wait for it. Imagine conversations about it. An open question can live quietly on a shelf. An active question keeps calling you back into the room.

Sometimes recovery means allowing a question to remain open while deciding it no longer gets to remain active.

Putting Down the Question Does Not Mean It Didn't Matter

This may be the hardest part.

If you stop asking, does that mean you don't care? No.

If you stop searching, are you saying what happened was acceptable? No.

If you stop trying to understand, are you giving up? Not necessarily.

Sometimes you have simply reached the boundary of what is knowable. You have gathered the information available. Thought. Reflected. Asked what was reasonable to ask. Perhaps sought help understanding what you could not see alone. And now there is no new evidence.

Putting down a question is not the same thing as answering it.

It is deciding that an unanswered question no longer gets unlimited access to your attention.

You Can Say “I Don't Know”

There is remarkable dignity in those three words.

Why did she do it? *I don't know.*

Did he ever understand what he did? *I don't know.*

Will they ever come back? *I don't know.*

Would the relationship have survived if I had done something differently? *I don't know.*

“I don't know” is not always a failure of understanding. Sometimes it is the most accurate answer reality permits. And reality is a sturdier place to stand than speculation.

You Can Know What You Do Know

An unanswered question does not mean you know nothing.

Perhaps you know:

I loved them. The relationship mattered. Something happened. I was hurt. I made mistakes. I tried. There were things I could not control. There are things I would do differently now. There are things I would not. The relationship changed. My life changed. I am still here.

That is a substantial body of knowledge. Sometimes we allow one unanswered question to obscure everything we actually understand.

You Can Stop Building Theories

When information is missing, the mind fills gaps. Maybe she was jealous. Maybe he never loved me. Maybe someone turned them against me. Maybe they secretly regret it. Maybe she always hated me. Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Theories can temporarily relieve uncertainty. At least we have an explanation. But a theory repeated often enough can begin feeling like a fact.



You are allowed to distinguish:

What I know. What I reasonably believe. What I am imagining because I don't know.

That distinction can return a surprising amount of steadiness.

The Future May Bring More Information

Putting down a question does not mean locking it in a vault. Something may change. A conversation happens. Someone contacts you. New information emerges. You remember something. Perhaps years from now, you understand something differently.

You can respond to new reality when new reality arrives. You do not have to keep monitoring the question every day just in case.

You can stop waiting without declaring that nothing will ever change.

Your Life Does Not Need to Wait for the Answer

This is where the question begins losing some of its authority. You can make plans without knowing why. Build relationships without knowing whether someone will return. Enjoy something without resolving the past first. Learn. Work. Rest. Laugh. Plant something. Go somewhere. Stay home. Change your mind.

Become someone the person you lost never gets to know. The unanswered question can remain unanswered. And Tuesday can still belong to you.

Some Answers May Come From Living

Not answers about another person's motives. Those may remain unknowable. But other answers.

Can I trust myself again? You find out by making decisions.

Can I have meaningful relationships after this? You find out through relationship.

Can I live with not knowing? You discover that one ordinary day at a time.

Will this always organize my life? Perhaps one morning you realize it no longer does.

Some questions are not solved through more analysis. They are answered through participation.

Put the Question Somewhere

Perhaps there is a question you have carried for a long time. You do not need to throw it away.

Perhaps simply name it. *This is the question I cannot answer.*

Then ask:

Is there information still reasonably available to me? Is there something responsible and appropriate I still need to do? Is this question teaching me anything new? Or am I waiting for it to give me something it cannot give?

If there is something to do, perhaps do it. If there is something to learn, learn it.

But if you have reached the edge of what is available, perhaps you can say:

I don't know. I wish I did. And I am no longer willing to suspend my life here.

The Question Can Remain. You Can Move.

That may be the most important distinction. You do not have to solve every mystery. Understand every motive. Receive every apology. Correct every misunderstanding. Know what would have happened in the life you did not get. Some questions may accompany you for years. But they do not have to lead.

You can carry an unanswered question without continuing to organize your life around finding its answer.

You can leave the door open without standing in the doorway.

You can acknowledge:

I wish this had been different.

You can tell the truth:

I don't know.



And then turn your attention toward something that is knowable. The person in front of you. The decision that actually belongs to you. The work that can be done. The relationship that is available. The life that is here. The question may still exist.

But so do you.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: You Don't Have to Make the Relationship Mean Something Different

Once we stop requiring every question to be answered, another pressure can begin to loosen: the need to construct a final meaning for the relationship. Perhaps it wasn't "all for a reason." Perhaps the painful ending wasn't secretly the best thing that ever happened to you. Perhaps the good years weren't rendered meaningless by what happened later. Next, we'll explore what becomes possible when you stop requiring the relationship to become something other than what it actually was.