Time to Say Goodbye: Therapist-Initiated Termination of Long-Term Therapy Relationships with Complex Trauma Clients

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Situations Leading to Therapist-Initiated Termination

- Leaving practice
- Taking extended leave for health reasons
- Moving a practice to a different geographic location
Styles of Ending

- Mutual/unilateral*
- Planned*/unplanned
- Hasty/brief/extended*

*Focus of this presentation
Dynamics of Trauma Therapies that Affect Endings

- **All trauma clients**
  - Sensitivity to lack of control, loss

- **Complex trauma clients**
  - Histories of childhood abuse and neglect, giving rise to attachment & abandonment issues
  - Reenactment with retraumatization potential

- **Long-term relational treatment relationships**
  - trust (the promise)
  - shift from mutuality to unilateral decision
Ending Therapy Relationships
RICHly*

- **Respect**: Reassurance, time, choice
- **Information**: Why, how, when
- **Connection**: Authenticity
- **Hope**: Past progress and future possibilities

(*RICH comes from *Risky Connection*, 2000)
Minimizing Retraumatization in the Ending Process

– Preparation (time, planning)*
– Support (connection, control)
– Processing
  (express & discuss feelings)

*How much time?
Ending Process: Overview

- Announcing the therapist’s departure
- Processing the client’s feelings about the ending
- Reviewing the therapy
- Reviewing the relationship
- Remembering each other
- Planning for the future
- Processing therapist’s feelings
Announcing Therapist’s Departure

- In person and in writing
- Provide information about why, when, and how
- Respond to questions
- Invite emotional responses
Processing the Client’s Feelings about the Ending

- This goes on throughout the process
- Some clients are able to talk about ending the therapy many months before the time of ending.
- Clients’ feelings about the shift from their agenda to the focus on ending
Reviewing the Therapy

- What do you recall about yourself when you started therapy?
- Where are you now? In what ways have you changed? What new resources do you have?
- How would you summarize what happened in the therapy?
- What were the factors that contributed to those changes?
Reviewing the Therapy

- What was helpful?
- What was challenging or problematic?
- What hasn’t changed (yet)?
Reviewing the Relationship

• What worked well for us?
• What didn’t work so well?
• Disappointments & appreciations
Remembering Each Other

• What will each of us remember about the other?
• What will remind us of each other?
• How do we want to remember each other?
• How are we afraid we will remember each other?
Planning for the Future

- Referrals for clients who want them
- How will you manage the things for which s/he has relied on the therapy relationship?
- What would be the signs that you needed to return to therapy or the issues that might arise around which you might return to therapy?
- Future contact
Saying Goodbye

- Any remaining appreciations and disappointments
- What will you wish you’d said after you leave here for the last time?
- Saying goodbye in the penultimate session
Processing the Therapist’s Feelings about the Goodbyes

- The feelings
- Sources of support
  - Colleagues
  - Literature
  - Psychotherapy
  - Journal
Additional Considerations in Ending Time-Limited Therapies

- Ending is built in from the start
- Importance of talking about ending throughout the therapy
- Clients often wish to continue treatment.

Clinical considerations.
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