An Approach for Facilitating the Passage Through Termination

INTRODUCTION

I have been pulled close to many people in my life; I have touched many people’s lives; many have touched mine deeply. Inevitably, these relationships have experienced goodbyes. Not once has the parting been easy or smooth. My goodbyes have been difficult and filled with feelings. That’s just the way it has been when I got close, felt touched, experienced myself being influential to another, and, for whatever reasons, parted company.

The above serves as a preface to the quality of relationships which this paper addresses. The focus is on the termination phase of clinical work. This is written for the student, teacher and clinician of nursing whose work involves relationships that evoke feelings in each person when the goodbyes are said, and who recognize the importance of the passage through termination for each person.

The background of the authors is one of psychiatric nursing; hence, this paper speaks primarily to the nurse-patient relationship in this clinical specialty. The authors encourage the reader to consider the ideas presented here no matter what her specialty, as it is recognized that termination is a significant event in many areas of the field.

The intent of this paper is to describe one approach toward actualizing the termination. This paper will not deal with why people terminate nor will it include an in-depth theoretical discussion of the dynamics. It will present one technique designed to maximize the learnings of the relationship and to facilitate the passage through this phase.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Termination received little attention in the literature over the last ten years. The majority of work written on this subject came prior to 1965 and was based on the psychoanalytic model with emphasis on signs and symptoms present in the patient during termination and the need to work them through. Since that time, the clinical, psychiatric literature has defined many new approaches to treatment; yet, recent
The literature on termination has remained static and does not reflect the many changes in the field.

The following summary of the literature reflects the current appraisal of termination in a psychotherapeutic relationship.

**Individual Therapy:** Firestein, reviewing termination in psychoanalysis, studied the literature of the last fifty years. He noted that symptom removal alone was not a reliable criterion for termination. Rather, termination was warranted when the client gained insight into his conflicts and his neurosis was identified and undone. Criteria which identified this process were the decrease or elimination of symptoms, removal of transference from object relations, improved psychosexual functioning, mastery of anxiety related to genital injury and penis envy, strengthening of the ego, ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, elimination of acting out and the ability to tolerate anxiety and to delay gratification.

Dewald noted that conflict during termination of psychotherapy was directly related to the emotional intensity of the client-therapist relationship. Client reactions were variable and depended on the nature of treatment as well as the client's problems, personality, and previous termination experiences. The client may see satisfaction if there were improvements with treatment or dissatisfaction if improvements were limited or nonexistent. Even if therapy was successful, the process of termination might bring about an exacerbation of the client's presenting symptoms. If little or no improvement were made then depression or discouragement may be seen in the termination phase.

The impending loss of the therapist, as with the loss of any significant person, may provoke deep feelings of grief and sadness in the client. He may defend against these feelings by wishing to terminate quickly, by denial, by displacement, or by reaction formation. Also, termination may bring about the appearance of neurotic childhood dependency wishes, or it may provoke frank, hostile remarks toward the therapist which may be an attempt by the client to see the therapist as a person with whom he may have a more peer-oriented relationship. Regardless of the symptoms or ploys used by the client, it is in his best interest to recognize and interpret these responses as part of the termination process and to move toward resolution of the conflicted feelings. The essence of termination is to move the client through this phase of treatment and to enable him to gain understanding and thus express the fullness of his feelings.

Phillips states that termination is a time for evaluation. Exploring and sharing the emotions of the experience give it meaning and validate for the client that feelings, however powerful, are not destructive to the relationship. The client learns that the discomfort of the experience is bearable and that ending face-to-face contact is not the end of thoughts and feelings about the other.

Presently, the mechanism for ending psychotherapy is the mutual decision by the client and therapist of a termination date and movement toward the goal. Some therapists choose to wean their clients, decreasing visits over a period of time, while others maintain the same interview schedule until the last hour.

**Group Therapy:** Termination in group psychotherapy is equally as difficult and tumultuous as it is in individual therapy. It arouses feelings of separation and loss, dissolution, futility, impotence, dependency, death, inadequacy, and abandonment. Having to experience a goodbye may also reactivate old themes and conflicts in the group.

In an open-ended group, termination is repetitive and mirrors the clients' life experiences outside of the group. Members continually see the cycle of entering, belonging, and leaving in the group. It is important for the group therapist to encourage verbalizations of feelings around termination as it is unusual for a group to voluntarily examine these feelings. The therapist can help group members differentiate between genuine and false termination proposals. Those genuinely wishing to leave the group often need to be encouraged to plan their leave taking well in advance of their actual departure and to be direct and explicit about their intentions. A well-planned goodbye allows time to complete unfinished business in the group and to explore members' mutual concerns and feelings about the separation.

Groups in which members all share the same termination date may experience very strong separation anxiety. The therapist who takes the initiative to explore and share his own feelings with the group teaches through modeling and encourages group members to join him in the process of terminating.

It is of importance to note that termination anxiety is real for the therapist as well as for the group members, and that it is a most usual phenomenon. A therapist who denies these feelings in himself impedes his clients' movement through termination and his own resolution of the relationship.

In conclusion, the literature describes
behaviors present during termination and stresses the need to move toward, experience, and work through feelings in this phase of treatment. In general, the literature does not discuss any specific techniques for facilitating this process.

The following is offered as one technique for encouraging clients and therapists to explore and express their feelings during the final phase of the relationship. It is one approach to facilitate the passage through termination.

THE APPROACH

The basic premise of this approach is that the people involved in this relationship have come together, each has been touched by the other, and that each must say goodbye and part from this shared experience. This technique is meant to be a complement to the ongoing therapy and is most effectively implemented when the usual approaches toward terminating have been introduced and the work is well under way. The authors have chosen to be detailed in their presentation of the approach, not intending to suggest a definitive procedure to be followed but rather giving the many points involved, most found to be necessary based on the authors' experience, and encouraging each therapist to adapt the specific content of this approach to the unique therapist-client process at hand.

Again, timing for each part of this technique is left to the discretion of the therapist. It cannot be stressed enough: The therapeutic value of this approach lies in the process of what is happening between and inside of these people as each experiences these particular tasks of termination.

As the final session approaches, give the following directions to the client and to yourself:

1. Before we meet again I want each of us to take some time to be alone, as much time as we choose but no less than a half hour. We must plan for this time well so that we ensure that we are undisturbed and undistracted.

2. Give careful thought to the place and the time of day you choose for this time alone. Plan well so that nothing deprives you of this time and that this time alone is exactly the way you want it to be. Most importantly, spend this time alone. I will do this, too.

3. While alone let yourself reminisce about our relationship. Recall the first session we had together and review historically any moments that come clear to you. Give yourself the luxury of staying with these moments as long as you want. Ask yourself: What has this experience been for me? What has touched me? Most importantly, think about you in this relationship and feel whatever feelings come up inside you. I will do this, too.

4. Next, while you are alone, let yourself imagine and/or fantasize how you want the last session to be. Include as many details as possible. At first this may be very difficult to do. Stay with the task, nevertheless, allowing yourself to think and feel whatever comes to you. I will do this, too.

5. Having done this imagining, practice this scene. So many of us have never had a satisfactory goodbye. Allow thoughts and feelings of previous partings to come to you. How were they? How do you want this one to be? You and I must say goodbye. Practice your chosen scene for our parting over and over, changing or modifying until your image of the last session is perfect for you. I will do this, too.

The following are examples of some images from the many people who have participated in this experience:

I see myself having written a song about us and playing it for you.

I want to wear my favorite green dress, look and feel pretty, cry and laugh and get across to you how important you have been to me.

I want to come and be able to sit through it and look you in the eyes as I leave. I see you hugging me.

I see myself telling you how afraid I am to leave you and feeling proud of myself and not ashamed that I can say that.

I see lots of food there that each of us has brought, lots of laughing and crying, not many words because we have said it all. We look at peace to the eyes of each other.

As must be obvious, this task has created many different partings for therapists. One author recalls in particular the ending of a group she had led for eight months. The group had become very close and many people had shown strong growth. While alone, following her own directions, she allowed herself to fantasize about the ending. She saw each person's face and various images of each came to mind. This evoked sadness and a deep feeling of loss inside her. From this came her final scene and the wish to say to each, "Please don't forget me. I shall remember little parts of each of you forever." These feelings and needs represented her own struggles with terminations.

The fantasies of the final session are to be shared with each other, therapist and client, as fully as possible. Each may need to ask help from the other for certain parts of his fantasy to come true. There may be need for compromises.
to occur so that each gets some of what he wants. Through the sharing, the implicit is made explicit, and each person readies himself for a good goodbye.

The practicing is important. Clients, students, therapists, teachers, and patients can be encouraged to practice the parting scene in whatever way fits best for each: talk on a tape recorder to practice saying what one wants to say, draw pictures to capture the final essence, or write a story about how one wants it to go for him. Most importantly, go into the last session having truly thought about it, having allowed yourself the opportunity to feel yourself, and having planned it in such a way that you get what you want.

CONCLUSION

This exercise has had effective results for the authors. People certainly have shared their feelings about leaving with one another. There have been no absences in last sessions when this technique has been used. Both parties report satisfaction at having given and received a full goodbye.

In addition to these benefits, this approach offers some therapeutic bonuses. Each person must take responsibility for this termination occurring the way he wants it to, or certainly as close to his ideal as possible. Each person is encouraged, via this technique, to acknowledge his uniqueness as a person and say his goodbye in a way that fits for himself. The message given is: "We do have to separate; the last time will be (date and time); yes, we will part; but let's do it in a way that allows each of us to have as much of our own uniqueness as possible." This technique facilitates closure to the relationship with each person leaving the last session feeling equally responsible for what just happened. This approach emphasizes that each person is a unique individual and is responsible for communicating this sense of self in all phases of each succeeding interpersonal relationship.

REFERENCES