Termination of Individual Counseling: Concepts and Strategies

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The termination of individual counseling is often an inadequately handled process. If managed effectively as a significant stage of counseling, however, it can maximize counseling outcome and the likelihood that clients will maintain new learning and behavior after counseling has ended. Three major functions of termination are described and a number of strategies are presented for attaining each function. In addition, suggestions are given for the facilitative management of premature termination.

The termination of counseling is a process that seems to have been inadequately addressed in the literature, in training programs, and therefore most probably in counseling practice. One contributing factor is the strong human tendency to try to avoid issues of loss by not acknowledging or dealing with them, resulting until recently in a lack of adequate models for productively working with such issues. Another reason is that counseling theoreticians and counselor educators have been mostly interested in emphasizing the establishment of facilitative counseling conditions and the application of facilitative-therapeutic techniques and strategies in order to bring about human growth and change. They have therefore been less interested in the process of reducing and eliminating these conditions and techniques and the strong, productive relationship they create.

A related contributing factor has been that the microcounseling model for teaching counseling skills (Ivey & Authier, 1978), which has been used increasingly in counselor education programs since the late 1960s, has not focused on larger issues of case management such as the termination of counseling. Rather, microcounseling models have emphasized the training of specific microskills and the development of a repertoire of attending/relationship-building skills and influencing/change skills. In fact, several recent textbooks used in counseling techniques classes contain very little or no material concerning the termination of counseling and its importance (Cormier & Cormier, 1979; Egan, 1982; Hackney & Cormier, 1979; Ivey, 1983).

A theoretical rationale on which to base the effective management of counseling termination must begin with the premise that termination is a process or stage, rather than a sudden cessation of activity (Cavanaugh, 1982; Corey, Corey, Callanan, & Russell, 1982; Shulman, 1979). Yalom (1975) emphasized the significance of termination when he stated, "Termination is more than an act signifying the end of therapy; it is an integral part of the process of therapy and, if properly understood and managed, may be an important factor in the instigation of change" (p. 365). Shulman (1979) suggested that as a general rule-of-thumb, termination should constitute one-sixth of the time of the therapeutic process. The crucial importance of an effective termination process in counseling and psychotherapy has been stressed by a growing number of authors (Goodyear, 1981; Maholick & Turner, 1979; McGee, Schuman, & Racusen, 1972; Shulman, 1979; Weiner, 1975). In fact, if handled inappropriately, termination "may not only conclude this experience without effective change for the member or members, but also so adversely affect individuals that they may not seek further help when necessary" (Hansen, Warner, & Smith, 1980, p. 539). For some clients termination has special significance, especially in cases in which growing up, individuation-separation, and dependency-independency issues are paramount.

Several authors have lamented the lack of attention given to termination in the professional literature (Hansen et al., 1980; Maholick & Turner, 1979; McGee et al., 1972). With the notable exception of an excellent section on the management of termination in Wolberg's (1954) classic textbook on the practice of psychotherapy, little systematic attention has been given to the management of termination until the last decade, during which several factors have converged to provide a rationale for the more sophisticated conceptualization and treatment of the termination process. The aging of the American population has resulted in a movement from a youth-oriented culture to a stimulation of interest in the adult developmental process. A model viewing human development as moving through stages throughout the life span, with important transitions to be negotiated between stages, has been described in both the professional (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1976; Vaillant & McArthur, 1972) and the popular literature (Sheehy, 1976). A related development was the seminal work of Kubler-Ross (1969) describing the stages of the natural human process of dealing with death.

A third major factor has been the rapid development of the field of group work since Lewin's development of the T-group just after World War II and the accompanying increase in the sophistication of understanding of that process during the last decade. The recognition of the importance of the termination process in group work is best illustrated in the work of Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen (1977), both of which reviewed the literature on group developmental stages in order to identify a common model of stages most representative of the various models proposed in the literature at the time. Four stages provided the best fit for the models prior to 1965, and they were tentatively labeled forming, storming, norming, and performing. The literature on group development between 1965 and 1977, however, emphasized termination as a separate and important stage of group work in its own right, and Tuckman and Jensen (1977) consequently identified a fifth stage, adjourning. In fact, McGee et al. (1972) described the value of the termination stage in the following statement:

The total group and the group psychotherapist are frequently reluctant to face such issues in an open, positive, and therapeutic manner. Yet, if adequately understood and worked through, termination becomes the fruit of group psychotherapy and all that has gone before in the group process. (p. 521)

Recent editions of commonly used group counseling and psy-
chotherapy textbooks include extensive discussions of the termination process in group work (Corey, 1981; Hansen et al., 1980; Trotzer, 1977; Yalom, 1975). The cumulative effect of these developments is to provide a firm rationale upon which to base the more effective management of termination in the individual counseling process.

CONCEPTUALIZING TERMINATION

Not only does appropriate termination of individual counseling or psychotherapy involve a number of important issues and activities as part of an identifiable stage of treatment, this stage can be viewed as consisting of three primary functions. First is the function of assessing client readiness for the end of counseling and consolidating learning. A second major purpose includes both resolving remaining affective issues and bringing about appropriate closure of the significant and often intense relationship between the client and the counselor. Effective termination also seeks to maximize transfer of learning and to increase the client’s self-reliance and confidence in his or her ability to maintain change after counseling has ended. The extent to which each of these three major functions needs to be emphasized depends upon the individual counseling situation and the needs of specific clients.

Termination Themes and Tasks

A number of important themes and tasks representative of the termination process have been identified, primarily in the literature of group work. Addressing and working through a selected number of these themes and tasks, guided by the needs of each client, will bring about an effective termination process.

As has been mentioned, Tuckman and Jensen (1977) used the term “adjourning” to describe a major task of termination. In other extensive reviews of the group developmental stage literature for the purpose of building comprehensive models of group development, Lacoursiere (1980) identified loss, separation, sadness, and grief as major themes representative of the termination stage, and Cohen and Smith (1976) listed closure, sadness, increased self-efficacy and personal power, and the transfer of learning as key issues. Other important themes are essentially variations of those already listed, such as ending, growing up, autonomy, individuation, reviewing, summarizing, consolidating, and saying good-bye. In an article describing a model to guide the application of theories of counseling and psychotherapy to group work, Ward (1982) identified grieving and leaving as the key tasks in the group termination stage.

MANAGEMENT OF THE TERMINATION STAGE

What are some of the important variables that must be handled properly in order to maximize the effectiveness of work on these themes and tasks during the termination stage? There is general agreement that psychotherapy should not be terminated during the session when it is first verbalized (McGee et al., 1972; Shulman; 1979; Weiner, 1975). In addition to preventing impulsive premature termination, such a policy establishes termination as a formal stage.

Signs of the Approach of Termination

There are a number of behaviors that may signal the onset of the termination stage, other than direct verbal statements of intent by the client. Among those mentioned in the literature are a decrease in the intensity of the work of counseling, lateness, joking, and intellectualizing (Corey et al., 1982); missed appointments, apathy, acting out, regression to earlier and less mature behavior patterns, withdrawal, denial, expression of anger, and mourning (Shulman, 1979); and feelings of separation and loss, dissolution, futility, impotence, dependency, inadequacy, and abandonment (McGee et al., 1972). If the client increasingly engages in some of these behaviors or feelings but does not verbalize a desire for termination, it may be necessary for the counselor to initiate the process. It is in any case necessary for the counselor to guide the appropriate working through of both task and relationship issues of termination. After the subject has been initiated, it is necessary that the counseling process be restructured to focus on issues of the evaluation and assessment of counseling progress and, therefore, on client readiness for termination.

Evaluation of Termination Readiness

Beginning with Freud (1937/1959), a number of authors have discussed the fact that the counseling or therapeutic process never resolves all problems, removes all symptoms, or results in a complete cure (Weiner, 1975; Wollberg, 1954). Susceptibility to the fantasy quest for “a complete cure” is a characteristic not uncommon among those in the helping professions, many of whom seem to have a strong proclivity toward windmill-tilting. Some propose the use of specific behavioral goals as a remedy for this tendency toward excess. Although such goals are useful as a benchmark against which counseling progress can be measured, a more sophisticated view recognizes the importance of clinical judgment of client readiness to end the treatment process. Variables such as working through the end of the client-counselor relationship, feelings of grief and sorrow, and learning how to handle endings productively are important, but difficult or impossible to objectify or to be anticipated by clients early in the counseling process. Egan’s (1982) problem-management model includes the use of the concept of working to bring about partial gains toward idealized goals such as complete remission of symptoms, psychological wellness, or self-actualization as a method of avoiding unrealistically high or narrow expectations.

Mahllick and Turner (1979, pp. 588–589) identified seven areas useful for evaluating client readiness to leave counseling, including:

1. Examining whether initial problems or symptoms have been reduced or eliminated.
2. Determining whether the stress that motivated the client to seek counseling has dissipated.
3. Assessing increased coping ability.
4. Assessing increased understanding and valuing of self and others.
5. Determining increased levels of relating to others and of loving and being loved.
6. Examining increased abilities to plan and work productively.
7. Evaluating increases in the capacity to play and enjoy life.

Another important area is the extent to which the client comes to feel confident to continue to live effectively without counseling.

As these areas are assessed, it may be helpful to classify the client’s readiness for termination into a six-category taxonomy of termination type revised and adapted from a model for group therapy developed by McGee et al. (1972). The major criteria include both the completeness of work on the task and the resolution of feelings related to counseling and the ending of the facilitative relationship. The four categories in the original model include (a) leaving with complete denial of any feelings of loss, (b) leaving after a flight into health or sudden breaking through defenses, (c) ending after a specific goal has been partially met with a lack of willingness to move further and little awareness of nonreadiness, and (d) separation after announcing a desire to leave and then appropriately working through evaluation and emotional issues with the counselor. In addition, at least two other categories may be useful, that of the very early terminator who leaves before a strong relationship has been established.
established (thus no feelings of loss exist) and the situation in which the client ends the process despite being aware of his or her nonreadiness, often due to factors external to the counseling process.

SAMPLE TERMINATION STRATEGIES

The presentation of sample counseling strategies useful during the termination process will be organized within the three major functions of termination described earlier, those most useful in goal assessment and consolidation of learning, strategies emphasizing affective issues and closure of the relationship between the counselor and the client, and those that focus on the client's expectations and transfer of learning to a life after counseling has ended. Of course, the categories are not mutually exclusive in actual practice, but do provide a useful system for conceptualizing and selecting strategies. Some of the strategies presented were described in several sources (Corey et al., 1982; Maholick & Turner, 1979; Yalom, 1975), and others originated from my background and experience.

Assessment of Goal Completion and Learning

As has been discussed, restructurmg the counseling process toward termination often begins with a shift to a goal assessment focus, and Maholick and Turner's (1979) seven assessment areas can be helpful here. Evaluating progress often begins with listing and measuring changes that the client has made. It is especially important that this is a mutual process between the client and counselor, the client assume the primary responsibility for this process during termination, because the counselor will not be present to remind the client of significant gains after the counseling ends. The client may also prepare a progress report for presentation and discussion. Identifying the most significant learnings is an extension or refinement of the comprehensive-listing strategy.

In addition to reviewing progress using written notes or recall, a very enlightening approach involves reviewing a counseling session recorded early in counseling. Clients frequently fail to recall their original status realistically and often tend to minimize gains as they begin to feel, think, and behave more effectively. Another strategy uses actual testing to determine whether or not the client can demonstrate the changes that have occurred, either within the counseling session or in vivo. The client's awareness of and confidence in his or her counseling gains may also be tested by a "devil's advocate" procedure in which the client attempts to convince the counselor of his or her readiness to end counseling. Another quite valuable technique is that in which the client gathers feedback from people outside of the counseling situation related to readiness to sever the counseling process. For a number of reasons judicious planning, care, and processing should be exercised with this technique, primarily because external sources are unpredictable and may be unreliable.

Closure of Affective and Relationship Issues

Opening and inviting exploration of the separation issue is a primary strategy for dealing with affective issues surrounding the cessation of counseling and working through the steps in the closure of the important relationship between the client and the counselor. The client can be encouraged to explore feelings that arise during the termination process, especially those of loss, grief, abandonment, and related issues. The counselor needs to emphasize the fact that although it may be easy and somewhat natural to avoid and deny such feelings, they are very important for the successful completion of counseling. Therefore, the client should focus on, express, and even dramatize such feelings during termination. Reporting dreams and fantasies may help the client to identify and work through these feelings.

Using a photo-album strategy in which the client identifies significant emotional moments that occurred throughout the counseling process by describing imaginary "snapshots" of those moments and feelings that accompanied them can also bring affective issues into focus. A major strategy in this area is that of immediacy, or increasing the direct discussion of the client and counselor's feelings toward one another and toward the relationship itself. More than any other single indicator, the presence or absence of this increased attention to and working through of relationship factors discriminates between approaches that use the termination process most effectively as a facilitative or therapeutic mechanism in its own right and those that do not. The goal of this emphasis is to lead toward the expression of an appropriate and meaningful good-bye at the actual conclusion of counseling. Clients may summarize their personal reactions to counseling and to the counselor and may give feedback to the counselor concerning what they found facilitative and nonfacilitative in the process. As the affective and relationship factors are explored and worked through, some clients may find the idea of developing and signing a "separation-of-counseling decree" a valuable symbolic statement.

In a special Personnel and Guidance Journal issue on dealing with loss and grief, Goodyear (1981) indicated that counselors and therapists should not overlook but should work through their own feelings about the ending of counseling relationships. This is especially true due to the high investment of energy and of self in our work with many clients. There is also the paradox that we continually end these relationships with clients at the point when they have improved their functioning to the extent that they are much more attractive interpersonally and, thus, a continued relationship might be more personally enjoyable to the counselor. The essential guideline in the counselor's resolution of affective and relationship factors during termination is that counselor disclosure during counseling never be detrimental to the client. In other words, where the counselor's use of immediacy benefits the client, it is appropriate to include during counseling sessions, but feelings or issues that would not benefit the client should be worked through outside of the sessions. Genuineness and transparency must be tempered by therapeutic judgment concerning the best interests of the client.

Preparation for Postcounseling Self-Reliance and Transfer of Learning

The third category of termination strategies to be presented are those directed toward the client's expectations for and transfer of learning to life after counseling has ended. One general strategy is to help the client to be specific about at least some expectations and plans. Renewed goal-setting can assist the client in generalizing the goal-setting procedures used in counseling to outside life and to integrating them as a continuing life skill. The client may wish to make self-contracts concerning behavior after counseling has ceased. Rehearsing new roles may also be included at this time. Learning not to diminish, discount, or forget new learning, skills, and the effects of counseling is also a useful strategy.

Although the use of imagery may be effective at any stage of counseling and may be included in any of the three categories of termination strategies, it is also especially valuable in helping the client to anticipate and plan life without counseling. Projecting the future using imagery can be applied in a number of ways, such as imagining oneself applying new learning in a variety of situations and imagining how life will be in 1 month, 6 months, 1 year, and at any point in the client's future. A specific adaptation of this strategy is for the client to imagine how it will feel during the time period when counseling had been scheduled while not going to the session. The client may even plan activities in which to engage at those times if clients remain anxious or unsure about their readiness to function with
out counseling, but the counselor judges that most of the work of counseling and termination is complete and the major dependencies have been resolved, direct systematic desensitization procedures may be used. Desensitization may be combined with cognitive practice, success imagery, and suggestions to maximize the client's expectations for successful functioning and self-reliance following counseling. Another important strategy for preparing the client to leave counseling is counselor feedback including an assessment of the level of client functioning and of issues that the client might anticipate later.

As the termination process continues, increasing the amount of time between sessions is an excellent way of working toward life without counseling. In addition, a number of authors (Corey et al., 1982; Maholick & Turner, 1979; Wolberg, 1954) stress the importance of follow-up letters as long as 5 years after the end of therapy. There are, then, many strategies that can be effective during the termination process. One cardinal rule concerning client readiness for the end of counseling should be emphasized. If, after a number of termination strategies have been applied and other signs of counseling completion are positive, the client remains uncertain about his or her ability to maintain counseling gains without counseling support, then ending the counseling process is inappropriate. Reassessment should be conducted to determine whether the lack of readiness stems from unfinished task work, lingering dependency feelings or incomplete closure of affective issues relating to saying farewell, or incomplete preparation for self-reliance without counseling, after which a recycling of work in the unfinished areas may be undertaken.

### Handling Termination When Counseling is Unfinished

Thus far, discussion has emphasized the somewhat ideal situation in which counseling has progressed to the point that most goals seem to have been met and the client willingly cooperates in the meaningful working through of termination issues. Some attention has even been directed at cases in which the client resists or feels unready to end the counseling process. But a major challenge in termination remains to be discussed, that of clients who wish to end counseling before it seems that they are ready.

### What Constitutes “Premature Termination”

Of course, readiness is a subjective concept. Strategies of the evaluation of readiness have been presented. In some cases the client and counselor may agree that counseling is unfinished and that significant problems remain. There are also those cases in which the client believes or purports to believe that the process is complete, despite the counselor's judgment and concern that it is not. Actually, these types of situations account for five of the six types of termination described by McGee et al. (1972) and myself earlier in this article.

Recent studies have attempted to identify the variables responsible for early terminations from university counseling centers, defined as those who do not return for a second or third interview after the intake session. The results, however, have been unclear and somewhat contradictory (Epperson, Bushway, & Warman, 1983; Rodolfa, Rapaport, & Lee, 1983). On the other hand, Rosenzweig and Folman (1974) identified level of education and several therapist judgment variables as significant predictors of dropouts who completed less than 16 group therapy sessions at an outpatient VA service. Clearly, then, early separation from counseling cannot be neatly defined by the number of interviews completed. Readiness must be judged in terms of the extent to which client problems and ineffective functioning remain, the degree to which these factors negatively affect the client's life and that of significant others, the extent to which the client can be expected to maintain counseling gains on his or her own, and how appropriately the client has been able to work through affective issues surrounding the termination of counseling and of the relationship with the counselor.

### Extending Abrupt Endings into a Stage

Yalom (1975) made the important point that premature termination in group therapy is a necessary safety valve due to our imperfect understanding of member selection procedures. One of the problems with nonvoluntary counseling is that this safety valve can no longer operate as easily. This same protective device also serves a useful purpose in voluntary individual counseling, because our treatment methods and matching of treatment and counselor with client are less than perfect. But there still remains the issue of providing the best possible treatment for the client, and this requires some extension of the counseling process beyond the time when the client decides to end it. When the client's ending of counseling is characterized by suddenness, unpreparedness, unavailability, irrationality, superficiality, or unfavorable reactions from the counselor (McGee et al., 1972), it is critical that the counselor try to extend counseling and restructure the work to include a termination stage. The major purposes of this extended work are to help clients to resolve any negative feelings resulting from counseling itself, to invite clients to continue counseling if they wish, and to work toward an appropriate referral to another counselor or type of treatment or toward increasing the likelihood that the client will reengage in some type of counseling or facilitative experience at a later date.

Ohslen (1979) and Hansen et al. (1980) suggested that in group work, if the client indicates or the counselor suspects that the client may abruptly sever the counseling process before it is completed, the subject of termination should be openly discussed. If as is the case with some clients, the client simply does not return for a scheduled appointment and does not contact the counselor or agency to reschedule, efforts should be made to contact the client. Some clients may be testing the counselor's concern, may have reached a difficult point in the counseling process, or may be so overwhelmed that they do not believe themselves capable of continuing, and a contact may be all that is needed for productive counseling to resume. Others may very definitely have negative feelings and be resistant to continued counseling. It is suggested that a receptionist phone a client 3 or 4 days after the missed appointment to reschedule. If the receptionist is unable to make contact or meets resistance, the counselor can then contact the client and, if the client wishes to end counseling, invite and strongly encourage the client to return for at least one more session to work through any lingering issues, to decide about possible referral, and to help the counselor to understand better the reasons for termination. If these procedures are unsuccessful, a follow-up letter to invite the client to return at any time can be effective. Although less preferable than working with the client in person, it is even possible to work on some of these issues during a telephone call in cases where the client refuses to return or to give the client the name of a referral source in a letter.

### Working Through Negative Reactions

It is very important that the counselor help the client who wishes to end the counseling process with significant work remaining to deal with negative reactions and feelings. If the client is willing to engage in an exit interview, there are at least four possible positive client outcomes that may result: (a) reduction of as many negative influences as possible before the client resumes life without counseling, (b) resolution of critical issues to the extent that the client is able to continue counseling with the same counselor, (c) preparation of the client for gaining maximum benefit from referral to another "helper," and (d) increased likelihood that the client will reenter counseling or some other personal growth experience at some future date.
As Yalom (1975) stated when discussing group therapy dropouts, “it is up to the therapist to make the experience as constructive as possible; such patients ordinarily are considerably demoralized and tend to view the group experience as ‘one more failure’” (p. 367). In individual counseling the same reaction often applies, although the strong feelings may also be directed at the counselor, the agency, or counseling in general. Although clients should be given feedback to assist them in their futures, the extent to which a specific client is confronted with unrecognized, unresolved, and potentially threatening material should be carefully considered in light of whether or not he or she is likely to accept a referral or reenter counseling in the near future (Yalom, 1975). Although some judicious leverage may be carefully applied, frightening the client into further therapy is a questionable policy at best.

The extent to which the client’s negative reactions toward the counselor should be resolved also depends on the likelihood of the client accepting a referral and the extent to which such resolution is likely to assist in the continuing counseling process. It took some time in my own counseling practice before I realized that although some referral clients were justifiably upset by their previous treatment, others had been purposely allowed to maintain their negative or ambivalent attitudes toward the previous counselor in order to increase the effectiveness of counseling after the referral. Although it is difficult for counselors to end counseling while unappreciated and unlike by clients, it is sometimes in the client’s best interest.

CONCLUSION

It is possible for the termination of counseling to be handled more effectively today, primarily as a result of knowledge stimulated by the work of Kubler-Ross on death, dying, and the grieving process and by advances in the management of termination in group work. Assessment procedures are available for evaluating client readiness for termination of counseling. Strategies are also available for working through issues of identifying and consolidating gains, resolving affective issues and ending the relationship with the counselor appropriately, and preparing the client to maintain counseling gains after counseling ends. In addition, handling client attempts to leave counseling prematurely in the best interests of the client is a sensitive and important issue.

The guiding principle in the productive management of counseling termination is to treat the termination process as a stage in its own right and therefore to give significant termination issues the attention they deserve. Effective closure of the counseling process in a well-managed termination stage can help to solidify clients’ learning and to maximize their continued self-efficacy and success after counseling. The role of effective termination procedures in helping the client to take appropriate and mature leave of the counseling process has been clearly described by Maholick and Turner (1979): “Termination of therapy can be thought of as a recapitulation of the multiple preceding goodbyes of living. At the same time it is a preparation for being able to deal more adequately and openly with future goodbyes” (p. 584). Or, to paraphrase the bard, “parting can be such sweet sorrows.”

REFERENCES