

Ending Psychotherapy: Recurring Themes

Petruska Clarkson

I do not believe that something as profound as a personal journey into inner space can ever be 'terminated' except by death. All of us at junctures of the journey seek out and connect with people who help us, trip us or trick us into greater facility for fecundating the next void — enabling the next transition.

Satisfaction Achievement

When dealing with ending clients may spend time processing and commenting on their sense of satisfaction at their achievements in their psychotherapy. 'I remember what my original psychotherapy contract with you was and I feel so proud that I have met it. More explicitly, I came into therapy to deal with and work through my past relationships in order for me to be more fully present in the here and now so that I would have healthy relationships. I now have a healthy sexual relationship with my partner and plenty of satisfying friendships.' Here the client is clearly stating how satisfied they are. They may of course put it in different words. 'I now feel as if I sit in the middle of my self, in charge of my aspirations, my needs and my fears. I feel as if I have a centre, a core

and an inner beat synchronised with a pulse of life.'

Guilt and Regrets

Clients often face some of their regrets about what they didn't get from this relationship. For example, a client who is currently terminating therapy expresses many regrets about not having spent enough time with me outside of conflict. She wishes that we might have more time where we can be two women sharing together in a harmonious way. She also feels guilty about all the years she now knows she projected her abusive mother on to me, so that she spent the major proportion of her time in therapy being furious with me. Now that the transference relationship has dissolved and she is able to see me for who I am, she feels guilt about having been that nasty horrible child that she was acting out (though this was highly therapeutic and appropriate) and for having perhaps caused me to feel uncomfortable, persecuted and so forth.

It is very important for the clinician to be clear when the client addresses such guilt, because what the above client moved through in her therapy was totally

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appropriate and indeed what her therapeutic journey was essentially all about. If she now translates an excellent therapeutic journey into a guilt-ridden one, we are in effect undoing what was so effective. It is therefore essential to differentiate between appropriate person-to-person/human-to-human 'sorry' feelings and what was needed for the inner child of the client during their psychotherapy. It's like saying 'I'm really sorry for all those difficult times, but I didn't know any different, and that is what I came here to find out'. In this statement there is a genuine meeting of two people and a lack of persecution towards self and others.

Anger and Disappointments

Often individuals will express their feelings of anger towards the psychotherapist for ending. They will in essence be clearing any feelings of anger that they have perhaps held on to and never declared during the process of their psychotherapy. They may even, as Seinfeld suggests, spoil the good things they have accomplished and the good object they had internalised.

I have also found that clients often express their rage as a way of separating at this stage of treatment. In the expression of their feelings they feel their separateness. The important thing is that this is just a phase of the ending process, as opposed to something that is fixed. Working through this issue, clients will also perhaps deal with their disappointments about the psychotherapeutic process and the psychotherapist, such as 'I believed that you knew everything and I'm now discovering you don't. I expected at the end of my therapy never again to feel

depressed and the reality is that I do'. The difference therefore between disappointments and regrets is that regrets are to do with self and disappointments to do with the other — they are other-directed.

Sadness and Nostalgia

Some clients will spend time reminiscing about various times in their therapy. These are usually related to healing times — whether they were difficult times or easy times is of no consequence. The healing quality of these times is connected with the sadness of coming to an end of the relationship, the sadness of this process. What predominates in working through this particular issue is reflection. This is particularly profound in group psychotherapy, where clients may share with each other both the group's journey and each other's psychotherapy journey. For example, one group member may reflect to another by saying 'Remember when you came into the group and sat in the corner for six months. Now look at you, a really important and present member of this group.'

Fear and Trepidation

Clients will need to deal with their fear of being in the big world without their psychotherapist. Comments such as 'What will I do if I have a problem?' 'How will I solve problems outside of our relationship?' 'Will I be OK without you?' may be made. It is here also that individuals face their own fear about not trusting themselves: 'Will I become severely depressed again?' It is my belief that what individuals are working through here is whether or not they have a secure enough self-support system to

take themselves through difficulties. They are testing themselves in this process as to whether they have incorporated enough from the psychotherapeutic relationship to sustain themselves in the world out there.

They are also facing their fear of separation: 'Can I really tolerate the pain of ending this relationship?' It is often here that clients will seek reassurance from the psychotherapist by asking questions like 'Can I come back and see you if I have problems?'. It is important not to foreclose too prematurely. If the psychotherapist answers the question too soon and doesn't pay attention to the underlying emotion, then what is not being addressed is the fear of 'really ending' and therefore facing the despairing position of being in the void and experiencing 'aloneness'. Therapists often work just above this level in order not to face their own fear of confronting endings.

Envy and Gratitude

'Envy' relates here to those envious feelings that are often exposed at the termination of therapy. It is at this point that clients may say 'I feel envious about your life and your relationship and really wish for that in my life'. The envy can therefore be current envy, or involve clearing past envy that they have held and not declared. It is important to be able to deal with envy, which is very much a person-to-person exchange.

Feelings of gratitude towards the psychotherapist need to be received and acknowledged, too. 'I am really grateful for what I have received in this very important relationship. I am grateful for the time and energy you have put into the

relationship. I am grateful for having found you in my time of despair.' Again it is essential for the psychotherapist to differentiate between pathological gratitude and genuine person-to-person gratitude. For instance, a client recently began to share her gratefulness towards me. As a child she had spent most of her life being dependent on the state for her welfare and for her needs to be met. It was therefore important that she realized that she did not have to be grateful any more, but that it was her right to receive what she had received in our relationship: her right to be heard; her right to be seen, and her right to be loved and to love. Having moved through this she was in a clearer position to feel genuinely grateful to herself and to me for the psychotherapy journey that we had travelled together.

Relief and Release

When individuals experience relief it is often due to clearing the psychotherapeutic issues that they originally came to tackle. 'I'm so relieved that I no longer feel anxious.' 'I feel so relieved that I am no longer afraid of authority figures.' This relief can be directed towards themselves or towards the psychotherapeutic relationship: 'I feel relieved that I am no longer frightened of you.' 'I am so relieved to be able to be myself in relation to you.' Through expressing their relief, they are released into allowing themselves to become more autonomous in the world. This release is both internal and external. By this I mean they are both internally released to be who they are and also, because of the termination of the psychotherapeutic relationship, experiencing themselves as released from

dependency into life as interdependent, autonomous human beings.

Anticipation

Clients will spend time talking and fantasising about what it will be like when they leave this relationship: 'I wonder what I will do on a Tuesday night — at last I'll be able to have that extra supply of money'. They will also anticipate future meetings with the psychotherapist and wonder what will happen when they meet, say at a conference. What the individual is doing here is anticipating future ways of relating. It is an important issue to work through, as it symbolises in a profound way the letting-go of this relationship and being in the future without it. The process of anticipation is active visualisation of 'how I see myself being in the future without you'.

Past Losses

Terminating a relationship of this nature is highly evocative. It can often evoke the memory of past losses. It is therefore often a time where individuals revisit past losses, looking at whether they are closed gestalts or whether in fact there are still feelings that need to be dealt with. Looking at past losses, griefs and bereavements is often very informative for both client and psychotherapist. By doing this they are often able to make some clinically beneficial predictions. For example, a client who is withdrawing in the termination phase is asked how he dealt with leaving his country of origin. The answer was that he had cut off from his feelings and gone numb. In revisiting this trauma he was able to release his feelings about leaving his country of birth. It was at that moment that he became

fully present in the process of leaving the psychotherapy group.

Recycling

Levin uses this term to refer to the developmental age of nineteen onwards. This stage is referred to as the time when adolescents are individuating and preparing to leave home. Before leaving, she says, they recycle the earlier developmental stages, their aim being to check what still needs to be addressed, to see if there are still some developmental deficits that need filling. The same can be said to apply to the client-psychotherapist relationship in the process of ending. It is often a time where clients will recycle earlier phases and issues of their therapy in order to check a) whether such issues are completed or not, and b) for the gaps, in order to fill them before leaving.

Another motivation behind recycling some old behaviour might be to do with an issue of trust, along the lines of 'Let's really see whether it's true that I will not be rejected from this relationship'. Here the client is checking a fundamental life belief that people who are close will eventually reject them. So in termination they are checking out whether the reparative experience will really hold to be true.

Existential

We also need to look at the existential reality of endings. Endings are part of life. There is no way in which human beings can escape the eternally recurrent, cyclic nature of human experience — meeting and separating, birth and death, intimacy and withdrawal. Here we are facing the despair of our aloneness and the void of nothingness. Each one of us, as Kierkegaard says, is ultimately alone.

An existential issue such as death is placed here as the penultimate issue, because if it is dealt with before all the above has been worked through it can be seen as pseudo-existential, or as a way of avoiding the real immediate pain of dealing with this separation in this moment, now.

Archetypal and Transpersonal Dimensions

Finally, there are the images, the dreams and artwork and experiences which emerge towards the end of therapy, indicating renewal, completion, death and rebirth. With all of these the clinician has many options in choosing how to work intrapsychically or interpersonally.

The following dream is not atypical: 'I was in the presence of two older women. One of them seemed to be my "difficult" grandmother. But she faded into the background immediately. Both women were engaged in religious and spiritual pursuits. But the stranger definitely was more level-headed. She suggested I should do an "exercise". I was puzzled. She called it shedding of the skin. As she was explaining it to me a young woman was in fact performing the exercise. She put her head

on her chest. And it disappeared into her body. That's all I saw. Although I was slightly scared and apprehensive I told the woman I wanted to do the exercise. So I put my head on my chest . . . and it entered my body. And from then on I had to completely trust this woman. I felt her hands curling my skin across my bones. I was completely soft. Even my bones. She proceeded to peel me, turn me inside out. I felt like a sausage, with an unsavoury skin. I felt this as I was "peeled". I remember thinking, "How nice to get rid of that skin". But at the same time I still didn't know if I'd ever get out of this very awkward position! I could get completely stuck half-way through . . . These fearful thoughts crept through my mind as I felt my skin being pushed on my outside. I was still inside. It was awfully dark. And then I felt hands quite hard pushing at my head. And I saw light. I saw it from the inside of my own vagina. And I realized I was actually born from myself. I saw the shed skin and even the umbilical cord, which had been cut off. I can't remember how I got "out" — but when I was out I had a new skin and felt very fresh all over. And glowing.'

Further Reading

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