Termination Tips and Perspectives

What we are facing right now is considered unplanned and/or premature termination with our clients. Unplanned and/or premature terminations are difficult for many reasons. They bring up a loss of control for the client and for the worker/intern. Consider ways to bring some measure of control back for you and for the client.

1. Consider how you’d like to bring yourself into your ending with your client, once you’ve determined how that ending will be conducted. Appearing as if you are managing the changes as well as one can provides for the client a sense that they do not have to take care of us. Discuss this in supervision so that you also feel supported.

2. Having a plan for the client’s next steps is another way that they can feel more in control. You will establish some kind of plan with your field instructor so that the client will know that they will be transferred to someone else in a particular time frame or that they should contact WHOM (name, contact info) in the meantime until next steps are determined.

3. Providing some kind of transitional object can bring some control back for us and for the client. This might be a rock, a note, a wish that you connect to their strengths, ways you’ve seen them grow over the period of time you’ve worked together.

4. Of course these steps will depend on the nature of your relationships with your clients in the role that you have had as well as the length of time you might have worked with a particular group or individual.

5. Under these circumstances, you are encouraged to acknowledge and support the client’s experience of limited control over the process and the decision for you, their worker, to leave. Thank them for any concern they share with you about you, acknowledging that this situation is impacting all of us, while assuring them that your concern is for them.

Attachment theory is a relevant theory to understand premature termination. Clients are being asked to adapt to an imposed change. Separation protest, regardless of its form, is normal (Ainsworth et al. 1978). Clients might be angry, reactive, non-reactive, complacent, etc. They might resist moving to a new worker or blame the agency/university/world for things outside of their control. Interns might experience this as well. Many of you don’t want to end yet and certainly don’t want a force outside of planned termination to end your field experience early. Having mixed responses is natural and normal.

In unplanned and/or premature termination, workers/interns are often disappointed that we are a source of hurt for the client. Because we come into the profession to help, it is often hard to reconcile that endings can be hurtful to clients and that they might experience us as having disappointed them. We might have even felt guilty when considering our own health when thinking about returning to field. It is critical to recognize, however, that successful endings where clients have felt disappointed often lead clients to a process of greater self-understanding, sense of individuation, and increased capacity for self and other reflection (Fonagy 2000).

Walsh (2007) indicates that termination is positive by defining it as the process of bringing a relationship with a client to a constructive end. Even experienced social workers often need consultation and support to achieve these constructive endings. Utilize supervision with your field instructor, consultation with your faculty liaison, peer consultation in Seminar, and journaling to obtain the perspectives and support that will be helpful to you as you deal with your own feelings during this unplanned and/or premature termination process.


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