Are We There Yet? How Do We Know When It Is Time to End Psychotherapy?

A Review of

Termination in Psychotherapy: A Psychodynamic Model of Processes and Outcomes
by Anthony S. Joyce, William E. Piper, John S. Ogrodniczuk, and Robert H. Klein
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Reviewed by
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Most writings about terminating psychotherapy begin with a comment about the relative dearth of previous publications on this subject. This paucity of discussion is evident particularly in comparison with the mountainous piles of communications on most other psychotherapeutic topics. There is some truth to the statement that termination has not been as well studied as have been the psychotherapeutic issues and variables that precede it during the course of treatment. The repeated mention of this imbalance also may express a more profound emotional truth that has nothing to do with numbers of articles or chapters but that touches on the conflictual feelings and ideas that are evoked in patients and therapists by this subject. Few topics in psychotherapy stir up so much doubt and debate, and equally few have such poorly defined empirical parameters and clinical benchmarks. How do we know when most or all of the work has been done? Is what is left important enough to justify more time and expense? Is the idea of ending the therapy a way for either or both parties in the dyad to avoid some important issue? Or, conversely, is the continuation of psychotherapy an avoidance of painful feelings of loss, separation, and anxiety? These and other such questions arise in the minds of patients and therapists alike when termination is (or sometimes isn't) addressed.

Termination in Psychotherapy: A Psychodynamic Model of Processes and Outcomes goes a long way in filling in the gaps in the existing literature, particularly with regard to psychodynamically oriented psychotherapy, which is the approach that the authors emphasize. It works as an intellectual manual for the practicing psychotherapist, which will guide her or him down the slippery slope of the termination process. The book also will be effective in reducing the anxiety of those practitioners, as its comprehensive review of the literature and its clear, easily used model for understanding and working though termination can be adapted readily by most psychodynamic practitioners. The specific model of termination can be considered and adapted by therapists who work within theoretical orientations other than specifically psychodynamic. The authors have included a very useful chapter that focuses on the differences in the termination process in cognitive–behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, supportive therapy, and experiential therapy. The model that is developed in this volume also will serve as the framework for effective and important future research.

The book is organized around a goal-oriented, conceptual framework for planning for and working through termination, which is effectively linked to central and necessary clinical techniques. It offers a set of practical guidelines for evaluating progress in therapy and in using movement toward consensual goals as triggers for consideration of the possibility of termination. These guidelines include clearly defined, termination-specific
goals. These termination goals emphasize especially working through issues that are stimulated or re-evoked by the termination process and processing and integrating feelings of loss and sadness connected to the therapeutic relationship. A final subset of termination-specific goals revolves around the resolution of issues in the therapeutic relationship that have been ongoing concerns or that have been heightened by the impending end of the treatment.

One clinical puzzle that is unknotted to a large degree through reading this book is the variability with which individual patients and therapists approach termination. As the authors note clearly, for some therapy participants ending is not really a big deal, and little time and emotional energy are spent on it. Other persons (again, including either therapists or patients) have the most difficult time working through this part of the process, and it becomes an almost exclusive concern. The text includes an extensive discussion of patient characteristics (such as personality disorder or excessive dependency), therapist variables (for example, a history of losses), relationship issues (ongoing alliance problems), and structural variables (such as time-limited or long-term psychotherapy), all of which may play important roles in determining the specifics of each termination.

The book is well organized, clearly written, and free from the technical jargon that makes some psychodynamic writing tiresome and difficult to plow through. The integration of empirical data, theory, and clinical experience is well balanced, fair, and effective. I was surprised that the authors did not spend more time discussing the issue of forced termination and the impact of third parties (i.e., insurance companies, spouses, or parents) who sometimes cut off support for psychotherapy before either therapist or patient deems termination to be appropriate. Psychodynamic psychotherapy seems to be particularly vulnerable to such intrusions by third-party payers because of its length and its focus on variables that are out of awareness and thus more difficult to empirically measure.

Similarly, the book would have benefited from some discussion of those cases (we all have heard of them) that approximate Freud's (1937/1968) notion of analysis interminable or of the avoidance or denial of termination. Still, these are minor quibbles that do not point to any major flaws in this very useful text. It would be a useful addition to the libraries of practicing psychotherapists and an important component of reading lists in graduate courses in psychodynamic psychotherapy. Additionally, it serves as a valuable update and elaboration on earlier contributions to this literature, such as the volumes by Kupers (1988), Kramer (1990), and Murdin (2000). These earlier works also contained psychodynamic explorations of successful and unsuccessful termination. The present volume includes and expands on the essential ideas in these earlier works while also updating the psychoanalytic theoretical framework through which termination is understood. At the same time, the integrative use of the research literature in this volume adds immeasurably to its value as compared with earlier discussions. Just as important, the framework for understanding, initiating, and processing termination issues is so clear and practically elaborated that it could be used as a source of operationally defined constructs and hypotheses that could fuel important empirical research on this topic.

References


