

Ending therapy

Client information sheet

Kathleen Daymond and Sarah Millward of our **Get help with counselling concerns service** look at some of the issues that can arise when therapy comes to an end.

We use the word 'therapy' to cover talking therapies, such as counselling, psychotherapy and coaching, and 'therapist' to include 'counsellor' and 'psychotherapist'.

Ending therapy can be challenging for both you and your therapist - you might experience intense feelings of loss, separation or abandonment. But ending can also be empowering and an important marker of change and what you've achieved. You're likely to have become more emotionally strong.

Deciding when to end therapy

Unless you are in short term therapy with a set number of sessions, it's unlikely that your therapy will have a definite end date from the outset, but all therapy should be working towards an eventual finishing point.

You and your therapist should discuss a clear plan for the goals you would like to achieve from therapy, even if these change over time. Setting goals focuses attention and provides direction in the counselling relationship. You can see that your therapist has understood your needs and you are both working towards the same outcome.

Once those goals are achieved, it's probably time to think about ending therapy. Having regular reviews and talking about how your therapy has progressed can encourage discussions about when would be a good time to end.

In short-term therapy, these goals should be linked to the amount of time you have available with the therapist. To ensure that you feel emotionally stable and able to cope when therapy ends, your therapy should be structured in the same way as an individual session. That means that you talk about the most emotionally difficult things before or at the mid-point so that you can feel emotionally strong enough to leave safely by the time therapy ends.

Not all types of therapy work in this way or cover setting goals in training but whatever way your therapist works, it may be considered acceptable to set goals and review them.

Talking about endings

Whether you're in short or long-term therapy, the ending of therapy should not come as a surprise.

Your therapist should be aware that endings can be difficult, so it's good practice for them to discuss it with you at the start and throughout your therapy. Most therapists will also talk about the end of therapy several sessions before it is due. They should let you know how many sessions are left (if you're in time-limited therapy) and discuss how an ending might be managed.

Although discussing endings may feel strange and uncomfortable, it's a necessary part of planning your therapy. You should be at a point where the ending feels 'right' and you are emotionally strong enough to be independent of therapy. Talking about the end early on means you have time to get used to the idea and can discuss any anxieties or new problems that crop up in your remaining sessions.

The last session

The final or ending session (or sessions) is an important part of the process. How many ending sessions you have may well depend on how long or how often you've been in therapy. While there are no rules, it's reasonable to suppose that someone who's been in long-term therapy will generally require more ending sessions than someone in shorter term therapy.

Some endings may be final with no possibility of returning, while others may appropriately 'leave the door open'. It's crucial that you have clear conversations about what additional support may be available and whether or not you will have any future contact with your therapist.

Unplanned endings

Sudden and unplanned endings can leave clients feeling very angry and upset. Many liken their feelings to those of extreme grief and the sense of loss can be huge.

Whatever the reason for ending therapy, it is the responsibility of the therapist to ensure as safe an ending as possible for their clients.

Although therapists do not have a duty to treat clients indefinitely and they do not need their client's permission to end sessions, they do have a responsibility to 'ensure the safety and wellbeing of all clients' (*Ethical Framework* Good Practice point 11).

It is important that they make sure their clients are informed and any ongoing therapeutic needs are sufficiently met if they decide to, or have to, end therapy prematurely.

Reasons why a therapist might end therapy

A therapist may end your therapy sooner than expected due to:

- retirement
- illness or accident
- their own fitness to practise
- change of work patterns
- funding
- feeling they are not working within their competence
- a conflict of interest, for example they may know someone you know

The BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits all our members to 'making clients our primary concern while we are working with them'. If they are unable to continue to work with you, they need to ensure that your needs will be taken care of and that you will not be abandoned.

Members must make arrangements for ensuring you are informed in the event of their death or if they suffer an accident or serious illness. This is known as making a clinical will. Such a crisis can cause extreme difficulties for clients, so a clinical will sets out plans to be carried out by a trusted individual, such as their supervisor, which will ensure any disruption to their clients is minimised and may include help to find a new therapist.

If your therapist wishes to stop because they feel that they cannot help you further, it is good ethical practice for them to discuss this first with their clinical supervisor. If they still feel unable to continue, they should provide you with a satisfactory ending and help with a potential referral.

Reasons why a client might end therapy

Occasionally clients decide to stop attending therapy without any warning. This might happen if you:

- do not feel ready for therapy, or don't think the therapist is the right one for you
- feel you no longer need therapy or are no longer finding it useful
- have an unresolved conflict with or have lost trust in your therapist
- feel 'stuck' and unable to overcome this feeling

Sometimes life events or financial circumstances can also get in the way.

Although the decision to end therapy would preferably be made together, it is ultimately your choice and your therapist should respect your decision.

However, sometimes avoiding an ending might be a client repeating a life pattern of avoidance so it could be appropriate for the therapist to challenge you if they feel this is the case.

But ultimately you should not feel trapped and forced to remain in therapy against your wishes. You have the right to decide when to stop as well as the right to look for another therapist at any time.

Pre-paid or block booked sessions

Sometimes clients are asked to pay for a number of sessions in advance.

If you're asked to pay upfront, you need to consider what would happen if you decide not to have all the sessions for any reason. What does your contract say about ending therapy early? Will the remaining sessions be reimbursed?

Block booking sessions may be considered unethical as it may be of greater benefit to the therapist than to the client.

BACP's Get help with counselling concerns service

Our **Get help with counselling concerns** service provides help, guidance and information on what to do if you have any concerns about your therapy or your therapist.

Anything you say is confidential and you can speak with us anonymously if you prefer.

We're available from Monday to Thursday 9.30am to 4pm. Calls are limited to a maximum of 30 minutes.

At other times or, if you have difficulty accessing the service by telephone, please leave us a voicemail or email us and we'll get back to you as soon as we can.

You can contact us by:

- telephone 01455 883300 option 2, 07811 762114 or 07811 762256
- email gethelp@bacp.co.uk
- www.bacp.co.uk/gethelp

You can also find other sources of help at www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/useful-links/