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## **Work at the ending stage of the group: separation issues**

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# Work at the ending stage of the group: separation issues

The date of ending for some groups is determined at the outset. The number of sessions or the length of time that the group will run for is established before the group begins. In other groups termination is expected to occur upon completion of a particular task or whenever it is decided that members have achieved their goals and objectives.

However, there are other situations where a group does not coalesce; there is a heavy loss or turnover of members; workers may leave the group and termination can occur. I am not referring to these instances when I discuss ending of the group in this section. I want to look at the natural and planned termination of the group and the separation issues that are part of this stage.

The approach of termination is a psychic shock which group members react to according to their preferred method of coping with anxiety. The group is finishing and the basic issue for members is how to handle separation with least personal discomfort. Members look for ways of avoiding or denying the reality that their group is to end and when this fails to work may regress to previous states of group disorganization.

At the same time that members are trying to avoid the ending of the group there is a growing acknowledgement of the finality of termination and a willingness to face and accomplish it. However, right up until the final moment there may well be a strong tension between these two desires that can manifest in a wide variety of confused and contradictory behaviour.

There are a number of themes to look out for in the final stages:

- *Denial*: Members may express surprise or claim to have forgotten that the group would end. Members may plan to continue on their own after the formal ending or look towards reunions.
- *Regression*: This involves a sliding back into earlier group experiences and relationship patterns accompanied by increased dependence on the worker. Attempts may be made to reactivate the problems or needs that led to the group being set up originally.
- *Flight*: Destructive and aggressive behaviour may be directed towards each other, the worker, equipment, and activity. People drop out early or join other groups.
- *Reviewing*: This involves going over group experiences and reminiscing about past events and memories. It can be integrative in that it is an attempt to evaluate the meeting of the group experience and prepare members for letting go of each other.

These themes generate ambivalent behaviours and feelings which are confusions and distortions of the love and will energies (see [subsequent table]).

In general, I find that the longer members have been together the more visible and pronounced is their anger and mourning of the passing of the group. A group which has been meeting weekly for nine months will experience themselves as losing more than a group which has met for six sessions. The shorter group, however, will still experience a scaled-down version of what occurs in its older relative if it has at all bonded. So whether your group lasts for a day, six sessions, or nine months, you can expect to find some of these manifestations of grief and anger at separation.

Let us look at the role of the worker in this final stage.

### **Working with the group at termination**

As groups move towards their conclusion the worker again becomes a central figure and his major task is to help the members let go of the group and move away. As we have seen, this is an emotionally distressing time for members and can make huge demands on the worker who in all probability is trying to deal with his own separation issues.

I find that members look to me to be group mother, father and guide all at the same time: because of their anxiety and distress they need nurturing but they also need reminding that there are clear boundaries and limits. At other times, members are well able to contain their feelings and review their work with little need of my intervention.

Manifestations of ending and separation	Underlying needs and motives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denial that the group is ending</li> <li>• Delaying or prolonging work</li> <li>• Frenzied work activity</li> <li>• Rejection of work</li> <li>• Sabotage and destruction of programme and materials</li> <li>• Clinging together for comfort</li> <li>• Reduced interaction and involvement</li> <li>• Absenteeism</li> <li>• Lateness</li> <li>• Premature endings</li> <li>• Abdication of responsibility</li> <li>• Overdependence on worker</li> <li>• Rejection, provoking, challenging of worker</li> <li>• Rejection, anger, challenging of other members</li> <li>• Blaming, scapegoating, finding fault</li> <li>• Irruption of unresolved incidents</li> <li>• Feelings of guilt, shame about levels of contribution</li> <li>• Depression, despair, anxiety, grief</li> <li>• Feelings of loss and abandonment</li> <li>• Planned reunions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To avoid separation</li> <li>• To maintain group experience</li> <li>• To begin again</li> <li>• To deal with painful feelings</li> <li>• To punish worker and 'bad' members</li> <li>• To destroy group</li> </ul>

Here are some suggestions that might help you work with your group at this stage.

### **Working with the group at the physical level of separation**

Members' interest and investment in the group is beginning to wane and your main job now is to emphasize movement away from the group and towards other groups, members' own community, or workplace.

#### *Complete group tasks*

Aim to complete and resolve any remaining tasks left to the group and draw attention to any delaying or prolonging activity. Be alert for any over-enthusiastic approach to work which might suggest a desire to deny or preclude the group ending. I find it important to be visible with my expectation that members will complete individual tasks and join with me in concluding group projects. This seems to make ending less threatening and more in the nature of a normal passage or development.

*Permit activity to become less rewarding*

There is a thin line between allowing activity to become less attractive and rewarding and letting your programme collapse into boredom and monotony, which increases the risk of precipitating early withdrawal by members. What you should aim at is a gradual reduction in attraction and interest in activity, as a way of increasing members' motivation to conclude the business of separation and look outside the group for new and more stimulating relationships and experiences.

To encourage this, avoid any activity which challenges the group to further accomplishments such as competition or new projects. Activity which is stimulating, exciting, gives high rewards, or encourages a lot of group interaction should also be avoided. If you find that members are complaining of boredom you may have made activity too bland and it would be important to reintroduce some favoured activity if you are not to force members to leave prematurely. However, complaints about boredom may also reflect resistance and anger about the impending termination. In other instances I have found that the group has naturally come to an end and attempting to continue until the official end is uncreative and tedious.

In some groups you can facilitate the idea of moving out by arranging visits outside the group which prepare members for transition into workplace, community, school or college. Visitors or guest speakers may be invited into the group to help members with enquiries about welfare rights, accommodation needs, and other points relating to life apart from the group.

*Encourage ritual and celebration*

I am always surprised at the attitude of those groupwork teachers and practitioners who view the farewell party as contrived, false, and beneath the dignity of the worker. By encouraging group workers to see the farewell party as an immature attempt to deny or sublimate the end of the group I believe we miss something important and deep in human experience.

The ending of the group is a kind of death and will be experienced by members as the passing of a particular time in their lives. They need to mark this passing in a way which celebrates the importance of the experience in their lives and gives a sense of completion. At the same time they are aware that with the ending of the group there comes opportunity for new relationships and experiences and the invitation to transfer the growth and learning that took place in the group.

All cultures have recognized the pain and celebration, the death and transformation inherent in times of transition and have marked these occasions with a rite of passage – birth, death, initiation and marriage ceremonies and rituals. Similarly the ending of the group is an experience of separation and initiation, finishing and beginning which can speak to something real and deep in us. I believe it demands and warrants its own rite of passage. Obviously this will vary according to the purpose for which the group met, the time spent together, intimacy generated, and so on. It can vary from a party for members in the last session to a drink in the pub or a meal together after the last session. The important point is that you should create an end for the group which celebrates, synthesizes, and symbolizes for members which the group was all about.

If you want to be more prosaic about the ending of the group you can see the ending ritual as a way of helping the group to relax and wind down. Many groups are very task-oriented and minimise or forget the need to slow down, rest, and take pleasure in their labour. Marking the end of the group in the ways I have suggested brings home to members the necessity of maintenance activities and provides an opportunity for informality, fun, and saying goodbye.

### **Working with the group at the emotional level of separation**

As soon as people know that the ending of the group is really going to come they deal with this knowledge by using strategies that often come from earlier in their lives. This can cause a great deal of emotional disruption among members depending on the purpose and intimacy of the group. Here are some ideas to help you to work with the feelings and emotions that are prevalent at this time.

#### *Sort out your own feelings*

The first thing to be aware of is that you have been very closely involved in the life of the group. You have been a part of the conflict, the resolutions, and the decisions that were made. The group has been a satisfying, frustrating, exciting, boring, painful, and happy experience for you. You have nurtured members through difficult and awkward stages of their life, provided them with stability and boundary when they were in open revolt against your leadership, and you have had to sit back and let them learn through their own efforts which you could have done it faster! The point is this – the group is also ending for you and you have your own feelings and thoughts about this.

You may be glad, sad, or a mixture of both and so it is important to spend time preferably with a supervisor or colleague, looking at your own feelings about the group ending. Being clear about how the ending affects you, ensures that you do not get swamped or overwhelmed by members' feelings and are free to support the group at this difficult time. Acknowledging feelings of sadness or loss, to yourself first of all, enables you subsequently to be visible with them in the group and model for members a more appropriate way of being in relationship with their own feelings. It also helps you identify the emotional themes that are likely to be around in the group and develop strategies for highlighting and facilitating them.

#### *Deal with separation anxieties*

Give members permission to have feelings about the end of the group and encourage them to share these collectively. I try to give some structure to this by building in small sessions where members can talk about what they appreciated in the group and what they resented. This has the effect of bringing feelings to the surface, balancing them, and channelling them effectively.

View expressions of guilt, failure, and incompetence as signs of sadness or repressed anger and do not allow them to be put forward as reasons for the group ending. Allow appropriate levels of grief and anger to be expressed whilst maintaining boundary and avoid being hooked into punitive behaviour or made to reject members. I find the simplest way of working

with such behaviour is to describe what is happening and wonder aloud what is behind it. Members are usually able to verbalize and reflect on their motives quite quickly.

Members may need help to complete unfinished business with each other or find it difficult to say goodbye to each other. It can be useful to spend time in pairs doing this or you may prefer to use exercises in which everybody can participate.

What can often make ending more difficult for members is their association of group termination with other unresolved or painful life experiences of separation, loss, abandonment, and bereavement. It is not uncommon for some members to talk openly about the death of parents or relatives and bring into the group emotional material from these events. Although the ending of a group can activate very deep feelings of pain and shock you should not allow yourself to be frightened or put off by this. You can create a positive experience of termination for your group which can go a long way towards healing and redeeming past endings, and showing people that not all separations have to be brutal and bloody.

As you help people deal with their good and bad feelings you will find that they are better able to accept separation and dissolve the group. Allow this to be a difficult time for members and respond to them with compassion, understanding and acceptance.

### **Working with the group at the intellectual level of separation**

It is important to help members conceptualize what the group experience has meant to them and be clear about what they are taking away from the group. A major activity at this stage is to create time and space where members can evaluate their involvement and progress. This is a different procedure from the reminiscing type of review that members typically engage in. Evaluation is a structured part of the group's work and has clear objectives:

- To determine the value of the group to the individual.
- To gauge progress in achieving individual goals.
- To assess whether group objectives were achieved.
- To determine what aspects of the group require modification.

The particular purpose of your group will determine what you evaluate for and how you conduct this. I have a particular format that I use in most groups because I find it a simple but powerful way of generating meaning, making connections, and focusing members on their future outside the group. Depending on the type of group I am working with I will ask members to write or draw in response to my questions. I preface the evaluation by repeating familiar themes to my group members – the idea of journey, of unfolding and of process.

*Where have you come from?*

What were your goals/objectives at the start of the group? What were your hopes/ambitions/fears/anxieties? What was the group like for you? What

were the times of joy/pain/highs/lows? What did you enjoy/regret, appreciate/resent?

*Where are you at now?*

What have you achieved/changed/learned? Are you satisfied/frustrated with what you have accomplished? What comments can you make about yourself now? What would you change/modify about the group/programme/sessions?

*Where are you going to in your life?*

What is the direction you wish to go in? What do you need to do in your life? What is your next step/goal/possibility? What do you still need to change/achieve/learn?

*What is in your way?*

What prevents you from changing/achieving/learning? What blocks you from going in this direction? What are you avoiding/overlooking/refusing?

*What will help you*

What do you need to help you change/learn? What do you need to develop in yourself? What skills/qualities/knowledge do you need? Where will you get them from?

These five headings provide a framework for members which begins to help them understand their experience in the group and creates context, orientation, and perspective so that the group is not perceived as an isolated event but is woven into their lives.

Encourage people to reflect and abstract what learning and growth took place; what personal and interpersonal skills they acquired. This will help individuals view their membership in a more objective light and lessen feelings of grief or sadness by showing how personally beneficial involvement in the group was.

You may wish to spend time helping the group plan more specific follow-up needs. This may require you to be available to offer help after the group terminates or may take the form of a 'reunion' to gauge 'success' on a longer timescale. Be careful that follow-up is seen for what it is and not used as an attempt to continue or prolong the group.

The experience of leaving the group is not an easy one for either the members or the leader so make plenty of time available for the group to work through the separation. Don't avoid or skimp on this stage of the group's life, because if handled well the experience of ending, despite feelings of sadness and grief, can foster personal satisfaction and self-reliance, with members leaving the group feeling that they can make it on their own.

### **Review**

- The separation stage of the group is analogous to death and brings up issues to do with ending, termination.
- Members can experience this as a time of great anxiety.

- The worker is more dominant in this stage and may intervene as group mother, father, and guide, as appropriate.
- The worker helps members to deal with feelings about ending, to review involvement, and to separate.