

Cyberwork Endings

Sarah Worley-James

worley-james@cardiff.ac.uk



I've been pondering over endings in therapeutic relationships and how real-life endings differ from endings in relationships conducted online.

One of the unique aspects of therapeutic relationships is that both parties are aware that it is finite, and generally, within the context of workplace counselling, it is limited to a maximum of six sessions. This brief structure, with a planned ending, can bring an intensity to the work, which can focus and lead to a surge in the pace of change for the client in the last session or two. This 'speeding up' can lead to a pressure (either from the client or self-imposed by the therapist) to do more in the sessions, to bring something tangible that will induce change or create an environment in which change feels possible. With some clients, this change of pace as the sessions progress can seem quite striking in contrast to the slower, more hesitant, pace at the beginning. When driven by the client, this can take the counsellor by surprise and result in the need for a swift adjustment of our own expectations and focus.

Early on in my career as a workplace counsellor, I had what I had been taught about abuse and trauma work being long term, overturned by a client who, for the first time in their life, disclosed an experience of childhood abuse (unrelated to the presenting issue and previous sessions). This occurred in session four of six, and their feedback was that this one session was hugely beneficial in them being able to re-evaluate the impact of this past trauma on current life difficulties and find a new way

forward. It may well be that a limit to the number of sessions, and knowledge of the finiteness of the process, with an ending close in sight, gave the client a freedom to disclose this abuse. Perhaps an open-ended approach, with no clearly stated date for the endings, would not have enabled an environment in which they could take the risk to share.

When working online, I am mindful of looking out for the unspoken and more subtle clues that the client wants the pace to pick up, or is focusing more on outcomes and change, rather than exploration, as the sessions draw to a close. Working with text-based communication, a more explicit approach is required when asking for feedback and checking out whether the focus and direction of the sessions are in line with the client's expectations and goals. Working synchronously enables me to ask in real time and negotiate changes in direction and pace. With asynchronous email sessions, I remain alert to matching my client's pace, and am explicit about discussing the ending throughout the process. I am observant of my expectations about what I view as 'a successful outcome', challenging my need for proof that I am 'good enough'. How often I find myself reminding supervisees that if a session has consisted entirely of listening, normalising and affirming, then those qualities in themselves will have made for a powerful and healing experience for the client, only to put pressure on

myself to ensure that I have given the client tools, strategies and insight in order to feel I have been a 'good' counsellor, in the hopes that they will believe the counselling was worthwhile!

In face-to-face counselling, when approaching the last session, I often ask the client how they may want to mark the end of the process. For some, it is a celebration, for others a nervousness creeps in at the thought of continuing their life journey without the therapeutic support. Often, themes of loss, attachment, abandonment and fears about endings are explored and played out between counsellor and client.

I always enjoy a last session that is focused on encouraging the client to identify how they have changed, and what they now know about themselves that will support them in traversing future challenges. How often it is a space filled with laughter, amazement, pride and sometimes tears, which feels rich for both of us, and I value and appreciate being part of this.

When ending counselling via email, knowing this process is not shared synchronously, I ask the client in the penultimate email to consider what has changed, what their strengths are and how they will utilise these as they move forward. While I read their responses without the immediacy of their feelings in the room, they are often palpable in the words they have chosen. I am also conscious that I may be infusing my own feelings into these words; pride in my client's achievements and hopes for their future; and pride in the part I played in this. ●

Sarah Worley-James is a Senior Counsellor and Co-ordinator of the Online Service at Cardiff University.