

Navigating Unexpected Termination in Therapy: A Lesson in Flexibility and Client Autonomy

Introduction/Description: During my field education this semester, I experienced a significant learning moment while conducting a treatment session with an independent client I had been seeing for four months. The client, a man in his 40s with ASD, had been receiving support for his daily living skills at Sunfield for over 10 years. Expecting a routine telehealth session that day, I was taken by surprise when the client shared he was ready to graduate from therapy and no longer needed professional support. As my first and only independent client, I had to quickly pivot our planned agenda into a termination session, despite having no prior experience with treatment termination. This unexpected situation challenged me to adapt quickly and provided valuable insights into the process of concluding therapy with an adult client.

Overall Importance: This learning experience was crucial to my professional training as it encouraged me to apply my clinical skills and judgment in an unexpected situation by navigating the termination process without prior training. It also underscored the importance of flexibility in session planning and the concept of client autonomy in the therapeutic relationship, despite the inherent power and privilege differential between myself and the client. For the client, it was a significant step in recognizing his progress in therapy and his readiness to move forward independently.

Tasks Carried Out:

- Checked in with the client about recent weeks and any significant highs and lows
- Reviewed his bi-weekly treatment objectives (similar to every other session)
- Facilitated a reflective discussion on his decision to terminate, emphasizing his overall progress and growth in skills
- Explored his feelings about ending therapy by asking open-ended questions
- Discussed future plans and concrete ways for using the skills learned in therapy
- Commended his overall progress and celebrated his accomplishments using a self-reflection worksheet
- Discussed logistics of termination, including final paperwork and the option to seek future support at Sunfield if and when needed
- Concluded the session with expressions of gratitude and goodbyes

Skills Learned/Acquired:

- Adapted planned session topics and activities spontaneously based on what the client shared
- Demonstrated empathic understanding and responded with empathy (both verbally and non-verbally) to the client's decision to terminate therapy

- Used open-ended questions to encourage client reflection on his therapy journey and future use of acquired skills
- Provided simple and complex reflections to integrate what the client shared regarding his experiences and progress in therapy
- Managed non-verbal communication effectively, ensuring my reactions supported and were congruent with the client's feelings and experience
- Reflected on this unexpected termination experience in supervision and my own therapy, addressing possible countertransference
- Completed a termination note and related logistical tasks with supervisor support

Lessons Learned:

- Learned the essential steps of conducting a termination session, as well as the required follow-up tasks
- Realized the importance of processing my own emotions as a clinician in a supportive environment, understanding the need for mental health support for mental health professionals in training
- Gained a deeper understanding of respecting client autonomy and valuing the client's expertise in their own experiences and life

Overall Impact: Overall, this experience taught me to anticipate and adapt to unexpected developments during therapy sessions and helped refine my clinical judgment, especially beneficial for future work with children. It encouraged me to have resources ready for termination and motivational challenges that clients might encounter, ensuring I can quickly access helpful tools and activities when needed. Additionally, it helped me understand the normalcy of feeling disappointed when a client terminates therapy, and the importance of reflecting on these feelings with a supervisor to prevent them from impacting my work with other clients.