



CHILD AND YOUTH

Managing endings when working with young people: advice to clinicians

A good ending of therapy is an important part of the treatment. Especially for young people with complex mental health presentations, therapy termination can be emotionally challenging and may bring up powerful feelings of being abandoned or rejected. When done effectively, the ending of therapy can be a positive and lasting experience for the young person as they learn about relationships and how to safely say 'goodbye'.

Introducing termination from the start

From the beginning of therapy, it is important to anticipate the ending of therapy (termination) as a natural and expected part of the process. This is particularly crucial for young people with complex relational histories.

- **Establish a clear therapeutic frame** early in treatment, including the purpose, structure, and likely duration of therapy.
- **Set a termination date** - this is recommended to support emotional preparation and predictability. Decide on a specific date you will finish, rather than number of sessions, to avoid confusion if sessions are missed or extra sessions booked.
- **Talk about termination from the beginning**, ensure young people know the therapeutic relationship will come to an end at an agreed upon point and revisit this regularly during therapy to normalise and manage expectations. Sometimes, it can be helpful to encourage young people to agree they will attend a 'final session' before ceasing therapy.

Preparing for the ending

Therapy will most likely be a success if the ending is expected and well planned. Clinicians should help the young person understand therapy is a temporary but supportive space in the here and now designed to build skills for future challenges. It is also important to explore and manage any expectations or emotions about ending the relationship.

It is important to recognise there can be many reasons why therapy comes to an end. Sometimes external factors interfere, such as moving away or difficulties attending. Sometimes, young people choose to finish, or clinicians may not feel they are able to help. Whatever the reason, setting aside some time to discuss together the ending is important.

Managing challenges in termination

Young people's reactions to endings will vary depending on a number of factors. Clinicians should be aware of potential risks including:

- **Premature termination** - therapy can bring up difficult distressing feelings, which the young person may want to avoid. This can lead them to want to discontinue early. It is important to notice this and proactively talk about the person's experience and fears and adjust the approach to help make them feel safe to stay.

- **When treatment is coming to an end it is common for early problems to return.** The re-emergence of such feelings might relate the young person's worry about the ending and the loss of the support of the clinician. Talking about these feelings and recognising any worries about the ending can be very helpful. Sometimes the clinician needs to bring this up first, as it might be too difficult or out of awareness for the young person during this time.
- **Endings can bring up difficult feelings about previous losses or trauma.** Previous regrets, or feelings of loss or being abandoned or neglected can surface. Allowing space to recognise these painful feelings and being able to differentiate them from the therapy ending can be helpful.

Termination can be a therapeutic opportunity to reinforce skills, normalise feelings, and acknowledge growth. For young people with histories of relational trauma, **having a "good enough ending" can be a powerful experience**, especially if it is done in a respectful, consistent and caring way.

Navigating the final session

Prior to the final session, it is important to plan for how the clinician and young person may part ways and say goodbye. Sharing therapeutic letters, drawings or certificates of completion might be helpful, as can the simple exchange of thoughts and feelings. The final session is still therapy so should allow time to discuss what is currently important for the young person, as well as setting aside time to review the progress and notice any changes or ongoing struggles.

Planning for next steps

Many people have multiple experiences of seeking help. If the young person has complex mental health challenges, it is likely this will not be the end of their therapeutic journey, and they will re-engage with services in the future. Normalising that and encouraging the young person to seek further support is recommended. It can help to discuss warning signs of a decline in mental health to prepare for the future. A positive experience of the ending of the current treatment can help young people trust seeking help in the future.

Version 31102025

