

SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS

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DEALING WITH GROUP ENDINGS

In life, endings are one of most troubling and powerful experiences. This is easily observed when one considers that about 80% of the songs on the radio are about coming together or ending. Endings affect everybody and tend to be hard for all. This struggle very often includes the worker who like everyone else is human. The power in the ending gives great potential for positive clinical outcomes as the group is wrapping up.

It is unfortunate that the potential for growth in the endings is often missed as people seek to avoid the feelings and activities of ending. This avoidance begins as the members begin to sense that the ending is imminent. Reactions at this point include such things as:

1. **Regression** Often as endings become imminent, one or more group member will begin to regress often producing similar behaviours that brought them to the group in the first place. Another form of regression is to create new symptoms so service might be prolonged. While it is not often thought out, this almost operates as a ploy to get the group worker to extend the group or otherwise cancel the ending.
2. **Denial** As endings are approaching members often avoid the pain through denying that there is anything to face. There are two forms of denial. First, members often deny the upcoming ending by thinking that they will continue meeting (e.g., there are more sessions left). The second form of denial is the denial of the relationship through pretending that there will be no loss or that the relationship was not important in the first place.
3. **Fight** If feelings are difficult for one of the members, it is not unusual for anger and fighting to erupt around the time of ending. Often this occurs between members who have had the most intensity in their relationship. This allows the members to avoid any pain through making the ending abrupt and externalizing the feelings (e.g., blaming the other for any upset).
4. **Flight** Similar to the fighting response, flight avoids any feelings by making the ending abrupt or setting up a distraction so feelings can be avoided. There are two common methods of flight. First, members will create reasons to not attend the final meeting. This allows them to avoid feelings. The second method is probably the most common strategy used by leaders. This flight strategy is to plan a party on the last day. This distracts people from their feelings and sets up activities that will effectively pre-empt discussion of feelings.
5. **Avoid** Members might begin to focus all of their attention on things outside of the group or on life after the group ends. This might involve efforts to increase the value of the new experiences or increasing the amount of time spent outside of the group (absenteeism). Efforts to amplify or exaggerate the importance of the new experience are used to diminish the feelings of loss that might be associated with the ending.
6. **Devalue** Often members will badmouth or diminish people in the group, the agency or the group itself as a way to insulate against feelings of loss. This strategy of diminishing the value of people within the group seeks to mitigate the potential loss when the group finally ends.

The manner in which the reactions to termination is expressed is influenced by the member's past experiences with endings and his/her level of investment in the group/leader. If members are highly invested and are doing well as a result of the group, they are likely to experience a greater loss than members who are peripheral. Concurrently, if the member has experienced past difficult endings, the feelings about the current ending are likely to be more difficult and will elicit more severe reactions.

As the group ending approaches, leaders must be aware of these tendencies to avoid being trapped into colluding with the avoidance. For the ending to be helpful, it is important to address the desire to avoid good-byes and explore some of the power in the experience. This affirms the relationships among the members and provides intervention into one of the most difficult human problems. To begin this, it is sometimes useful to introduce imminent endings two or three sessions before the final meeting.

The power associated with good-byes tends to come from a convergence of three times. Everyone is aware of past, present and future as aspects of time but people usually only focus on one time ignoring the other two. In an ending, past present and future are all fused into the experience of ending with equal power. One cannot ignore any of the times because there are feelings associated with each. To be helpful, it is important to attend to the difficult feelings associated with each time.

Issues of the Past

Feelings associated with the past operate at both the individual and group level. So, just as in the work stage, the leader must maintain a dual focus so feelings concerning both the group and the individual can be explored. At the individual level, feelings associated with past good-byes are agitated.

Clients who have experienced rejections, losses or other difficult partings may begin to act differently because of these feelings. Part of the difficulty is that the group parting context does not allow members to easily identify feelings associated with other past good-byes. It is the leader's job to pull these out so members can at least acknowledge how much they hate good-byes. Without such exploration, many members will either sit on their feelings or act them out creating another negative ending.

At the group level, the past is more contained and everyone has a shared history. This element of the past allows for opportunities to assess the growth of each member and how they have progressed over the time of the group. As such, this is an opportunity to affirm each member while reflecting on the group history.

Leader Activities for Addressing Past-Focused Issues

Rotten Good-Byes	Almost everyone has had difficult good-byes that still have emotion attached to them. Through talking about how the leader hates good-byes and how many are really rotten experiences, members can be lead to some of their own experiences of endings that have been difficult. Through asking people to talk about past rotten good-byes, feelings can be brought out in the open rather than ignored.
What Makes the Rot	Once feelings have been expressed about good-byes, it is often useful to move away from the individual feelings and assess what has made the good-byes so difficult. This brings common themes to the feelings such as rejection, powerlessness over the ending, loss of someone who made you feel good etc. This can pull the members closer as each would have different experiences but at the same time, common feelings.
Any Good Good-Byes	After exploring negative affect, it is sometimes useful to explore if there have been any good-byes that have been okay. Through exploring positive good-byes the potential for a healthy good-bye is introduced and a model for the group ending can be developed.

Other Current Good-Byes	Sometimes members are dealing with other good-byes at the same time the group is ending. If this is the case, it is important to acknowledge these other good-byes and allow expression about the multiple endings.
Review	To help members move the focus of ending to the group, it is useful to reflect back on the life of the group so changes at individual and group levels can be highlighted. A brief discussion of the historical highlights of the group often yields some stories and affirmations for many of the members.
Reinforce	In discussing the group past, it is important to point out progress in the members. This affirms that they are doing well and that they have made important changes. Positive changes are often ignored during the day-to-day operation of the group. In the ending, one has an opportunity to highlight and reinforce the growth that has occurred.
Remember When	To help lighten the leaving, sometimes humorous anecdotes about the members are helpful. Remembering lighter moments in the group allows members to laugh a little and also take some positive memories away with them about the other members.

Issues of the Present

While the past tends to bring affect into the group, the affect is experienced in the present. Consequently, much of the present focus is on how the members are dealing with their feelings. The leader is required to focus on the current feelings about both the group ending, past endings and about each other.

The goal of leader activity is really to help members deal with their feelings associated with other two times during the session. If one cannot get these feelings out in the open they are likely to be either suppressed or acted out hindering the potential gains that can be made through the group ending.

Leader Activities for Addressing Issues of the Present

I Thought...But Now	One of the ways one can start to get feelings expressed is through bringing your own feelings out in the room. This is easily accomplished through starting with sharing an impression from earlier in the group and then adding a present feeling. For example, "...you know when you first came into the group, I didn't think we would get along because I am much older than you....but now I am finding that I will miss you. I will especially miss the way you call me.....".
Make It Different	After discussing past endings and how they have been difficult, it is often useful to explore how the group can make this ending different or somehow better than the other endings. This begins to put the group in control of how feelings will be expressed or not expressed.
Highlight Resisting	Given that all people will have some desire to avoid the issues of ending, it is useful to verbally express your own resistance so others can begin to identify their own feelings. For example, "...you know, I hate good-byes so much that I am looking for ways to avoid saying good-bye to you guys. Do you ever feel like that?"

- What I'll Miss By stating what you will miss in each member, feelings of loss become expressed in the current group situation. This allows members to experience the loss aspects of the group ending. The items one chooses to highlight in making such a statement also affirms aspects of each member's personality.
- Evaluate As members are leaving the group, it is helpful to have them evaluate their experience. This involves soliciting feedback about: 1) what was helpful; 2) what was not helpful; and 3) what they would recommend changing in any upcoming groups. This allows them to express feelings about the experience in a structured manner and begins to introduce the inevitability of the future.

Issues of the Future

The future issues of ending are twofold. First, the members will go forward from the group and never have another group meeting. Even if they meet each other and do things together, it will not be the same. This finality is important because it contains the loss. The experience of the loss is dependant on the experience each member had in the group. The loss-of-group aspect of the future is often dismissed by members through statements of being able to see each other outside of the group. Such statements are often an avoidance or denial strategy.

The second future issue is the moving forward as individuals after the group experience. This includes how each member takes the group learning and experiences and begins to apply learning to his/her future life. This is one of the most important elements of ending since it focuses on prolonging the goals that have been accomplished through the group.

Leader Activities for Dealing with Issues of the Future

- Token Gifts Small token gifts that symbolize the work done in the group by a member can given to each member to symbolically extend the work into the future. These must be customized and build on some experience in the group to be effective.
- I'll Take With Me In discussion, it is useful to ask members what they will take with them from the group to use in their lives. This both provides feedback about what was helpful and gives the member a chance to mentally project forward in time.
- Picture Success When groups have an element of behaviour change it is often useful to have members visualize themselves in a challenging situation where they successfully use their learning from the group to avoid problems. This projects group concepts both into the future and outside of the group.
- When I See You As relationships are ending, it is often helpful to talk about bumping into members in the future and how they might talk with each other. Having members project what information they might report to the leader (or each other) introduces the changes in relationship as well as the future without the group.
- Follow-up With groups that are focused on changing behaviours or reducing risk (to self or other), sometimes a follow-up system is useful to maintain the changes into the future. Contact or extended meeting systems can be used to monitor and support changes. In developing a follow-up plan, one is cautioned to still address the ending issues as the current group will still end. Follow-up activities can create the illusion that the ending is not here and cause people to avoid dealing with the ending.