

Termination Techniques: Ending the Volunteer/Client Relationship

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The social work training of the authors has taught the value of ending, or terminating, helping relationships in a positive way. Social work itself is a helping process. In our agency, volunteers supplement the social work process. Like many volunteer administrators, we fell into our jobs in the volunteer program because of our commitment to helping people. We viewed the volunteer program as another component of the social work treatment methodology. We will discuss termination as the positive ending of a helping relationship between a volunteer and a client, not termination of volunteers from the program.

As we both trained and worked with volunteers, we realized that the volunteers needed much the same assistance in ending the helping relationships as the social workers did. We made the decision to discuss the termination process in our initial training of volunteers. It is our belief that this addition to training has not only made endings easier for volunteers but has improved volunteer retention. Volunteers are prepared in the beginning for the way in which termination will affect them emotionally, and they are encouraged to discuss these feelings with their agency contact person. The volunteer is helped to understand that these feelings are a normal part of endings and that these feelings do not reflect negatively on their abilities.

DEFINITION

Termination is sometimes a rather harsh word and often carries an unpleasant connotation. However, Webster's defines termination simply as "Bringing to an end."

In relationship to the helping process, the authors define termination as "The process of ending a helping relationship." The emphasis here is on the word *process* rather than the word *ending*. Process, a social work theme, reminds us that, when working with people, no one action stands alone. In other words, the way a relationship proceeds to its ending can affect the success of the whole change effort. The volunteer and client work together to achieve change, and, as the relationship ends, their feelings toward each other and the relationship affect the changes associated with that relationship.

How does this definition of termination fit with volunteer programs? This term is applicable only in agencies where volunteers are used in long-term one-to-one relationships. Several types of agencies which involve volunteers in this way are the military, police, mental health, services to aging, mental retardation, public and private child welfare, drug and alcohol prevention, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, hospice, and Scouts. Although these agencies serve a variety of clients, volunteers play the same role: helper in one-to-one relationships.

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VOLUNTEER SELF-AWARENESS

Volunteers learning about termination techniques look at their own feelings about endings. Self-awareness, another term for this sort of discovery, is an important step in training. As volunteers admit their own ease or difficulty with saying "Good-bye," they will be better prepared for their own and their client's behavior when the time comes, and they will be better role models. It would be a good idea for all volunteer leaders to conduct the same kind of self-discovery in order to understand what volunteers' feelings may be and thus be in a better position to help them.

One technique for discovering feelings about leavetaking is to review past friendships. Ask yourself: Do you still keep in touch with old friends? Do you say "Good-bye" to people or "See you"? Have you moved often to new towns, or even new houses? How far do you live from where you were born? Do you throw things away, or keep them forever? Make a list of 10 or 15 leavetaking concepts and review it with volunteers as a training exercise. Discuss as a group how behaviors and styles differ. Finally, be available to discuss these feelings with volunteers when their time comes to end a relationship with a client.

STAGES OF THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP

A helping relationship can be defined as a bond between two people who have come together for the purpose of enabling at least one of them to improve his or her life. There are five stages in the volunteer-client relationship: development, transition, partial dependency, independence, and termination of the formal relationship.

In the development stage, the volunteer will make himself or herself available to the client. The volunteer will reach out in a caring manner and show concern, trying to be as relaxed and natural with the client as is possible in a new relationship. While listening to and recognizing the client as an individual, the volunteer needs to be willing to give without expecting anything in return. This volunteer role is much like what psychologist Carl Rogers describes as unconditional, positive

regard. In response to the volunteer's behavior, the client will see that no expectations are being placed upon him or her and will begin to trust the volunteer. The client will see the volunteer as dependable, caring, and consistent, believing that the volunteer cares about the client as an individual. As the relationship further develops, the client may want to give something in return. This needs to be handled gracefully and be accepted, knowing that it is part of the client's growth. Material gift giving should be discouraged in preference for symbolic gifts (*i.e.*, demonstration of a new skill or a homemade gift).

The transition stage is when a change is seen in both persons' behaviors. The volunteer increases support to the client and will acknowledge and accept the client's feelings; the volunteer helps the client to set his or her own limits. The client verbalizes anger and frustration and will test the helping relationship through negative behaviors such as missing appointments or having a house full of people when the volunteer arrives. The volunteer needs to remind the client of the importance of the relationship and the need for the frequent one-to-one contact. The Agency must prepare the volunteer for the types of behaviors the client may display.

The third stage of the relationship is partial dependency. The volunteer reinforces the new behavior the client has learned and helps the client develop problem-solving skills. The volunteer will discourage the impulsive or passive reactions that were characteristic of the client in the past. The client has improved self-esteem, is less self-critical, is increasingly autonomous and is capable of self-nurturing.

The fourth stage in the development of the helping relationship is independence. The volunteer continues to provide support and caring while beginning to decrease contact with the client. Since the client has become more self-sufficient, the volunteer discusses the positive changes that have been made and begins to withdraw from the relationship. The client has become able not only to turn to others appropriately in times of stress but also to

recognize needs and feelings of other people. The client has learned to recognize and avert potential crisis.

The final stage in the development of the helping relationship is termination which will occur on a schedule set up by the agency worker, volunteer, and client. The volunteer, gradually weaning the client, discusses the positive changes that have occurred. Acknowledging the positive changes that have been achieved, the client is now able to use support systems and is less dependent on the volunteer.

This description of the developing stages of the ideal helping relationship assumes that both the client and the volunteer are handling the relationship appropriately. The client and volunteer may not go through these stages in this order and may not be in the same stage at the same time. But if the volunteers understand these stages, they can better understand and help the client.

PROCESS OF ENDING THE RELATIONSHIP

The actual process of terminating a helping relationship begins at the beginning of that relationship. It should be made clear before the relationship starts that there will be an ending. The volunteer and client need to be clear that they are not just friends, but helper and helpee. The conclusion of the relationship should be defined clearly: it will end either within a given time frame (*i.e.*, one year) or when a goal is achieved. A volunteer working with a child must explain this in terms the child can understand.

As the relationship develops, its inevitable termination should not be forgotten. The volunteer and client need to review the projected termination from time to time and to remind each other of the helping nature of the relationship. Phrases such as "You can do this by yourself when we're no longer seeing each other" or "Next year at this time we will not be working together anymore" are appropriate ways to reinforce the concept of termination.

When the time to end the helping relationship draws near, it will be important to discuss it more frequently.

The volunteer, client, and helping professional should make the decision together to begin the ending process. The volunteer and client need to remind themselves of their feelings about endings and how their personal life experiences will affect this process. The volunteer will begin gradually to decrease the frequency of visits with the client, explaining to the client what is happening. While decreasing the frequency of visits, the volunteer will encourage the client to use such natural support systems as neighbors, school or work contacts, someone who belongs to the same club or organization, or family.

A graduation date should be set by scheduling a last meeting with the volunteer, client, helping professional, and anyone else who may have been involved in the relationship. At this graduation, the volunteer and client review events and changes made during the relationship and discuss their individual plans for the future. It is a good idea to inform the client how to obtain additional help if needed. Often, volunteers and clients choose to celebrate the graduation, combining it with a treat, such as a trip for ice cream.

As the reader may have already anticipated, the termination process is not always a smooth road. One problem that thwarts the process is a sudden change in the client's life, making him or her no longer available to the volunteer. Such a change could be moving, a new job, long-term hospitalization, or involvement in a new relationship. With no opportunity to say good-bye to the client, the volunteer often feels frustrated and cheated. As there is no good way to predict or prevent these occurrences, the best way to help volunteers is to discuss this possibility in training, in effect warning volunteers that these abrupt changes can happen. When something like this does occur, the volunteer leader should be available to discuss this with the volunteer and allow him or her to vent feelings.

Sometimes the client will resist the termination process, not cooperating with less frequent visitation or exhibiting former problem behaviors in an effort to seem needy. The volunteer needs to

recognize these behaviors for what they are and not over-react. The volunteer might try reinforcing the client's past accomplishments, reinforcing the client's other support systems, and encouraging the client to honestly discuss feelings. The volunteer can also discuss his or her own feelings with the client about terminating but must be firm about sticking to the termination schedule.

When a volunteer has been involved in a helping relationship with a child, these endings can be very difficult for the client. However, volunteers do not often make lifetime commitments and these endings must take place as volunteers move on. It is very important that the child be aware from the beginning that the relationship will end and that the volunteer reinforces this often. The volunteer can spend time with the child helping to develop hobbies and activities, or even friendships, that he or she can carry on alone. When the end does come, handling it as a graduation is most effective, stressing achievements and recognizing strengths. The child may never be happy about the relationship's ending; but if prepared, it will not be a surprise. If the child can feel really good about the relationship, he or she will have a warm and lasting memory.

BENEFITS

Do volunteer programs benefit by training our volunteers in termination? Preparing volunteers for the termination process helps end relationships more positively. When it is clearly understood that the helping relationship is finite, the

ambiguity of the volunteer's role is reduced. Knowing that the relationship will end encourages the volunteer to set a timetable to establish goals. Meeting these goals then enhances the self-esteem of both client and volunteer. If a relationship ends on a positive note, then it will be seen in a positive light. If the relationship ends in a negative way, then the client may transfer negative feelings toward the agency rather than toward the volunteer. Volunteers who perceive that the relationship was positive will continue to volunteer, thus improving volunteer retention.

Discussing termination with the client affords an opportunity to acknowledge feelings and to feel part of the process. The knowledge that the relationship will end can discourage unrealistic expectations on the client's part. When the client is told in the beginning that this helping relationship is time-limited, it will clarify that the volunteer is not a friend but a helper. Using termination techniques shows the client how to end other relationships in a positive way. Many clients do not always have positive endings with other people; modeling proper ways to terminate is a valuable gift to offer clients.

Termination techniques are useful to the client, the volunteer, and the agency. The client can leave the relationship in a positive fashion. The volunteer feels valued and will perform this role again. The agency gains by having better trained, satisfied volunteers who will stay longer and speak well of the organization to others.