Chapter 11.  
Ending Therapy and the Maintenance of Gains

The process of ending

Now that you are coming to the end of your therapy, we want to spend some time helping you prepare for the future, when you are more "on your own." Our experience has shown us that there are several steps you can take while still in treatment to help yourself with this task. We will present each point below:

Scheduling the ending process

You need to end therapy in a gradual and systematic way. The final few sessions will be “spaced out” (that is, they won't be held weekly, but perhaps biweekly, or monthly). The reason for this is to help you to begin to disengage from the therapeutic relationship and to see how well you can handle things on your own, with less frequent reminders about "doing your homework" and using the tools learned in therapy to combat negative moods. We hope your schedule will allow you to work with this plan, so that you will not have to end abruptly. We have found that more gradual endings (rather than abrupt ones) are easier for people to adjust to, and are associated with more long term improvement (since this gives you an opportunity to try things out more on your own, yet with the "safety net" of knowing that you have certain additional appointments coming up in the future). Also, you and your therapist can discuss the possibility of scheduling “Booster Sessions” after your last formal session. “Booster” sessions are a way for you to “check-in” with your therapist about how you are adjusting to using these skills independently.

What does ending mean to you?

During the final sessions, you will be asked to talk with your therapist about (1) what ending therapy means to you, (2) your ideas about what was more helpful and what was less helpful about treatment, and (3) your feelings about your relationship with your therapist. Talking directly about these issues
will help you to feel good about ending, and will give you a sense of closure that is very important -- we don't want you to walk away from this experience without having gotten the most you can out of it! Please come prepared to talk about these things -- perhaps you want to write out some notes on these topics, or do a Thought Diary (or two) about your fears and concerns about ending therapy. Another topic that may come up at this point in time is whether or not you should continue with another professional therapist, or go on anti-depressant medication (just in case you may need it to maintain your gains) or perhaps you might want to join a self-help group or a support group of some kind in order to stay in contact with other people who have had similar problems and gain support from them. These are important issues that should be talked about frankly and thoroughly with your therapist; there are no general guidelines that are appropriate for all clients, but rather only individual people with individual needs.

**Maintaining changes after therapy has ended: The Maintenance Guide**

*How did I make changes in my goals?*

A fair amount of time will be focused on development and refinement of what we call the "MAINTENANCE GUIDE" which is a specific document that you and your therapist will create together. This guide summarizes your therapy experience to help you face the future with more confidence and less likelihood of a recurrence of depression. To begin the preparation of this document, list what specific skills you have learned in therapy that you feel are most going to be most useful to you in the future, for combating negative moods. Spend a few minutes now to think about all of the skills you learned. Use these pages to make notes about the cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal skills you have learned during therapy.
HOW DID I MAKE CHANGES IN MY GOALS?

COGNITIVE SKILLS I HAVE LEARNED

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BEHAVIORAL SKILLS I HAVE LEARNED

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INTERPERSONAL SKILLS I HAVE LEARNED

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Future Stressful Situations

Spend some time thinking very carefully about the fact that there are certain situations likely to arise in the future that will tend to make you feel down again. Now is the time to think specifically about which situations or events these are, and to make a list, so that you can see how the tools you have learned in therapy will help you handle these situations differently the next time around (with minimal or no depression). For example, you may be afraid that you will get depressed again if your health declines further, or if you miss out on a certain opportunity that you are trying to make happen, or if you have to move to a new area. Each of these events is likely to be stressful, but none of them have to result in depression. You can use the tools you have learned in therapy to combat your negative thinking and to keep your level of pleasant activities high (despite the fact that negative things have happened). We would like you to develop your own personal list of events or situations that are a) likely to occur after therapy ends, and b) likely to cause you to feel depressed (or some other strong negative emotion). Take a few minutes to think of events that could be potentially stressful for you. Ask yourself: What kinds of high risk situations might I experience that would send my thoughts and emotions into a downward spiral?

LIST OF POTENTIALLY STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

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How will I handle future stressful situations?

Next, after the list is generated, we want you to think of which specific behavioral and cognitive skills (from your earlier list) would help in each particular situation. Your therapist will discuss the details with you and add notes about his/her ideas of what would be helpful, then you both will discuss these issues in detail in the face-to-face meetings.

**HOW WILL I HANDLE STRESSFUL SITUATIONS IN THE FUTURE?**

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**Do I know my DANGER SIGNALS?**

Your therapist will encourage you to talk about your DANGER SIGNALS that should serve as warning signs that, despite your best efforts, low moods are again present and is getting more severe. Your therapist will work out a plan with you for what to do and who to call, should this occur. Knowing your danger signals is crucial to maintaining your well-being. It may be that several negative events occur as predicted, and you use the various skills you planned on using
to help you deal with the events. However, for some reason, the strategies do not seem adequate, and do not fully do the job of minimizing a depressive reaction. That sometimes happens, despite our best efforts. For example, that could occur if you become overwhelmed by one very big negative event (such as death of a loved one) or by a series of smaller but frequent negative events (several bad things happening at once, over-taxing your ability to cope). This can happen to anyone. It is nothing to be ashamed of. The question still remains, how do you know when you have reached that point, so that you can seek professional assistance before it gets even worse? The answer to that, once again, varies greatly from patient to patient. No general answers can be given here, but we can recommend that you think back to this most recent bout of depression and try to remember what your main symptoms were. Did you mainly have trouble eating, sleeping, with your energy level, or were you mainly preoccupied with negative thoughts about yourself and the future? Were you primarily sad, angry, anxious, or perhaps lonely, in terms of mood? How did you function? What areas of your functioning seemed to be affected by your depression? Thinking back to your prior history will help a great deal here. Again, you need to talk this out with your therapist so that he/she can clarify which symptoms are more significant in terms of signaling serious depression. Make a list of the symptoms that you would consider to be your DANGER SIGNALS. This way you can notice them right away and make immediate plans for constructive action.
What do I do when I am experiencing a DANGER SIGNAL?

The final aspect of this task is to develop a concrete plan, with your therapist, for what to do when certain symptoms resurface. Who should you call? What should you do if your current therapist is no longer in the area, or is not available, if you need therapy again? You should have specific answers to these questions, so that you can terminate with confidence that you will know what to do, if you need treatment in the future.

One important resource: Your workbook!

You have worked very hard to make the changes that you are now experiencing. You now have a written record containing all the notes, exercises, handouts, and thoughts regarding your work. Keep this notebook in a place where you can find it easily. It can be a great reference for reviewing tools and a great reminder of you new ability to work through problems. Congratulations!