

## ABSTRACT

This study explored clients' experiences of premature, or unexpected, ending to their long-term psychotherapeutic relationship, which had been imposed as a result of their therapists having to stop working with them, either because of illness, or other existential reasons. Relevant literature was reviewed and later discussed with respect to findings from this investigation.

Consistent with Gestalt philosophy, a phenomenological and qualitative methodology was adopted, using semi-structured interviews to elicit subjective experiences of six individuals who had been clients in a psychotherapy relationship for at least two years, and who had experienced an enforced and unexpected ending to that relationship. Critique of this method of research is offered.

Findings showed that participants in this research felt powerless and abandoned by their therapists, which revived memories of loss from their past and led to a sense of a repetition of their history for them. Linked with this, unfinished business presented as a notable theme. The impact of the ending effected grief reactions of shock, sorrow, anxiety, and anger, yet clients also had a propensity to protect their therapists, manifest as elements of caring and understanding. Ways in which therapists 'managed' the ending were variable and affected the emotional well-being and personal development of their clients. Further support from a new therapeutic relationship was an important factor for participants for coming to an understanding of the situation they found themselves in.

The small sample size prevented generalization of findings, but the study did provide some insight into the impact and meaning for clients of an imposed, premature ending to their long-term psychotherapeutic relationships. Arising out of the findings, implications for Gestalt psychotherapy practice were discussed and ideas for developing the study through further research were suggested.