

LONG-TERM PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY: A STUDY OF THE THERAPIST'S EXPERIENCE *by Jean Kotcher, 2012*

This qualitative study explores psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapists' experience of work with therapy cases that have lasted 15 years or longer. The data was collected in semi-structured interviews with seven experienced therapists in the San Francisco Bay Area and was analyzed using grounded theory.

Long-term therapy can be transformative for patients. Therapists and patients mutually benefit from the intimacy and experience of being well known by another, through years and milestones of life. Most long-term patients are dealing with painful childhoods with trauma, neglect, and relationship deficits. Some of them need ongoing support, while others have achieved psychological and emotional growth but remain in therapy to enhance maturation in a relationship that is unlike any other in their lives. Long-term therapists are comfortable with dependency and immersion in such therapy relationships. Clinical experience has contributed to their capacity to provide a long-term therapeutic container.

Although their termination literature often disparages long-term therapy and long-term therapy and termination might be seen as mutually exclusive, their therapists in the study are knowledgeable about termination, and when it enters the long-term therapeutic field, they discuss it with their patients. The seven therapists were guided by different psychoanalytic theories about whether or not termination is a needed or valuable experience for long-term patients.

Therapist experience uncertainties about their long-term work, derived from other external criticism and internal doubts. An important way to diminish the isolation and self-doubt of working alone with patients over many years is engagement with trusted consultation groups. Participants in the study expressed the wish for open communication in the profession about practicing long-term therapy, communication with curiosity—rather than rigidity and judgment—about how often other therapists work.

The findings of this study suggest that therapists who practice long-term therapy experience the process as developmental, implying a lifelong developmental process where patients evolve according to their individual psychic needs and are not expected to terminate *unless* and *until* they are ready. Similar to a young adult leaving and returning home to continue valued relationships, this study found that long-term patients who end therapy often stay in touch or resume therapy again.