

## Termination Resource Guide

See below for a definition of termination in counseling work and best practices for how to approach this vital process in the school setting with adolescents.

### What is termination?

Despite its ominous sounding name, **termination** is simply the term for the ending of a counseling or therapeutic relationship due to a variety of reasons including the end of a school year, change of jobs for the counselor, a client moving, the end of a mandated number of sessions or much more. Though endings are a natural part of life at every stage, some see termination as an opportunity to do some essential therapeutic work, particularly for those who may have experienced traumatic or ambiguous loss in the past.

### When does termination occur?

In schools, termination can occur at any point in the year if a student moves, transfers or a counselor/social worker takes another job, goes on maternity leave etc. Typically, however, most termination processes happen towards the end of the school year when students leave for the summer or graduate. There may be opportunities to do some termination “previewing” prior to school breaks as well.

### What are some termination best practices for high school students?

- **Start Early-** Generally, the more time for young people to process a transition or change, the better. With interns or those in temporary positions, for example, it is helpful to preview termination from the very first session! Reminding students from the beginning that the relationship or work together will be for a finite amount of time can help alleviate some anxiety and help young people feel more in control and empowered in the relationship. In anticipation of a summer break or graduation, counselors may want to begin discussing this change at least a month or two in advance.
- **Review Progress-** Termination can be a great time to review the progress that has been made that year or even during the entirety of a student’s high school career. Demonstrating how far a student has come can build confidence and remind the student that they have the ability to grow and change for the better.
- **Make Time to Celebrate Success-** Celebrating the student’s accomplishments can be another important way to ritualize or acknowledge a transition and prepare the student for what’s next. Whether it is sharing a special snack, having a lunchtime dance party or something more specific to the student’s interests, even a small celebration can go a long way.
- **Create a Transitional Object (*Even for Teens!*)-** While young children can latch onto transitional objects (ie. a teddy bear or a favorite blanket) for comfort, older children and even adolescents can benefit from having an object to refer back to in times of sadness. A handwritten card or a poster with a photo of the student and counselor can provide that kind of stability and reminder.

- **Make a Plan-** Part of termination is preparing the young person for the next stage– whatever that is. Identifying resources (both people and coping mechanisms) to create a “plan” in advance can be extremely helpful. This could be as simple as finding the office number and hours for the mental health clinic at their new college, or making a list of people at the school who they can go to if they need something in the future.
- **Remind Young People of Their Resilience-** Young people who are moving on to college or even work with another counselor may benefit from being reminded of their resilience and importantly, of the fact that they were able to connect and open up to *you*. Some students may say that they will “never want to talk to another counselor again,” since they’ve already shared things with you and you are leaving or they are. It is important to remind students that at every life stage, there are changes and that they have the skills and abilities to connect with others and build strong, trusting relationships again.
- **Expect the Unexpected-** The term “doorknobbing” is common in the therapy world to describe a phenomenon where a client will share a vital or important piece of information on their way “out the door” at the end of a session. Similarly, you may be surprised to learn something new about your student during the end of your work with them– something they may not have felt comfortable sharing prior. Expect such disclosures and be prepared to address them as best you can in the time you have. You may also note that some students stop attending sessions or turn cold where they were open and agreeable before. Others may regress in some of the areas you’ve been working on together. This is a normal reaction to termination and typically is not something to be concerned about; the best thing you can do is continue to normalize whatever feelings may be coming up for the student and continue to hold space for anything they share.
- **Termination is Not Just For Individuals on Your Caseload-** Though termination is often applied to a 1:1 therapeutic relationship, it is also important to consider what other groups or individuals you have connected with and how you might want to terminate with them. A counseling group would benefit from a few sessions discussing the ending of the group and an opportunity to acknowledge progress, celebrate success and plan for the future without the group. A counselor also may have many students on their “unofficial” caseload who they have connected with and feel close to, or parents that they have supported over the year(s). Spending time intentionally connecting with these folks and engaging in an abbreviated termination process can be extremely healing for all.

If you have any questions or want to talk through an anticipated termination, please feel free to reach out to Dayna.

This is a living document; please feel free to send any additions or ideas to Dayna ([dsedillohamann@newvisions.org](mailto:dsedillohamann@newvisions.org)) so they can be added.