

Endings and Transitions With Groups

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Ending and Transition Phase in Groups

Group Illustrations

A Termination Session: The Worker Leaving the Group

The dynamics and skills involved in the ending and transition phase for individuals were discussed in detail in Chapter 6. All of these processes apply equally to work with groups. Following a review of the ending and transition phase, this chapter illustrates the variations that arise in group work. The chapter concludes with a full description of a group session that demonstrates the unique aspects of endings in groups.

Ending and Transition Phase in Groups

The ending stages of work with individuals, described in detail in Chapter 6, are also apparent in group sessions. The general stages of the ending phase include the following:

- Denial
- Indirect and direct expressions of anger
- Mourning
- Trying it on for size
- The farewell-party syndrome

Denial

First comes the denial of the ending, in which group members appear to ignore the imminent end of the group. This is related to the general difficulty of facing feelings in all areas of our lives associated with the ending of important relationships. In the group context, the members are ending with the leaders—whom they have experienced as caring and supportive professionals—as well as ending with the other members. If the reader will recall the married couples' group led by this author that was illustrated in previous chapters, a number of excerpts revealed how close members were able to become to one another as they shared their life experiences. About half-way through this group, held in a room in the Health Science Center at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, I discovered that the group members were getting together for coffee in the cafeteria after the regular session ended. The mutual-aid process had created a bond between these five couples—so different in their ages, life experiences, and social situations—that was also coming to an end. The group had become a safe place where they could get help with their difficult family struggles. They would be losing the workers, but they would also be losing one another.

Anger

Denial is often followed by anger about the ending, which emerges in direct and indirect forms and is often focused on the worker, who group members feel is abandoning them. At times, conflict between members of a group during this phase of work is actually an indirect way of expressing anger toward the worker. In an example from a children's group in a school setting, one worker describes the session that follows the one in which he told the group he must leave in a few weeks. There is no response in that session; the members continue with their activities as if they had not heard. The group had been established for boys who were in trouble for fighting and other forms of acting-out behavior. Over the course of the school year, they had moved into being able to talk about their issues, such as their anger at teachers and parents, rather than acting them out through negative behaviors. At the start of the session the week after the announcement of the worker's departure, the boys appeared to regress and began acting out, fighting, and not responding to the worker's efforts to set limits. At one point, in a symbolic action, the internal leader of the group put masking tape over his mouth,

an action that was quickly followed by the other members. The boys turned and shook their fists at the worker. Finally, the worker, who was also in a stage of denial, said:

"I know you are all angry at me for leaving, and that, underneath that anger, you are sad. I have to let you know I am sad as well. We have gotten very close to one another over the year. But we have been a talking group most of the year, and I hope you can take the tape off and we can talk about my leaving."

Adults can express their anger by missing group sessions or through dismissive comments about the value of the group. Regression may begin as group members report being unable to deal with problems in their lives that they had been able to address earlier in the life of the group. This regression may be an indirect call for help: "Don't leave us yet—we are not ready."

Mourning

The mourning period is usually characterized by apathy and a general tone of sadness in the group. This can be seen as a grieving period, as the reality of the ending begins to hit home. In the couples' group, in the session that followed my reminder to group members that we only had four sessions left, I entered the usually brightly lit group room to find that no one had turned on the overhead lights. In addition, each of the members sat silently, looking mostly at the floor, and did not participate in catch-up conversation with one another as usual. I articulated my first reaction by saying, "What's going on? This feels like a wake." One of the members—Lou, our 69-year-old member who was angry during the first session—said, "This is a wake. In a few weeks, the group will be over." This was followed by a discussion of the implications of the group ending for the members and the beginning of the transition phase work in terms of how they would get help in the future and on whom they could depend for support.

What I found most interesting with regard to this ending was the fact that my coleaders and I would meet before and after the session with a group of master of social work (MSW) students who observed the group on a monitor as part of their group work course (with the permission of the group members). When I entered the observation room to meet with the students after this particular group session, I suddenly realized that I was going to have to deal with two group endings on the same evening. When I mentioned the wake-like feeling in the observation room—which mirrored the feeling in the group meeting room I had just left—one of the students said, "I have felt so close to these people and their lives that it's tough to think about this ending." A second student commented that she had seen one group member in a supermarket checkout line and almost went over to say hello before she remembered that the group member had never actually seen her. Another student asked, "What am I going to do on Thursday evenings?"

Trying It on for Size

In the "trying the ending on for size" stage, the group members operate independently of the worker or spend a great deal of time talking about new groups or new workers. I noticed this in my teaching (an educational group) when a second year, last-semester seminar class was coming to a close. A student was making a presentation on the concept of continuing their learning when I made a comment. The class members turned toward me, looked for a moment, and then went right

back to their discussion as if they had not heard me. When this happened a third time, I realized they were getting ready to graduate and would no longer have a professor to help them out. They would need to depend more heavily on their colleagues, and I could see that they were trying this on for size. I commented on this by pointing out what I thought was happening. They turned, looked at me, and then went right back to their conversation. I realized I needed to just sit back and watch and to be pleased with how they had learned to depend on and use one another.

Farewell-Party Syndrome

Finally, in the farewell-party syndrome, group members appear to protect the group by avoiding its negative aspects. The group leader may ask for feedback on how the group has functioned: What were the positives, and what were the negatives? How had the group leader done, and how well had the members accomplished their goals? When the feedback is almost all positive, this is a sign of the farewell party—no group is *always* great. The group leader needs to reach for the negatives so that the group members do not "pad" the experience by only reflecting on the positives.

It is also not unusual for group members to suggest throwing an actual farewell party in an attempt to avoid the pain of the ending. The reader can reflect on his or her own experiences of leaving of a job, or perhaps when a colleague left, and a good-bye party was given on the last day. Gifts, funny stories, and, at times, an almost forced hilarity are common. What is often left out is a discussion of the loss that accompanies the staff member leaving. I am not arguing against a good, old-fashioned farewell party; however, it should not be a substitute for saying good-bye. Imagine the staff group in a residential center for children in the child welfare system, and the parallel process becomes clearer. Loss is central to the issues faced by the children—they may have already lost their parents, siblings, home, and so on—and needs to be addressed by the staff. Losing a staff member is another loss for some of these children. Unless staff members address their own feelings, they may not be able to address those of the children.

Worker Strategies With Regard to Ending

Worker strategies for dealing with endings in group work are similar to those described in work with individual clients and families. They are as follows:

- The worker should bring the ending to the group members' attention early, thereby allowing the ending process to be established.
- The stages should be pointed out as the group experiences them, with the worker reaching for the indirect cues and articulating the processes taking place: denial, anger, mourning, and so on.
- Because the group ending has meaning for the worker as well, he or she should bring personal feelings and recollections to the group.
- Discussion of the ending feelings should be encouraged, with the worker participating fully in the exchange of both positive and negative reactions.
- The worker should also help the group members be specific as they evaluate their work together. For example, when a member says, "It was a great

group!" the worker should ask, "What was it about the group that made it great?"

- Finally, the worker should reach past the farewell-party syndrome to encourage members to share negative feedback.

Because members have different reactions to endings, the group worker should encourage the expression and acceptance of differing views. Not everyone in the group will experience it in the same way, and the ending may have more impact on some than others.

Worker Strategies With Regard to Transition

The worker must also pay attention to the transitional aspect of the ending phase. For example:

- If members are continuing with other workers, how can they begin the relationship in a positive manner?
- If members have finished their work, what have they learned, and how can they use their learning in their new experiences?
- If members have found the group helpful, how can they find similar sources of support in their life situations?

In this way, the worker can ensure that the ending discussion deals with substantive matters as well as the process of ending. In some situations, help can also take the form of a physical transition. In one group for sixth graders who were about to transition to middle school, the worker arranged for the group to visit the school and meet with the principal and seventh-grade teacher.

Finally, the worker should search for the subtle connections between the process of the ending and the substantive work of the contract. For example, endings for a group of unmarried mothers may coincide with separation from their children; foster teenagers who have provided mutual aid to one another may have learned something about giving and taking help from their peer group, which will be important to them as they make their transition to independence from the child welfare system. These and other connections can help to enrich the ending discussion. The next section illustrates these dynamics and skills drawn from the group context.

Group Illustrations

The ending phase of work offers a powerful opportunity to deepen the work by integrating process and content. The losses involved in ending a group often provoke issues of intimacy and loss in other areas of the client's life. By constantly searching for the connections, however faint, between the dynamics of the ending process and the substantive work of the particular group, the worker can help the members use the ending as an important learning experience.

In the example that follows, a worker opens up the discussion of her leaving with a group of people who have multiple sclerosis, or MS (the group will be continuing). The announcement of the impending ending initiates a powerful conversation about

intimacy and loss related to the illness. Note that the worker brings the group members back to their own endings in the here-and-now of the group experience.

Patients With Multiple Sclerosis

WORKER: As you know, I only meet with you one more time after today. You all will continue to meet until June. What are your thoughts about the group ending in a couple of months?

BOB: I am not looking forward to the summer because of the hot weather . . . it makes my MS flare up.

ALBERT: I know . . . I always feel tired and run down when it gets too hot. And then the group breaks up and I don't have anyone to really talk to about my MS. I used to look forward to the summer, but now I almost dread it.

BOB: I'm going to miss everyone too. I don't have anyone to talk to either. My wife is great, but she doesn't really understand what I am feeling.

WORKER: Do you guys keep in touch even when the group is not meeting during the summer months?

ALBERT: Not really . . .

FRED: I talk to Rob from the other group pretty regularly.

BOB: Albert, you live not too far from me. We should get together once in a while this summer. Or at least talk on the phone.

ALBERT: I like that idea . . . I do want to stay in touch.

JAMES: (Who has been quiet up to this point) I used to dance and run track . . . and now I can't anymore. People look at me like I'm weird.

BOB: I always liked to dance too.

WORKER: James, you said people look at you weird. What do you mean by that? How does that make you feel?

JAMES: I get mad because I am not weird. I am just in a wheelchair. They don't know what I used to be able to do. All they see is what I look like on the outside.

WORKER: You're right. Strangers do not know who you are or what you are like, as we do. They don't know you as a person, and it isn't fair that they should judge you by your appearance or being in a wheelchair.

FRED: That's the trouble—no one can see the MS. They can't see the pain we feel in our legs or the burning we have in our joints.

ALBERT: (Who is one of the members whose MS is not as extreme; he still walks) People don't even know anything is wrong with me because I am not in a wheelchair. But I still experience the MS symptoms. When they flare up, I get tired and sometimes walk off-balance, like I am drunk or something.

WORKER: It must be hard for you, Albert, because people cannot see your illness, and they may not understand when you try to explain your physical symptoms.

ALBERT: Yeah, that happens a lot. When people find out I have MS, they don't believe me, because I am not in a wheelchair and they automatically associate MS with being in a wheelchair.

FRED: I went through that a lot when I was first diagnosed. I fought going into this wheelchair for as long as I could. I was lucky to be able to work until I was 60. But a short time after I retired, I had to get the chair.

JAMES: Yeah . . . when I first got those symptoms, the military police on base used to stop me to ask if I was drunk because I staggered so much. That's when I first realized something was wrong. And then it just kept getting worse until I wound up in this wheelchair.

WORKER: You guys have lost important things associated with your identity because of this disease. Many of you had to quit working before you wanted . . . some of you lost important relationships.

JAMES: That's what I miss . . . having a girlfriend. (He pauses.)

WORKER: (After it looks like he won't continue on his own) Tell us more, James.

JAMES: I just miss the company. I don't care about the sex. I just wish I had the companionship. Someone to talk to, who will do things with me. I love my son and my parents, but I wish I had someone more my age to be with.

(Worker's note: James is a young guy—in his early 30s—and, in addition to being confined to a wheelchair, he has speech difficulties and shaking in his arms and neck. In retrospect, I wish I had explored more about how the change in his appearance and increasing disability affect his romantic possibilities. He has an 8-year-old son, but I don't know what his relationship with the mother was or if she left him when he became disabled. I'm sure this is something all the men have had to face—changes in their manhood, and how society views a disabled man.)

FRED: I know, James. Companionship is important.

BOB: There are a lot of symptoms of MS that people don't see and we don't talk about. Like our bladder and bowel problems. It's very degrading and embarrassing not to be able to control them all the time. (The others all voice their agreement.)

WORKER: I know you were interested a few weeks ago in having Dr. C. (urologist) come to speak to you about these problems. Did she ever come?

ALBERT: Not yet.

WORKER: I will talk to the nurse again and try to schedule her as a speaker in the future. (I bowed out of a sensitive and embarrassing subject here as well. I probably should have explored their feelings more with regard to this subject.)

Although the discussion is important and raises powerful issues, it skirts around the losses involved in the group. It is as if the members of the group are waiting to see if the group leader will come back to the issue she raised at the beginning.

WORKER: I want to talk some more about our ending. I know I've been mentioning it the last couple of times we've met. It's really hard when people come and go from your life.

ALBERT: Yeah, it is. It seems like we just started with you and now you are leaving already.

WORKER: I want you to know that it is hard for me too. I am in a field where I will have to say good-bye many times to people whom I have grown to care about. But I believe that, when I leave here, I will take a part of you all and internalize it, especially your courage. I have learned a lot from all of you about what it is like to live with MS, and how hard it is to deal with all the symptoms. But mostly I have seen how courageous and positive you are in light of all you have been through, and that encourages me. I believe I will be able to help other people in your position because of what you have taught me about dealing with a chronic disease like multiple sclerosis, and I thank you for this group and this experience.

BOB: I know you are going to do well. You are a kind person, and genuine and caring. I think I speak for everyone when I say we've enjoyed having you here. (The others nod and voice their agreement.)

WORKER: Thank you. That's nice to hear. I've really enjoyed being a part of this group and getting to know all of you. (The time was up, and we finished by saying good-bye and talking about meeting again in 2 weeks.)

As the ending approaches, there is always unfinished business between the group and the worker that needs to be explored. In the next example, we see the variation on the theme with children's groups.

Children's Group in an Elementary School As pointed out earlier in the chapter, sometimes the expression of anger can emerge indirectly as acting out. This is particularly true of endings in children's groups, as the members seem to revert to the behaviors exhibited in the beginning sessions. In the following illustration, a student worker returned after a 2-week absence from her group of grade-school children who had been meeting with her every week because of their trouble in school. The group had only 2 weeks left before its last meeting. The worker reached for the cues of the anger expressed in the children's behavior.

The children were sitting in the middle of the room in a circle waiting for me. This was different from usual. There was a big table at the back of the room, and we usually sat around it. The boys started cheering and clapping when I came in. I said hello and told them that I was glad to see them too. I had missed them, and it was good to be back. They asked me a lot of questions about where I had been, what I had done, and so on, and I had to give them a rather detailed description of my vacation. After a while of this joking around, I said that it had been a long time since I had seen them last, and I asked what was new.

They started talking about Chang, the Chinese boy in the class whom they hated, and how they had beaten him up. While I was trying to get the story straight about what had happened, a couple of the kids started becoming rowdy and rude, cutting one another off more than usual and cutting me off, too. I was surprised because, although they had the habit of interrupting one another, and me as well, they had never been so belligerent. George continued telling me about the fight he had with Chang, and how he had given him a bloody nose and sent him to the hospital for stitches. (I later found out the stitches part of the story was exaggerated.) Warren, Bobby, and a couple of others joined in, and they all proudly described in detail the way they had beaten Chang up.

I wanted to remark on this and finally had to tell them to hold it, I wanted to say something. They quieted down a bit, and I finally was able to say what I had wanted—that I couldn't get over how excited and proud they were about what they did to Chang, and I asked them why they did it. They totally ignored my question and continued in depth about the fight.

I waited for a while and tried again to say something, but they were so noisy, I couldn't finish my sentence. There was a lot of horsing around, and they continued extolling the merits of beating Chang up. I tried to speak but kept getting cut off. I let them continue for a couple of minutes and kept quiet. Finally, I was able to ask them what was happening. I said that I got the feeling they were mad at me because they wouldn't let me speak. Jimmy nodded yes. Costa said, "We've wasted time, we've spent enough time talking about Chang, we only have a half hour left and then next week and that's all." I said that I thought maybe they were angry at me because I went away for 2 weeks, and maybe the

group didn't go so well while I was away. They nodded yes. I said maybe they were also angry because the group was ending next week. John said he didn't want the group to end.

The worker astutely picked up on the ending stage being acted out both in the children's behavior in the school and in the process within the group. She chose to focus on the underlying meaning for the group and reached for the anger toward her. In retrospect, because the children were also describing an incident of a racist physical attack, the worker needed to at least acknowledge her distress over the idea that a child was "hated," potentially because he was Asian. Although she might have needed to wait until later to go into this in more detail, she should not have let the discussion continue without her comment. Children need adult models, with whom they identify, to make clear a value system that their own homes or communities might not express. The skill involves the worker "lending a vision" by sharing her own views without falling into the trap of preaching or teaching and missing the underlying anger about the ending.

George asked why it had to end: Was I leaving the school? I said no, I'd be in the school until the end of May, but did they remember that, in the first session, we had all agreed that we'd have 6 to 10 sessions and then it would end? They agreed. Costa said, "We'll miss you. I know we fool around a lot, but we'll really get down to talk about something properly." I said that I guessed that they were sad the group was ending, and they thought that it was ending because I was punishing them for being noisy and rowdy. They nodded. I said that this wasn't so; it was ending because I had other things that I had to do in the school. But, I said, the group was not supposed to end—it was supposed to continue with their teacher leading it, as we had all agreed. There was a lot of complaining about their teacher and what had happened when I wasn't there, how she had made them do health instead of having a discussion.

I said that they were saying that the group wasn't the same when I wasn't there, and I got them to elaborate on how the two sessions had been during my absence. The boys felt that it was terrible. Jimmy complained that next week would be their last session, so they had better make the most of it. I said that, in part, they were angry with me because I was saying that I could no longer come in after next week, and maybe they were feeling let down and deserted. They quietly nodded. I said that I could understand how they felt; I was also sad that I would no longer be able to come in on Tuesday mornings, because I really enjoyed working with them, but I would still be in the school for a while and they could come to see me alone if they wanted to, and I would come in from time to time to see them. One of the boys asked if I would come to their next party, and I said that I would love to. I added that, besides talking about me and them, I knew that they were angry at Mrs. Morris, and I wondered if we could talk about that and see if we could work something out.

Mrs. Morris was a classroom teacher who had offered to continue the group. The worker focused on the transition question, realizing that she might be able to help the group members continue their work after she was gone. A discussion about how the group sessions went while she was away revealed that the children had been upset by her absence. They had not given Mrs. Morris a chance; they had acted out, which had caused her to abandon the group meeting and turn instead to a general health discussion. The worker strategized with the boys about how they could handle

things differently with Mrs. Morris. She also offered to meet with Mrs. Morris to assist in the transition.

In addition to unfinished business with the worker, groups face unfinished business among members during the last sessions. These issues, particularly the negative feelings, often emerge only toward the end of the group. Workers tend to pass over these issues to end the group on a high note. However, the worker who trusts the group will encourage exploration of the negative feelings as well as the positive ones, as illustrated in the next example.

Male Batterers' Group In the following illustration, the worker encouraged group members to share negative reactions to the helping efforts so they could avoid the farewell-party syndrome. The worker asked the group, "How can I be more helpful to groups in the future?" The group was composed of men who had been violent with their wives or the women they had lived with. The members responded to the worker's first question by referring to a coworker, who was not present. Note how the worker brings the discussion back to himself.

WORKER: What I want to ask you is, what do you think I could have done better?

What did I do that I shouldn't have done? I would like some feedback about me in relationship to the group and what's been going on here.

CHARLES: I always felt like he (the coworker) was giving me the third degree, but at the same time it brought out answers that probably wouldn't have come out any other time. I didn't feel like he was pushing, but at the same time he asked penetrating questions. And you had a choice, you could either lie about them or you could just fade out and go around them—or tell the truth; most of the time, instead of hiding it, I would answer his questions, and I think I got a lot more said that way than talking on my own.

WORKER: Do you think I could have asked more questions?

CHARLES: Yeah, you could have, but . . . I don't like criticizing.

ALAN: I don't see where you could have asked that many more questions. I think you've done well at bringing things out. It always takes somebody to start it . . . and I think you've tried to get it going.

CHARLES: Yeah.

ALAN: I think it has slipped quite a few times, but I don't think that is necessarily your responsibility; I think that's the group's responsibility.

CHARLES: Yeah. For some reason, we did seem to digress quite often, I felt. But I think it's my responsibility just as much as it is yours. Alan thought maybe we could have talked about some things more.

WORKER: How do you mean "slipped?" Do you mean we got off the topic?

CHARLES: Yeah.

BEN: We used to bullshit a lot!

ALAN: But I feel that's really good, because you have to be comfortable with the people you're talking with, therefore you have to bullshit sometimes. You have to get off the subject in order to get back onto it because we always manage to get back onto the topics. I think it's good to get off the subject—it's a rest . . .

BEN: I'm just questioning how much we do, that's all.

ALAN: Yeah, well, we did quite a bit . . . but I think we got things done.

CHARLES: But we always noticed it, eh? If it got carried too far, one of the group would say something about it, but I think it helped in a way because it made things more relaxed. We weren't always discussing somebody's hang-up or anything.

WORKER: I won't say that I don't mind being criticized because I do—(laughter) OK! But at the same time, I recognize that . . . Larry (Shulman), the consultant in this outfit, says, "We make mistakes, we learn from those, and then we make more sophisticated mistakes"—that kind of thing. I need that kind of input, not only for me as an individual, but for other guys who are going to be leading these groups.

CHARLES: Well, I think you're all right then—you haven't reached the sophisticated stage yet.

WORKER: You mean I'm just making the gross mistakes?! (Laughter.)

CHARLES: No, you're just making the everyday, ordinary ones.

WORKER: Like what?

CHARLES: I don't know, I haven't noticed you making any mistakes.

WORKER: What would you like to see me doing differently?

BEN: Going back to what I said earlier this evening about becoming more aware of how pervasive (maybe) this anger is, how it manifests itself in different ways, and one way is just kind of a sense of being uptight. And it seems to me that the only way I'm gonna change is that I first have to become somehow aware. I mean, I don't know how you ask questions to help another person become aware, but I think that's the kind of question that is helpful, and maybe you could have asked more of those. Now, specifically, I can't say, because I don't have a firm grasp on that. Do you (turning to John) have any idea of what I am talking about?

JOHN: Yes. Maybe we are putting too much responsibility on the worker? I don't think so. If I could do everything myself, I wouldn't be here in a group.

WORKER: I agree with that.

BEN: And I'm not sophisticated enough, I guess, to have penetrating questions . . . or to draw out . . . to help me become aware, I guess that takes . . . first of all, that you have the knowledge or something and being able to see more than I can—or at least have an idea, so that you can ask the questions that will help me rather than telling me, but help me become aware of what, you know, uh. . . . Because I'm just seeing now that I don't think I'm very aware of all the waves in my life—and I don't know why, but I think it's important that I gain that knowledge for myself. I'm not sure how to go about it. Because I don't think that my being is just going to change in the sense of my violence toward women—not just toward women; I think it has to change in other areas, and it will carry over. (Pause.)

WORKER: (Speaking to Alan) I was really moved when you talked about your feeling of being set up, and you were obviously very upset talking about it. Maybe I could have reached a bit more, I don't know, helped you get in touch with . . .

ALAN: Yeah, I think that you might have, and I probably showed it too, because I was uptight that night, I was getting into it—I think maybe you should have pushed me a little more. It was a very touchy subject for me, because it's a helpless . . . I never really had a totally helpless feeling in my entire life; I've always been able to do something about it, but this is one thing that I can do nothing about. Every time I try, it gets worse, and the frustration that comes from that really gets me. I get hit by this almost every day . . . the feeling that I can do nothing.

By making a demand for work, the worker demonstrated that he really wanted the feedback, and the members responded. Of course, the worker had to have enough

confidence in himself to invite the negative responses and to stay with them when the members tested him to see if he really meant it. In addition to making the ending discussion honest and receiving important professional feedback, the worker demonstrated a view of manhood that said it was all right to make mistakes and to accept criticism. This was critical for this group because of their tendency to avoid owning up to their own mistakes and taking responsibility for their abusive behavior.

Female Worker's Last Session With Men in a Correctional Setting In the excerpt that follows, a female graduate student shares an e-mail she has written to a friend about her experience working in a men's correctional setting. This is also the last session for this specific group, although the student is the only one leaving the setting. She describes the previous few meetings as characterized by increased negative conflict among the members themselves as well as between the members and the group leaders. This is not an unusual pattern as the group moves through the anger stage of the ending process.

Agency: Correctional Facility

Group Type: Communication, last meeting

Group Purpose: Every activity at the setting had an official purpose among the staff and a tacit purpose among the group members. The staff and administration stated the purpose of the communications group as a way for the participants to examine their negative communication patterns and acquire improved means of communicating. Most of the group members, however, enrolled in this and other groups to receive a certificate of completion, days off their sentence, and better chances of getting a favorable staff recommendation for their parole hearings. A secondary motivator for group participation was the ability to be away from the housing units and more freely interact with other inmates and "normal people"—specifically, female staff. Although there were a good number of members who appeared to have a genuine interest in the group topics, the groups would not have even half the membership they now have if members did not receive days off their sentence and more varied social interaction.

Gender: All members were male; the group was co-led by two females. This would be a good group for a male coleader, though I understand that is not always possible.

Age Range: The youngest member was in his early 20s; the oldest in his mid-50s. The two female group leaders were 22 and 65.

Cultural, Racial, Ethnic, and Sexual Orientation of Members: The majority of the members were African American, one or two members were Caucasian, and it appeared as though one member was of both African American and Caucasian descent. Although religion was never directly discussed, it became apparent that many of the group members identified with the Muslim religion, some felt disenfranchised from any religion, and others identified themselves as Christian. The sexual orientation of each member was unclear, but during discussions, most men implied that they were heterosexual. The two group leaders were Caucasian, nonreligious but spiritual, and heterosexual.

Session Excerpt

This was the last session of this particular group, and it fell on the last day of my internship, about a week before graduation. I had had most of these men in previous groups and gotten to know everyone pretty well throughout the entire year. The last few sessions before this final session had been rocky, and we had experienced a good amount of conflict between the coleaders and members, as well as conflict among the members. One theme that I was profoundly aware of as this group came to a close was a sense of frustration and anger at the way they were treated by one another and by prison staff, and the way they have been and anticipate being viewed by society. I never felt like that theme was appropriately addressed in any of the groups, and I felt I should try before I left. At the end of the session, I thanked them for letting me be a part of their group and shared with them an e-mail I wrote that I reflected on my experience at the setting. I feel that sharing the whole email ended up being beneficial to the group and to me, but the part that I feel made the biggest impact was the following:

WORKER: (Reading from her e-mail) I didn't expect that I would have intelligent conversations about philosophy, politics, literature, and current events in a prison, of all places, and with inmates, of all people. But that's just it. Now I see that these guys are so much more than simply "inmates" or "burdens of the state." The men that I've had the pleasure of knowing are just that: men. There's not been one person that I've talked to that fits the stereotypical image of inmates as heartless monsters.

It was at this point that I saw different expressions of emotions that weren't typical of any other group session I had co-led. Some men had tears in their eyes; others changed their body posture and bowed their heads, while others made attempts to hide any emotion. When I was done, I told them that I sincerely meant what I shared, and that I knew they all were able to do great things.

Adult Female Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Endings Over Time As the previous examples illustrated, the ending and transition phase of a group takes place over time. The stages are noticeable during the last three or four sessions for an ongoing group, beginning with the worker's reminder that the group is coming to an end. The next example provides excerpts from the last six sessions of a group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

The members of this group all experienced oppression on many levels. They were all sexually exploited as children, most often by people whom they knew and should have been able to trust. As women, they continued to experience oppression in relation to their gender. Some of the members were Hispanic and faced racism, which—when combined with sexism—strongly affected their lives. Finally, some were lesbians or bisexual, which also placed them in a group that commonly experiences prejudice and oppression. Thus, all of the group members carried a great deal of pain and internalization of their oppression.

As the group members moved into their ending and transition phase, and as they reviewed and evaluated their work together, note their courage, their love for one another, and their social worker's conviction about their inherent strength not only to survive oppression but to overcome it and fight it. In many ways, the work of the group followed the three developmental stages described in Chapters 1 and 2, in which oppressed people attempt to free themselves from the oppressor within and the oppressor without.

Client Description and Time Frame

This 24-week group for adult female survivors of childhood sexual victimization is a combination of support and stabilization and growth and education models. It is offered by a community rape crisis center and is led by two coworkers. The time frame of the meetings is August 28 to October 16.

The seven members range in age from 22 to 28. All members are women from working-class or middle-class backgrounds. Two members are Hispanic, and the rest are White or are from various other ethnic groups. Two women are lesbians, one is bisexual, and four are heterosexual.

Description of the Problem

As the group begins its ending stage, members are reluctant to face the pain and loss of the impending termination and the potential effect of this transition on their lives. As survivors of sexual abuse, many of the women feel acute fear and discomfort when confronted with strong feelings. They have described families of origin in which the development and ending of relationships have been poorly modeled, and they have learned to keep silent about their feelings and fears. The tasks of the workers will be to help build a group culture in which the taboo subjects of endings and losses can be explored, freeing the members to grapple with the tasks of termination. We must help the group establish a norm that supports intimacy and risk but also profoundly respects each member's need for safety and self-protection.

How the Problem Came to the Attention of the Worker(s)

As my coworker Jane and I prepared for termination, we tuned in to the potential problems of this stage, using both general knowledge of survivors' issues and our knowledge of the work and struggles of this particular group as a guide. Since the first sessions, safety had been vital to meaningful and productive work in the group. Members had worked hard to recognize when they felt unsafe or at risk and had learned to take steps to protect themselves. Because bonding and connection had been central to the group's creation of a safe and trusting culture, we hypothesized that the group might feel unsafe as members began to separate. We believed that the group might need to create a different "safe culture" that could tolerate the coming ending. On August 28, we learned about the group's norms for saying good-bye and about subjects and feelings related to endings that were forbidden. Members responded with silence when asked direct questions about what the group's end meant to them, and informed us that they usually run away from and ignore endings.

Summary of the Work

August 28

I tried to reach for the pain behind a group member's description of self-hurting behavior. Linda was describing how she felt compelled to binge on salty and high cholesterol foods lately and how it was very dangerous for her high blood pressure. I observed that, in the past, she had done this when she was having really strong feelings, and I asked how she was feeling these days when she seemed compelled to binge. She began to cry and said, "There's just so much pain, so much loss." She described her fear of losing her whole family if she confronted her mother (the perpetrator of her sexual abuse), the death of a cousin who had been missing and whose body had been found, the anniversary of a rape in which she

had nearly been killed at age 18, her loss of me as her individual therapist, and the impending loss of the group, the first people who had ever believed in and supported her. In the face of this, she said that she was really isolating herself and wanted to eat.

I felt guilty for "abandoning her" at this difficult time and felt an impulse to fix things for her. I decided this was a signal that I should involve the group rather than respond as her individual therapist. I tried to enlist the support of the group to combat her isolation. I said, "Linda, it sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed by all this pain, and at the very time you could use some support, you're all alone. Is there any way the group can help you right now?" She responded that she isolates most when she's most in pain but that the group could help by reaching out to her, that she needs to be with people when she feels this way. Some group members responded with expressions of support and offers to talk on the phone or be with her. People shared how hard it was to see her pain but how important it was that she share it.

I used Linda's expression of loss to raise the issue of termination again for the group. I said that Linda had shared feeling really sad about the group, and I wondered how others in the group were feeling about the end approaching. There was silence. I waited, thinking they might need time to respond. Jane, the coleader, asked group members how they usually say good-bye. Group members responded: "I just take off, usually." "Hey, I don't say 'good-bye,' I say 'see you later.'" "I never say good-bye, I just disappear." "I try to pretend nothing's changed." Jane said that she felt it was important for members to understand how they usually cope with good-byes so that they could make choices this time about how they want to handle this ending. Issues of trust, intimacy, and loss had been important in the group's work, and we could do vital work in these areas during our final weeks. Time was up, and I said that we would be spending more time next week talking about the approaching end of the group and how people wanted to work on it.

In the excerpt that follows, the workers display their understanding of the importance of allowing these young women to have control over the issue of disclosing the details of their abuse. It is common that, as the end approaches—in what is sometimes called "doorknob therapy," group members will disclose their most difficult issues and "secrets." Not having had control over what was done to them in the past, often by family members, it is crucial that the group members have control over their disclosure.

September 11

I reframed a member's inability to reach a stated group goal and attempted to unite ending process with content. A major goal for Martha had been to spend time in the group telling the story of her abuse, but each time she had planned to do it, she had felt unable to go through with it. She had felt flooded with fear and pain. The group had processed why it was so difficult and suggested different ways she could prepare and cope with this "disclosure," but to no avail. This time, what came up was that she felt unable to risk and be vulnerable in the group when it was so close to ending and she could be rejected and abandoned by the group members. She said that it no longer felt safe in the group. I said that perhaps what she was telling us was that this goal was not right for her right now, that keeping herself safe was most important, and that she was making choices about how she needed to protect herself.

Because child-victims often learn to feel that they are not worth protecting and can never feel truly safe, safety and self-protection had been important in the group's work.

I offered the group a new norm for endings. I said that we needed to strike a careful balance as we approached the ending, trying to work as hard as we could and risk as much as we could but also respecting each person's needs for safety. I told Martha that if she wanted to do her disclosure we would help her, but that no one would force her to do it. Martha and the group discussed this for a while, and then Jane talked about Martha's goal and goals in general and how it was important for us to review them and take stock of the work we needed to address in the next 4 weeks.

I attempted to demand work from the group, evaluating progress and exploring feelings, but I blew it by asking for too much information at once. I asked if we could spend some time right now hearing from everyone about what they had accomplished so far, what they still needed to work on, and how they were feeling about the group ending. I immediately sensed my error but didn't know how to correct it. The group was silent. Jane then said that she understood how hard it was for the group but that it was important for us to take stock of where we were. We could still accomplish a lot but we needed to know. . . . Jodi burst in and said, "I just feel like telling you to shut up. You both keep talking and talking about this, and I'm feeling really angry. I wish you would let us move on to what we want to talk about and stop wasting time."

I attempted to address her anger directly and put it in context. I said that she was clearly feeling really angry, and that it felt to her like we were pressuring the group. I waited and then said that people often feel very angry when they face losing something that has been really important to them. I wondered if some of her anger was related to the ending itself. Rita said, "But we're not losing the group. We'll still see each other." Others agreed. I confronted the group's denial. "That's true," I said, "you can choose to continue your friendships as individuals and as a group, but this Monday night group is special, the way we work together here. It's like it has its own identity. That's what's going to end." Michelle said that she wouldn't know what to do with herself on Mondays anymore. Others joined in, saying how they would miss the group. Both workers reflected these feelings and shared their own feelings about the group ending.

I attempted to correct my earlier mistake and reach for more feelings. I said that I had asked for a lot at once during my earlier question about goals. This was really hard to talk about and might require some reflection. Perhaps group members could review their progress and future needs during the week, and we could set aside time to discuss them next week. We would also need to talk in more depth about the final session. For now, I wondered if we could just spend some time talking about how it felt this moment to be dealing with this. We discussed this for the last few minutes of the session.

September 18

I renewed the previous week's demand for work. I reminded the group that we had planned to spend some time this week taking stock of what the group has meant to people and where we needed to put our energy during these final four sessions. People had put quite a bit of thought into this, and the group spent some time evaluating and prioritizing. Martha had clarified the issue of disclosure for herself. She

had discovered that, in trying to force herself to discuss the abuse before the group "audience" while feeling unsafe, she had been recreating the dynamics of her abuse as a child in which her father had taken her to bars where she had been sexually abused by various strangers while others observed. With the support and understanding of the group, she was able to carry out a disclosure related to this specific abuse, checking with the group whenever she began to feel unsafe. We credited her growing ability to protect herself while achieving her goals. Both Jane and I offered positive feedback about Martha's growth and her ability to both keep herself safe and move forward with her goals.

Later, Jane raised the issue of the final session, explaining to the group that it is generally structured around feedback, both negative and positive. She asked the group to consider a structure that has worked well for other groups, in which each group member in turn gives feedback to each of the other members and the workers. Past groups have chosen to write a special message to each individual so that the feedback would be kept and remembered. Some members were eager to do this, whereas others expressed considerable anxiety about evaluating themselves and others. I reached for feelings while giving the group responsibility for its own structure. I said that some people seemed eager to do this, but others seemed really uncomfortable with it. Ultimately, the decision of how to handle the last session lay with the group, but I wondered if we could explore how people felt about it right now. What made it seem scary, and what seemed positive about it? This was explored for a while.

Then group members asked me to review information about the local "Take Back the Night" march with them. We had told them about the march against sexual violence against women a few weeks before and, after some exploration of their fears about participating in a public demonstration, they decided to march as a group. I supported the group's readiness to act independently and support one another in new experiences. I shared with them how good I felt that they wanted to march together, and I gave them the information they needed:

September 25

We supported the group's growing independence and shared our feelings with them: As the group processed how the march had felt for them, Jane and I shared how powerful it had felt for us to see them there, marching, chanting, and singing. We also shared that it was hard for us to see them and know that the group was ending. The group was special for us, and it would be hard to let it go.

I fell for the illusion of work and let the group get off track. Rita had been talking for some time about her problems and conflicts with her parents. At first, both workers and the group were active in discussing her problem, but I gradually began to feel that we weren't going anywhere and my attempts to involve the group proved fruitless. They seemed to have checked out. I now think that some of the anger Rita was expressing was indirectly aimed at the leaders and/or the group, but I missed this at the time because she had ample reason to be angry with her parents.

I tried to regain focus by demanding work of another member. I had noticed for some time that Linda seemed very agitated and seemed to be struggling to contain herself. Rita had come to a long pause, and I asked, "What's going on with

you, Linda?" Linda seemed startled: "Who, me? Why? What's the problem?" I answered, "Well, Rita's been talking for a while now about her family, and I know your family has been a source of a lot of your pain. You seem really upset right now, and I wonder what's happening." Linda began to talk of having a great deal of pain all the time. She said that her losses had totally overwhelmed her lately, and she just didn't know how she was going to make it. I immediately felt the group come back to life.

I checked with Rita that we could move to Linda's issue. It would have been better to clarify what had occurred with Rita first, but I wasn't sure how to handle it. Linda and various group members talked for some time about how hopeless she felt. I reached for her ability to cope with her pain. "I'm just hearing that you have so much pain and sadness right now, Linda, and I wonder, what are you doing with all this hurt?" She said that she was crying a lot, just letting herself feel the sadness, and that she was also writing in her journal and writing poems. She mentioned that she had just written a poem today about her pain and where it was taking her. Several people asked her if she would read it, and she did. It was called "Children of the Rainbow," and it described how beams of light are shattered and broken as they pass through a drop of water and how they emerge to form the vibrant colors of the rainbow. The poem said that she and all survivors in recovery are like beams of light; if they can make it through their pain, they will become vibrant, beautiful, and whole. Several of us had tears in our eyes (me included), and there was a powerful silence when she finished.

I remained silent to let the group control this moment. People thanked her for sharing such a personal, painful, and hopeful part of herself. I had been Linda's individual worker for some time, and I was finding it very hard to leave her and the agency. I acknowledged her feelings, shared my own, and credited her ability to cope. I shared that I found the poem very moving, that I could feel that she had incredible pain, but that her art and ability to create were powerful vehicles for carrying her forward and transforming her pain. The group ended soon after.

October 2

We credited a member's growing independence. Martha told the group that she had confronted her father with the abuse since the last group. We were all amazed, because this had been a goal that Martha had not hoped to attain for several months, if not years, in the future. Her abuse had been very sadistic, and her father had continued to hold incredible power over her when he was able to have contact with her. She had been with Linda before he called and described "just feeling very powerful and safe. I was able to see Linda and my roommate right there, and I could hold the whole group right in my mind and feel you supporting me and helping me to be safe. I've never felt anything like that before. And he was weak! He was the one who seemed powerless."

Martha had burned a picture of her father after the call as a way of exorcizing his control over her, and she had brought the ashes to group. Later, the group gathered and flushed the ashes down the toilet. Both leaders credited Martha's incredible and rapid growth and related it to the ending and how she had taken control of how she wanted to accomplish her goals and approach the end of group. The group gave Martha feedback and discussed how it felt to be part of her sense of safety.

I missed two important opportunities to discuss anger in relation to the group's ending. Linda discussed feeling intense anger lately, like she was about to explode and be violent. The group and both workers addressed her anger extensively, relating it to her abuse and her current pain and exploring coping strategies. Although I mentioned her several losses as being related to her anger, I neglected to focus on the group's ending as a major source of her pain and thus missed a potentially important piece of work.

Next, Donna raised the issue of her psychiatrist and how he had told her to get on with her life and stop indulging herself with her depression and dwelling on her abuse. The group responded with explosive anger. I allowed my own anger and the real differences between my approach and the approach of the psychiatrist to blind me to the part of the group's anger that might have been directed at me, had I invited it. We did good work in helping Donna evaluate her therapy, but we missed another chance to explore the group's anger about the ending and our role as workers. I think that this group felt so special to me, and I was finding termination from individuals, the group, and the agency so hard, that I kept myself unaware of their anger.

October 16: Final Session

We assisted the group in sharing feedback and establishing closure, but we neglected to reach for negative evaluation. Each member and worker had prepared written feedback for the other members and workers, and members took turns reading their messages to one another. (Workers passed out written individual feedback and gave verbal feedback to the group as a whole.) The material was very personal and moving and related the work of the group to strong feelings about ending. Workers assisted members in preparing to read and helped the group to respond. Some members cried and expressed deep feelings of pain and loss. Workers also responded directly to their own feedback.

A few of the women chose to hand out the personal feedback and speak to the group generally while members read the personal material. Although I believe that the material was genuine, it focused on positives only, and both workers missed the opportunity to reach for negative feedback, falling for the farewell-party syndrome.

Although this important task was not accomplished, the workers did accomplish their goal of creating a safe culture in which members could risk being intimate and trusting as the group ended. I reinforced the culture that permits people to risk even as they are separating. Martha had read each note and closed with "Love, Martha." At one point, Rita said, "This is really hard, but I have to ask. You said 'Love' to everybody, but you didn't say it to me. I'm sure you just forgot, but I have to say, it hurts. Don't you love me too?" She began to cry with these last words. Martha had clearly just forgotten and turned to Rita, saying, "I'm so glad you told me. I was just finding this all so hard that I didn't even realize . . . I do love you. I'm sorry it hurt that I forgot you. Here, let me write it on yours."

I asked Rita how it had felt to risk this question, and I said that I remembered that she had entered the group 6 months ago saying she never let herself be vulnerable with others. Rita responded that this was a safer place than she had ever been in before. She had shared her story, her shame, and had been vulnerable with people here. She knew she could trust us. "It's true," added Martha, "I've never been anywhere that was safe the way this is, even more than individual therapy." Michelle

added, "This place is like the safe home we never had. You guys were almost like parents for us. You were honest with us, and we learned to be honest with each other. And it never mattered, we could feel good, feel bad, disagree with each other and be mad, but it was OK. We could learn to be ourselves. You were there for us the way our parents should have been." Soon after, we ended the group. There was a long "group hug" at the suggestion of the members, and we ate some cake a member had ordered. The message on the cake said, "Survivors—Striving and Thriving!"

The metaphor of the poem, in which survivors in recovery are viewed as "beams of light; if they can make it through their pain, they will become vibrant, beautiful, and whole," is extremely powerful and moving. It captures beautifully the struggle of these young, oppressed, and vulnerable women to free themselves from the self-image of being "damaged goods" that had been imposed upon them by those who should have been nurturing them. Their courage in joining a "Take Back the Night" march, when they felt so personally uncomfortable doing so, was an affirmation of their willingness to fight and overthrow their oppressors. It was a social parallel of their individual revolutions against oppression described in one member's efforts to confront her offending parent. The unique power of mutual-aid groups is amply demonstrated in the content of their work together and in the "Survivors—Striving and Thriving" lettering on the cake at their final session.

In the next section, a detailed analysis of a single session in the ending phase of a group of teenagers in a residential setting completes this chapter. Many of the teens in the ending group have experienced emotional, physical, and sexual abuse within their families of origin. The example illustrates all of the ending phases described thus far.

A Termination Session: The Worker Leaving the Group in a Residential Setting The following description of a group meeting with teenage girls in a residential treatment center illustrates some of the unique dynamics that emerge when the group continues but the worker leaves. The session took place one week after the worker told the group members that she was leaving the agency for another job. This worker in this example demonstrated an advanced level of skill in both group work and dealing with endings. Of particular interest is the impact of the worker's sharing of her own powerful feelings. The entire meeting is presented, together with a detailed analysis of the skills employed. The process in the meeting is classic—one can see elements of all of the ending dynamics in one session.

Three of the girls came in together and seemed to be in a very happy mood. They said that they'd had a good week in school. I said, you know, that sounded real nice, and that this was one of the enjoyments of finally being a senior—I teased them about that. I asked where Gladys and Beth were, and they said that they had to speak with a teacher about some arrangements and that they'd be there in a little while. The three of them continued talking about school and the rehearsals and the senior trip and stuff like that. Then Beth came in, and she was singing "Everything Is Beautiful," a popular song at this time. She took her seat and was laughing with everyone.

The good feelings expressed by the group members represented a denial of the ending. Because there was only one meeting left after this one, the worker had strategized

to reach past the denial for the opposite feelings she knew would be there. The members responded to her demand for work.

After a while, I said, "Hey, it's great to see everybody in such a good mood, and I hate to be a party pooper, but I feel that I have to say that this is our next-to-the-last meeting, and a lot of things between you and I will be drawing to an end." Margie said, "You have a hell of a nerve." I said, "You mean about my leaving?" She said, "Yeah, that, and a whole lot of things." I said, "OK, let's hear them. I'm sure that my leaving and the ending of the group has caused a lot of reactions in all of you." Nobody picked up on that, and Margie said, "Are we going to have a group next year?" A couple of girls said, "Yeah, we want to have another group next year," and Beth said, "Let's have a party in honor of your leaving."

The group's anger was expressed in Margie's comment, "You have a hell of a nerve." The worker acknowledged this anger and encouraged the members to continue. The anger they felt and the pain underneath it were too much for them at this point, so they backed off. They began, instead, to discuss the continuation of the group and a farewell party. The worker allowed them to move away from the anger but held them to a discussion of the importance of the group.

There was a lot of mixed-up talk, and I tried to pick up about continuing the group. I said, "You're saying that the group has meant something to you and that you want to continue even without me." Beth said, "Naw, the group wasn't all that good," and Margie said, "Sometimes it was and sometimes not. Sometimes the meetings were very good, and sometimes they were a waste of time." I said, "Can you tell me more about that?" Margie said, "Well, sometimes it just seemed like we weren't in the right mood, and we couldn't get down to work." Jill said, "Yeah, we were just fooling around all over the place," and Donna said, "Like the mood we were in Sunday night," and they all began to talk about a riot that had happened in the cottage, and they started fooling around. I said, "Hey, can we get back to the thing about the group, and what you thought about it, and what it meant to you? I think it is important for us to take a look at it now that you're nearing the end."

The members attempted to evade the discussion once again, and the worker showed great skill in not letting them put her off. She made another demand for work and insisted that the group members discuss their specific reactions to their time together. As the members described the mutual aid they had experienced, the worker attempted to explore this aspect of their learning; however, they were not ready for this discussion and still needed to express their angry feelings.

Donna said, "Well, the best meeting we had was just with three of us—me, Jill, and Gladys. That's when we really talked about ourselves." Margie said, "You mean without me and Beth, is that what you mean?" Jill said quickly, "No, I don't mean that. We did have a good meeting with everybody, but I guess that was really the best," and I said, "Well, what made it the best?" Donna said, "Because we talked about our families, and we got to understand how we were feeling," and Margie said, "Yeah, I agree. The best meetings were when we talked about our families, and the worst meetings were when we talked about the cottage and the cottage parents." I said, "How come?" Gladys said,

"Because we couldn't do anything about the cottage parents or even about the cottage. At least when we talk about ourselves and about our families, we can understand more, we can know why we are like we are." Beth said, "Yeah, we can help each other." I said, "You have helped each other a lot. Is that something important that you've gotten from these meetings?" Nobody picked up on that.

Beth began talking about a party that they had been to, and, all of a sudden, in the midst of a big discussion, Beth turned to me and said, "You're leaving, you God-damned fink." And everybody stopped, and everybody looked at me. I said, "I'm leaving, and I guess that makes me a fink." And everybody began saying, "Why are you leaving? Why do you have to leave us? Why can't you stay?" Then a whole torrent of emotion came pouring out. Finally, Jill said, "Why are you leaving?" I said, "I tried to explain the reasons on Friday, but if you'd like me to, I'll explain them again now. But I don't know if it's the reason that really matters. It's more how you feel knowing that I'm leaving, for whatever the reason." They said, "No, no, we want to hear the reasons; we don't understand." I said, "OK, let me try to explain. I'm leaving because I've been here for a number of years and I feel that it's time for me to move on, to move into another situation. Working here has meant an awful lot to me, and you all have meant an awful lot to me. Yet I feel that a combination of things, the long traveling, working a lot of nights, have become very hard for me, and I feel like I want to work nearer to where I live, and that I want to have a new kind of experience and not work in a residential treatment school. That's pretty much the reason. If there's anything you don't understand, ask me and I'll try to explain more."

As the anger emerged, the worker struggled with her own feelings in order not to block their expression. Her acceptance of their feelings—which was demonstrated in her response, "I'm leaving, and I guess that makes me a fink"—freed them to explore the feelings of dependency and hurt that were below their surface feelings of anger. Although she had explained her reasons for leaving the week before, the group members had been too shocked to heed them and understand. She agreed to explain them again while acknowledging that their feelings were what really mattered, rather than her reasons. As the group members began to express their emotions toward the worker, she asked them to identify the specific things about her they had found helpful. These would be the qualities they must look for in other workers. She also stayed with their hurt feelings, and she reached for their fear about establishing a relationship with a new worker, for their sense of rejection, and for their anger. Most important, the worker also shared her own pain at leaving them. The open expression of her feelings provided the impetus for the members to respond with theirs.

Beth started to cry and said, "You can't leave. We need you." I said, "You mean, you won't be able to make it without me?" Margie said, "You're the best social worker I ever had. I won't be able to talk to anybody else." I said, "We have been real close, me and every one of you, and I guess the thought of starting over with somebody else scares the hell out of you. What do you think there was about me that made it easier for you to talk to me?" Beth said, "It's because you cared about us. It's 'cause we knew that even when you were mad at us, you were really sticking up for us, and you were really with us." Donna said in a soft voice, "Yeah, but if you cared so much, you wouldn't be leaving." And I said,

"That's the thing, isn't it? How could I leave you if I really care for you?" Gladys said, "We know you care for us. We know you're leaving because you really feel that you have to." And then she just kind of shrugged, and I said, "But the words don't help very much, huh? They don't take away the bad feeling." Beth said, "That's right, what good does it do me to know that you care if you're not here?" And Jill said, "Yeah, you've been my social worker for a whole year. I don't want anybody else." There was a lot more talk about the idea that they didn't want anybody new.

I said, "You're angry as hell at me. You have a right to be, and even though your anger hurts me and a big piece of me wants to say, 'Don't be angry at me,' I can understand that you are, and I know the kind of pain that must be underneath, and I feel some of that pain also. It's hard as hell for me to leave you." Beth said, "If it was hard for you to leave us, then you wouldn't leave us." Margie said, "No, Beth, that's just not the truth. It was hard for me to leave home. . . ."

At this point in the session, the pain of the discussion caused the group to adopt its pattern of using a scapegoat when things got rough. Gladys, the group scapegoat, began to cry, expressing many of the emotions felt by the other members. Their anger at her was an expression of their anger at the same feelings within themselves. The worker demonstrated her group work skill, at a time when she herself was feeling somewhat overwhelmed by emotion, by paying attention to her two clients—Gladys and the group. In the next excerpt, we see an illustration of the worker's functional role, as outlined in the discussion on scapegoating in Chapter 13.

Gladys put her head down and began to cry, and one of the kids hollered, "Oh, cut it out. This hurts us as much as it hurts you." I said, "Maybe it hurts each of you in a different way, and this is how Gladys is reacting." She picked up her head and said, "Oh, leave me alone. None of you care about me," and Margie said, "Yes, we do, you don't want help. You just want to feel sorry for yourself."

I said, "You're all getting so angry at Gladys, and it seems that all she's doing is acting out how you feel. Is it that you hurt so much that you don't have room for anybody else's hurt?" Jill said, "She cries all the time. Who gives a damn about her?" Donna said, "I care about her, but I don't know what to do." Beth said to her (by this time, Gladys had moved away from the table where we meet and was sitting alone on a chair, crying), "Gladys, why don't you come over here?" and Gladys just shrugged, and one of the other kids said, "Aw, leave her alone," and there was kind of an uncomfortable quiet in the room. I said, "I don't think that you feel right leaving her alone," and Beth said, "Hell, what can we do?" I said, "What do you feel like doing? Do you feel like reaching out to her?"

Beth got up and walked over to Gladys. She put her arms around her and said, "You're scared because everybody's leaving, right?" Gladys nodded her head. Beth said, "We're all in that situation, too. She's leaving us, too. Miss S. is leaving us, too. Not only you." Beth said, "But maybe it is different for Gladys." Gladys said, "You have a mother and father. Every one of you has at least a mother or a father. Who do I have?" Beth said, "You have foster parents." Gladys said, "Big deal. They don't want me." There was a hush in the room at the pain of those words, and I said, "Wow, you really know how that feels."

The worker's trust in her group was rewarded as they reached out to Gladys to offer aid. As they spoke to Gladys, they were really speaking to one another and to the part of them that was facing the same set of problems. The faith of the worker was important at this point, because, with her help, they were able to experience the power of mutual aid in the peer group. As they move into their young adult years, they will have to seek out support and help from their peers; this was possibly the most important lesson for them.

Beth said, "I think I know how it feels. I think I know how bad it feels. And if you want to cry, that's OK, but you gotta live. You gotta pick yourself up. You gotta face it." Gladys shook her head. "No," she said, "I can't." I said, "It seems that she can't pick herself up." Donna said, "Even when you're alone, you have to trust yourself." Margie said, "That's pretty hard to do." Beth said, "But you're not alone, Gladys, you have us. We'll help you, and somebody else can help us." Donna said, "And maybe we'll also have to help ourselves." Gladys said, "I know what you mean. I know that, in the end, I do have to help myself." I said to her, "But are you scared that you won't be able to do that?" She nodded her head yes, and once again she began to cry. Beth said, "We'll help you, too; just like we did here this morning." And I had tears in my eyes, too, and I said, "Wow, you kids are fantastic." And they all kind of laughed, and somebody said, "Maybe we'll become social workers, too," and that kind of broke the tension of the moment, and we never really got back to the thing of them helping one another.

The feelings associated with endings stir deep and powerful emotions in all of us. When I use this example and the earlier ones in my workshops, workers are sometimes visibly moved by the power of the feelings expressed; they have perhaps moved you as well. Workers also react to the degree of skill demonstrated by this worker and the workers in the example involving the survivors' group. They reflect on endings they have handled poorly by missing the cues or not facing their own feelings with enough honesty. This record represents an advanced level of skill. This same worker handled endings quite differently in her training days; she would have cut and run at several key places in this meeting. There were many group endings along the way in which she made mistakes, learned from them, and ended her next group with more skill. However painful, this process represents the only way to develop professional skill. It is a process that continues throughout a professional's working life.

Chapter Summary

The ending and transition phase of practice and the strategies for intervention, as described in detail in Chapter 6, apply to group work as well as individual work. Workers help groups move through several ending stages: denial of the ending, anger over the ending, mourning, and trying the ending on for size. Helpful skills include pointing out endings early, reaching for feelings, and dealing with the farewell-party syndrome. Special dynamics arise when the worker leaves and the group continues.