KEEPING OR ENDING COMMITMENTS

Selections from Chapter Three of
The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy
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A life without interpersonal commitments is a life untethered. In the world of therapy, we know about the importance of relationships but have not paid much attention to the commitment dimension that involves obligations and an open timeline of investment—in other words, committed relationships.

The clinical challenges occur when the clients' life commitments are sources of pain and distress and preventing them from accomplishing their goals in therapy. (Think a depressed client with serious marital problems.) Many therapists may fall back on the mainstream cultural priority of individual self-interest over relational commitments. This looks like neutrality, but it's a heavily value-laden stance, one the therapist is usually not conscious of holding in an individualistic culture.

Marital Commitment and Divorce

A divorce decision involves keeping or ending a lifelong commitment, and it has more stakeholders than the individual client (the spouse, often children, extended family members, and others). Therapists can treat clients' dilemma about ending a marriage as if it were a decision that only affected them—a personal lifestyle choice without ethical ramifications. Or therapists can walk with clients through what is usually a lot of ambivalence about the needs of self and responsibilities to others. Therapists don't get a vote in the outcome, but we can help clients engage a fraught decision with the clinical and ethical complexity it deserves. Our field lacks tools for these both/and conversations.

Adults' Commitment to Their Parents

Since the 1980s, a number of therapists have been encouraging cutoffs from "toxic parents." It's not that therapists hate families or that there are never situations that call for a strategic time away from abusive family members. Rather, these therapeutic interventions reflect a cultural orientation where all relationships are transactional—what is the benefit I am gaining versus the cost to my well-being?

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Missing here are two ideas: first, that parent-child bonds are not psychologically disposable–they go on until death of the parent and beyond—and second, that there is an ethical dimension to the parent-child (and other family) relationships. A permanent cut off means that adult children have no moral obligation to respond to their parents' current needs and their eventual frailty and end of life, nor to any siblings or other family members who need support in those rough waters. These two levels—psychological and ethical—go together. Like it or not, we are emotionally tethered to our parents, and they to us. Therapists come and go, but not parents. As I've heard the psychologist Mary Pipher say, "No one calls out for their therapist on their deathbed."

Good ethical consultation does not mean that the therapist has the answers, but that the therapist honors the client's interpersonal commitments in light of all the other factors involved. The rubber hits the road when those relationships are sources of pain and distress.

Reference:

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