

Stages of Change

A psychoanalytic look at a client's treatment journey through a young adult residential program

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Quick Exercise

Take a moment and think about some of your more complex clients. In particular, the ones diagnosed with attachment disorders, personality disorders, and complex trauma.

- Did they have moments in treatment where they decompensated while appearing to make strides and progress?
- Why do you think that happened?

1. Initiation Stage: Fantasy is Reality

What's Happening:

- The honeymoon period
- Sense of hope
- Feelings of mastery

Resident's Presentation Cognitive, Emotional, Interpersonal:

- Great expectations
- "Wilderness glow"
- Sense of hope

1. Initiation Stage: Fantasy is Reality

Unconscious/Psychodynamics:

- Fantasy is reality
- The future is good and the past is bad
- Primitive ego functions at play

Therapeutic Considerations:

- Cushioning the fall
- Reinforce the previous work
- Focus on supportive treatment

2. Rejection Stage: Reality Rears its Ugly Head

What's Happening:

- “Post-wilderness trough”
- Struggles and Obstacles appear

Resident's Presentation Cognitive, Emotional, Interpersonal:

- The novelty fades
- Old patterns return
- Fight/Flight/Freeze
- Interpersonal: Others are objects

2. Rejection Stage: Reality Rears its Ugly Head

Unconscious/Psychodynamics:

- Splitting begins to fail
- Primitive defense mechanisms are increasingly activated
- Projection and displacement:
The return of the bad (not-me)

Therapeutic Considerations:

- The therapeutic work intensifies
- From supportive to reflective

3. Integration Stage: Buy In and the Development of Therapeutic Alliance

What's Happening:

- Client begins to enjoy success in the program
- Skills based improvements

Resident's Presentation

Cognitive, Emotional, Interpersonal:

- Successes lead to a sense of self-efficacy
- Optimism builds
- Fight, flight, and freeze begin to subside
- Interpersonal: Healthy relationships develop

3. Integration Stage: Buy In and the Development of Therapeutic Alliance

Unconscious/Psychodynamics:

- Higher order ego defenses come into play
- Begin integration of the good and bad objects

Therapeutic Considerations:

- The work deepens
- “Strike while the iron is cold!”
- Borrowing the therapist’s ego

4. Decompensation Stage: With success comes fear of losing it

What's Happening:

- Successes give way to struggle
- Backslide in progress

Resident's Presentation

Cognitive, Emotional, Interpersonal:

- Increased negative ideation
- Acting out behaviors emerge
- Interpersonal relationships suffer

4. Decompensation Stage: With success comes fear of losing it

Unconscious/Psychodynamics:

- The Rapprochement Crisis
- Fear of failure leads to self-sabotage
- Return to primitive defense mechanisms

Therapeutic Considerations:

- Treatment comes to a crisis
- The milieu, treatment team, and family must be united
- Confrontation and Interpretation
- Reparative work

5. Internalization Stage

What's Happening:

- Preparing for transition to independence
- Successfully managing life's responsibilities

Resident's Presentation

Cognitive, Emotional, Interpersonal:

- Grounded Optimism
- Greater trust in self to manage conflict
- Interpersonal relationships improve

5. Internalization Stage

Unconscious/Psychodynamics:

- The depressive position
- Mentalization
- Mutual recognition

Therapeutic Considerations:

- Rinse and repeat
- Prepare for end of treatment

References

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