

## **Some Common Problems in the Treatment of Adolescents**

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The treatment of adolescent patients in psychotherapy is often difficult as well as challenging. Some relevant issues should be considered.

The therapist must provide a holding environment, safety, and acceptance in order to facilitate self-disclosure and growth. Safeguarding the adolescent patient's confidentiality is a particularly sensitive issue, since the adolescent is usually brought into the therapist's office by the parents or other parental figure. It is very important to fully explain to parents who are not knowledgeable about therapy the ground rules. Therefore, special factors must be considered, including the amount of cooperation from the family.

"Trust is the bedrock of the therapeutic alliance," (Blos, 1979) It is often very poignant and less disguised, in working with the adolescent.

In order for the adolescent to progress to adulthood, several steps must occur over time. The teenager must be able to increasingly separate, both physically and mentally, from the gratifying parents of early childhood. The teenager must be able to maintain an internal view of his or her parents even when not actually present and also be able to maintain a sense of himself. Thus the separation-individuation process emerges again during adolescent development. (Edward, J., Ruskin, N., and Turrini, P. 1990) The teenager's struggle to disengage from the family and to develop a separate identity is often difficult. To achieve independence, the teenager must become less dependent on the family and be able to develop relationships outside of the family. (Jacobson, 1964) The adolescent must also be able to gradually tolerate external demands and pressures as well as internal ones. Excessive ambivalence towards parents prolongs and complicates this stage in the life cycle.

Insecure parents, who have their own unresolved separation-individuation issues tend to have insecure children. They often unconsciously encourage excessive dependence on them and thwart the adolescent's autonomous behavior. To become fully mature and to utilize all of his or her capacities and talents, the adolescent still needs some support and encouragement from the environment during attempts to master new experience. This helps in the process of letting go of childish ways of obtaining gratification from the caretakers.

The therapist has the task of maintaining the confidentiality of the teenager's treatment, while maintaining or working on the parents' cooperation and understanding of the treatment process. After all, the parents can bring the adolescent to the therapist's office, but it is ultimately up to the teenager to talk spontaneously and honestly about the problems.

Some parents react to the teenager's normal and healthy striving for independence as though the teenager was rejecting them or competing with them. When parents are too threatened themselves by the child's efforts to become more autonomous, the child, and later the teenager, and eventually the adult, will feel insecure rather than confident about moving towards individuation and pursuit of personal goals. Adolescents may then rebel or comply with parents' overt or subtle needs to hold onto them, while feeling ambivalent and confused. The parent who continues to overly gratify and overprotect the young person when it is no longer necessary to do so, infantilizes them. This interferes with the adolescent's attempts to function more autonomously and assertively.

Often, teenagers who maintain this type of dependent and intense bond with their families enter treatment due to tension about leaving home and going away to college, which really

translates into fear of growing up and fear of losing the infantile and dependent ways of relating to adults.

Over the years, I have observed good examples of adolescents' struggles with dependence vs. independence when I worked with students who failed to graduate on time because of one course, such as gym, and have encountered essentially the same issue in college students, who orchestrated failing to complete one course in their senior year.

Psychotherapy with adolescents can be challenging as well as productive when the therapist considers these issues. This brief paper has attempted to describe a few aspects of treatment at this stage of psychosocial development.

Blos, P. (1979) *The Adolescent Passage*. New York: IUP

Edward, J., Ruskin, N., and Turrini, P. (1990) *Separation-Individuation: Theory and Application*. New York: Bruner/Mazel.

Jacobson, E. (1964) *The Self and the Object World*. New York: IUP