

Beginning Anew, Again—Reflections of a New Social Worker

Contributed by Veronica L. Vaiti, LMSW

Nobody likes to be a newbie in the office, especially an office full of social workers and psychotherapists—people trained to assess and diagnose. Be the new girl in town? Yikes! But my experience in switching from one mental health agency to another, along with working with a completely different population, proved to be more than just a new beginning. It was a topic—“how does the new social work practitioner fare when beginning anew, again, in a new work environment”—I thought deserved its own spotlight.

The Invitation

No matter what field you’re in, everyone loves to hear the words: “We’d love to have you join us—how soon can you start?” The old job offer, can’t ever get too many of those. But when these words fell into my lap recently, I felt as if I had been stung by the bee of indecision; injected with both joy and dread.

Out of graduate school less than two years, I had been working in the same agency where I completed my second field placement, and was just settling in. But getting another job offer...I felt myself slowly being tempted to hop on that changing jobs rollercoaster ride.

“Uh, well, I will need some time to think this over,” was my cool, collected and ambivalent answer. Though I bought some time to deliver my final decision, as I explained, “to gather all the facts to make the best career choice,” the truth of the matter was I needed time to sort out the influx of mixed emotions I felt.

Changing jobs is counted among the more stressful life events modern man, or in this case woman, may encounter. And the fact that I’m a clinical social worker trained in the fine art of handling human emotion didn’t exactly translate into instant immunity to the usual stress experienced by such an event. In fact, because I’m fairly new to the field, I found the transition all the more precarious and wrought with aching growing pains. Leaving the Familiar

I liked my job as a psychotherapist in the AIDS Mental Health Clinic (AMHC). Since I’d been there, I had developed many deep ties with colleagues, clients, and the environment. Any consideration of leaving threw me into a state of premature mourning.

My colleagues and I spent more waking time at AMHC together than we did anywhere else. And, by virtue of the work we did with our clients, we came to share and show sides of ourselves and support one another in ways that you wouldn’t necessarily find in an automobile manufacturing plant or a corporate law firm, for that matter.

We felt like family. We knew each other’s habits and idiosyncrasies, likes and dislikes, joys and sorrows. We were a constant part in each other’s daily routines, and each time I thought of leaving, a spray of mist coated my eyes. Was this usual? “It’s just a job,” I thought. But I knew better.

If my colleagues fed my soul at work, then my clients fed my heart. For me, it’s an honor and a most heartfelt experience to sit with clients as they share themselves, slowly peeling off protective layers as they move toward a deeper understanding of themselves. And many of my clients were in the midst of making such movements.

Could I really leave now? Was it ethical and of professionally sound judgment for me to terminate at this point in the work just because I wanted to gain more experience? Would I be hurting my clients, abandoning my clients? Had I grown too attached to my clients? How would my clients feel about working with a different therapist? My job was to help, not to hurt.

Of course, there were one or two clients I was quietly relieved about transferring. Yet the thought of parting at this point in the work with clients for whom I felt a deep sense of care and responsibility, and from whom I had learned immeasurable wisdom, plagued me.

Although things weren’t perfect, I was comfortable and at ease in the AMHC environment. I knew how things worked there. I had my groove down. The paperwork, the protocols, the agency politics, where the light switches were when I was last to leave at night—it was truly a second home!

But at some point and in some way, we all need to venture from the familiar to the unknown for growth to take place. Professional and personal growth, after all, was the main motivating factor for my decision to even entertain the idea of working elsewhere. I desperately wanted experience working with children and adolescents, and in truth, AMHC could never offer that.

So, with the knowledge that I would be leaving the comforts of home so to speak, working longer hours, in a more

rigorous environment all with the sole intention of gaining varied experience, I accepted the offer at Clinic B (a general population outpatient mental health clinic) and ruefully gave my notice to AMHC. New Kid on the Block

With terminations completed, paperwork finished, and exit interview behind me, I was now out of the gates and galloping with bittersweet excitement toward the newness I was about to face.

And it was exciting, at first. There was the novelty of a new route to work in a different part of town, having my own private office space, and a whole new order of things with a new computer system, protocols, and people, of course. But the evil triplets of doubt, uncertainty, and longing for the familiar were riding on excitement's coattails.

When I first saw the list of my assigned 30+ clients, I gulped. There were children as young as five, teenagers and their families, women in midlife, most of whom had been transferred from the departing therapist. I was used to working with a predominantly gay male population. At Clinic B, I felt like I was a student all over again, starting from scratch.

But wasn't this the reason why I accepted this position in the first place? After all, wasn't I craving professional growth and the opportunity to work with children and adolescents? This was what I wanted, yet I couldn't help feeling shaken by my own insecurities in moving forward in the work, doubting my knowledge and abilities to work with these populations. I was even afraid to call clients' parents at first!

As if working with youngsters and their parents wasn't intimidating enough, I had to meet and manage the challenge posed by transferred clients to fill the shoes, or not, of their previous therapist. Who was this person whose space I now assumed? What was she like? How did she work? Would I be able to measure up to her not only in the eyes of my clients, but also in the eyes of my co-workers?

I felt surrounded by uncertainty—uncertainty about how this new arrangement was going to work out—in the treatment room with clients and in the office space with colleagues. Unfortunately, they didn't offer a training module on office politics and social codes during my new employee orientation. I had to learn to decipher and navigate those on my own.

What were the codes of conduct? Was it frowned upon to take a full lunch hour? Who liked who? Was the staff open to talk about the work, or did they keep to themselves? Were they friendly or competitive? Supportive? Indifferent? Did anyone harbor secret resentment toward me for assuming the position of their former co-worker?

I was eager to get to know my new co-workers and made attempts. But when I walked out of my windowless, cinderblock cell-like private office, I found a hallway of mostly closed doors, or colleagues who were obviously pressured and too busy to share more than a few niceties. I felt isolated and alone.

Add to this mix of doubt and uncertainty a feeling of ineptness regarding clerical matters and office policies, and you can imagine how I pined and yearned for the comforts of my home at AMHC. Lessons Learned

I've been at Clinic B for about seven months now, and I finally feel like I've adjusted. Although not much has changed here—it's the same clinic, same people, same policies—my perspective has certainly undergone some tinkering.

What has helped me most thus far is regaining an inner sense of trust, knowing, and acceptance sprinkled with a bit of humor and unending support. Trusting that I hadn't made the wrong choice; despite my discomfort and unease, I have instinctually known that I was right where I needed to be both professionally and emotionally. Knowing how to discern mere growing pains from true misery and that if I were truly miserable I could always leave has been an additional relief.

By accepting my role as new kid on the block and all the accompanying awkwardness and confusion as also acceptable, another dose of stress was alleviated. Plus, being able to laugh at myself and not take myself too seriously has been liberating. So what if it took me three hours instead of one to do my first intake just because I wasn't adept at using the computerized documentation system? At least it was a thorough intake!

The fact is that growth comes with its fair share of discomfort, which is all grist for the mill. And having sound support in addition to an internal sense of openness and curiosity to process this grist through the mill is key. Talking to my supervisor, friends, and old colleagues and even new co-workers has helped to normalize and make sense out of this experience.

Look, adjustment is a process and one that must be allowed the space to unfold over time. I don't know how long I'll be at Clinic B, but at least I'm prepared for what to expect if and when I'm on to Clinic C.

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and yoga, Veronica has a strong interest in social workers's; career development and work-related issues. This article appeared in the Winter 2007 issue of THE NEW SOCIAL WORKER. For permission to reprint or reproduce in any way, please contact Linda Grobman . Copyright 2007 White Hat Communications. All rights reserved.