

When Summer Ends, What Begins?

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Whether or not a person – therapist, client/patient, or anyone – actually takes a summer vacation, there is a universal awareness that summertime is special, and that the fall that follows is a time of fresh starts. What happens in September and October, following the passage of July and August, is the focus of this column.

Everywhere, schools begin a new year in September, from pre-kindergarten to graduate school. There is often the excitement of meeting new teachers and classmates, or for others, reunions with friends and the good feeling of coming back to familiar school buildings, after having advanced a level of education. Yet for some, there is dread and anxiety at facing the beginning of a new school year.

In cities, fall is the time when “the season” begins for museums and concert halls, with art shows and musical events presenting their pleasures, many of which were scheduled a year or two previously. Occasionally a new artist or performer will be introduced to the public, with high hopes for a rising career. And of course, fall sports start up.

Some lives, unhappily, are stuck in gloom and resentment, and we therapists deal with some of them. The end of summer and the beginning of autumn inevitably have strong feelings attached, e.g., hope or pessimism, fresh initiatives or stale repetitions, friendships or confrontations -- all get intensified as the seasons change.

During summertime, hard work may be postponed, as some of us float along in a near-idyllic existence where the usual difficulties of life can be pushed aside to make room for all the different ways we have of enjoying ourselves during the summer’s “time out,” and which may even bring us precious moments when we feel “outside of time.” Finally, as the summer winds down and the free days of August shift into the back-to-work of September, we have to shift our emotional gears. This brings ambitious challenges for some and heightened conflicts for others.

We meet people we haven’t seen since before the summer, and some of them (and some of us) appear with noticeable changes: a new beard or gained weight—or the opposite, or perhaps a new hairstyle or clothing style. We may rejoice at some of the changes, and deplore (silently) others. We may hope that our own changes will be appreciated. Change happens all the time, but perhaps most dramatically at the transition from summer freedoms to fall schedules.

For those clients/patients who were dependently attached to us, the hiatus of our vacations only increases their separation anxiety. When they resume their regular appointments, we may receive strong messages of their neediness or their anger, or both.

Our patients/clients have often postponed their hard tasks, just like the rest of us. While some have

used the summer to make real gains and consolidations, others are fraught with conflict and fear. Do they dare even to imagine that they can make progress this fall? Can their troubled psychic equilibrium tolerate even a fleeting fantasy of better days to come? Can they have hope? When this is the issue, and they need to persist in the face of repeated self-doubts, our steady relationship with them may be all that sustains them, helping them to “hang in there.”

As therapists, we have a delicate balance to maintain with our clients/patients, as the new season begins. We want to encourage them, subtly or openly, and increase their optimism, without setting them up for a fall by fostering unrealistic expectations. Where they are eager and excited, we still need to remind them, gently, of the predictable difficulties they will face – but without discouraging them.

Asking them “And how will you handle . . . ?” conveys a positive belief in them, instead of objectively pointing out that their ongoing conflicts should not be ignored in their new enthusiasms. If the autumn opportunities fail to stimulate their endeavors, we can work to deepen our understanding of their resistance to change.

When autumn rolls around, and patient/client new beginnings often clash with their old difficulties, their therapists are operating from their own summer experiences and fall ideas, and these are often positive, but sometimes not so. How we deal with our own hoped-for plans and mixed feelings about the fall will inevitably have some impact on how we go about starting up a new season of professional psychotherapy.

Whatever our own summer experiences were, how do we keep our hopes up? How do we acknowledge our own limitations, and rein in some of our fantasies of proud fall achievements – and still persist with legitimate optimism with our profession and the personal projects and relationships that give us so much meaning and satisfaction? What activities can we find that will help to keep alive our best intentions and insights from the summer?

As August ends and September begins, everyone reacts to the change. We all talk about how the weather is changing, but we have *feelings* about the opportunities and difficulties that are now facing us. It is good that we have this chance every year to begin again, or to begin new things. It is good to be able to say with Emily Dickinson, “I dwell in possibility.”

Furthermore, human beings tend to watch themselves more closely when they are starting something new. “Just look at that! Look at how I (you) just did that! That’s something I (you) need to remember.” Such self-awareness is vital to our continued well-being. One of the most important things we do all year is to help ourselves and our clients/patients navigate the emotionally loaded transition from summertime to the new fall season. It is a key time for having hope, persistence, and self-awareness.

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