

Women Discover Orgasm

Lonnie Barbach



**THE FINAL
SESSIONS AND
FOLLOW-UP**

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The Final Sessions and Follow-up

Termination Plans

Preparation for termination should be started by the eighth session. Most group members voice a wish to continue after the ten sessions when the subject of termination first arises. The women are generally very invested in the group and quite unhappy about the end coming so soon. However, after preparing themselves for the end of the group and the homework progression to follow afterward, the women feel less dependent on the group process and look forward to spending time working on their own.

Even the women who have not yet experienced orgasm with a partner are usually much less worried about this aspect of their sexuality than they were when they began the group. They no longer feel abnormal and they generally understand the importance of sexual communication and the steps they need to take in order to be orgasmic with a partner. The knowledge that they can join another group to assist them in continuing the process is comforting. However, most women opt to work on their own for a period of time before

deciding to join another group. Some groups do continue to meet regularly with or without the leader, but usually most of the women prefer a hiatus. A few may decide individually either to begin another form of therapy or to wait until the follow-up session to determine how best to proceed.

The Final Sessions

The eighth, ninth, and tenth sessions resemble the preceding sessions. However, by this time, the women's homework assignments are quite diversified. Some are doing partner exercises; others may be focusing on changing masturbatory positions and stroking techniques; still others may be beginning to use vaginal inserts and carrying out the initial partner assignments in fantasy during masturbation. Perhaps one woman has not yet experienced her first orgasm and is concentrating on the appropriate exercises to attain this goal.

By the ninth session the women are sufficiently skilled in using the tools they have acquired through participating in the group to begin planning a homework exercise progression to help them reach any additional sexual goals they may have. They are now realistic about their sexual objectives, knowledgeable about the ways to attain them, and familiar with the key principle of small steps under conditions that minimize risk and reduce the pressure to perform. Therefore, I instruct them to write out a series of homework assignments that they can work on until the follow-up session. The exercises are to be made explicit, with the understanding that for every goal set, the next assignment in the progression is not to be undertaken until success has been experienced with its predecessor.

The tenth session is devoted partly to reviewing the women's future sexual goals and planning the course of action to be taken after the group has ended. It is not uncommon for group members to experience a setback around the ninth or tenth session. Anxious about termination, women who were reliably orgasmic may abruptly lose this ability, and procedures that worked before may suddenly fail. Predicting this possibility in the ninth session can reduce its likelihood. If there are setbacks, however, simple reassurance can relieve the anxiety, freeing the natural sexual responses once again.

Therapist: You're upset. Miraculously, on the last session, your orgasms have stopped.

Josephine: I do everything more intensely, but nothing happens.

Abby: I have the same thing. I made love yesterday and I could have been doing something else. And I masturbated this week and old Fanny Hill didn't even do it. And I would sit there and masturbate and it felt good and I thought, "Oh, Jesus." And I wasn't getting anywhere. And I was doing it longer, too.

B.J.: Is this common?

Therapist: Unfortunately, yes. Very common. I don't know what's going on with you, but all I know is that in many groups a couple of things happen. One is the sixth session slump, which you all had in the fifth session. But there tends to be a session right around there where everybody gets really depressed. And then around the ninth or tenth session, people will come in and all of a sudden their successes will have all turned into total failures. Orgasms have stopped and everything.

B.J.: But why?

Therapist: Well, all I know is that there is frequently that response when the group is about to end, a feeling that it's been a good experience but, nobody's in a situation where everything is so solid that they feel 100 percent absolutely certain, because it's a short group. And everybody's anxieties come out at the end, like, "Oh, my God, the group's not going to be here. Now what? I've lost everything." It's very common.

B.J.: Well, what should I do? Something's happening, but I don't climax.

Therapist: But you always have climaxed even if they were small. Now, you're not having anything, right? That's got to be related to the group. Orgasms don't stop just like that. I'm not really worried about it in the long term. I've just never known anybody to get to a place and all of a sudden totally lose it. I'm not worried about it coming back.

B.J.: What do I do in the meantime?

Therapist: Take a vacation. Don't push it.

Abby: Just because for a week you can't have an orgasm does not mean that you're not going to have another one. Just flip-flop your thinking around to say you can have an orgasm and just take a little vacation. I started thinking, "I'm never going to have another orgasm." I could get myself in such a state doing this if I let myself. And I just thought, "I'm under so much pressure right now, about everything else that has nothing to do with sex." I know what to do. We all know what to do now. We have all the tools. You know what to do for yourself. You just have to have a little faith.

Therapist: But there is that real concern. Sometimes for six months following the group everyone does just fine, and then there may be a decline for some. And then, some of the people go right back up again. Some people go up and down. If they expect to have some downs and realize that downs are part of the ball game, then as soon as they go down, they say, "Oh, I'm down here. Now, let's see, what are the things I can do to feel better again." Then they can get back up out of it.

Jenny: I see a lot of things that are ups and downs, so why should sex be any different?

Therapist: Exactly.

Progress after termination of the group is highly dependent upon the expectations created by the leaders. Throughout the group the leaders have stressed the importance of reducing performance pressure and tuning in to bodily processes. For example, if a woman does her homework on a day when she has no interest in sex, she probably will not experience orgasm. Consequently, the women are encouraged to listen to their bodies and act accordingly. As the last part of the previous transcript illustrates, the leaders prepare the group members for reality. They let them know that women frequently experience a lessening of sexual interest after the group terminates due to fatigue resulting from the concentrated emphasis on sex during this period. Likewise, the women can expect to experience a lack of sexual interest during other periods in their lives.

Sexual problems arise most commonly during times of personal and interpersonal stress. Even though the feelings experienced during such times will be reminiscent of feelings experienced before the group began, they are not the same because the women have developed the necessary skills to deal with the sexual difficulties. Once they realize that a sexual problem exists, they can again utilize the tools

acquired in the group. If they lose perspective during particularly difficult times, they can return to therapy for some additional sessions.

Referrals

Many women in preorgasmic groups make too much progress too rapidly to integrate fully all the changes they have experienced in ten sessions and further therapy—group, individual, or couple— may be required to solidify the integration process. I always make certain that each woman has an appropriate referral if the need is indicated. Less than 5 percent of the women decide to participate in a second group. Less than 15 percent desire individual or couple therapy for nonsexual issues. However, approximately 40 percent of the women in committed relationships seek a few sessions of conjoint or group sex therapy with their partners.

Women's Group Follow-up

I have a follow-up session for all of my groups. The post-group meeting serves as a reunion: the women get together again and see how their lives have progressed since the group ended. They can share the problems they have encountered, as well as any techniques they have learned or developed; discussion in this session generally extends beyond sexuality to other issues of personal and relationship growth.

The group reunion can be a powerful therapy session. The sense of positive competition serves as an incentive to the women to persist in their own sexual pursuits. Those who have fallen behind often feel renewed hope as the result of hearing about the progress of others; whereas those who are moving ahead at a reasonable pace are reinforced for their continued growth.

The impact of the follow-up session depends upon the amount of time that has elapsed since the conclusion of the group. As has been noted, most of the women experience a lessening of interest in working on their sexuality in the four to six weeks immediately following the tenth group session. Although the women continue to feel pleased about being able to masturbate to orgasm, the frequency with which they masturbate generally has declined. Consequently, if the follow-up is scheduled for less than two months after the tenth session, many of the women will still be in the midst of a post-group

slump and a reunion will serve only to generate a sense of hopelessness among the members. However, by two months post-group, the women's natural interest in sexuality usually has returned. A reunion at this time encourages the women to continue working on the homework exercises in a more diligent and aware fashion.

For the therapists, the group follow-up is an opportunity to appraise the women's progress after termination of treatment. In general, the women not only maintain the changes but continue to increase their sexual satisfaction long after the tenth session. This extra meeting also enables the therapists to provide the information, guidance, support, or therapeutic intervention needed by women who are having problems with their sexuality. The follow-up is often the best point at which to make an appropriate referral. The woman has had the opportunity to work on her own and, if she has had difficulty, she may be more receptive to seeking additional therapy than she was at the tenth session.

Couples' Group Follow-up

If the women and their partners so desire, a two- to four-session couples' group can begin either after the tenth group session or after the follow-up. I have tried both schedules and prefer to run the couples' group immediately after the women's group since there is less time for problems to develop and solidify.

For the most part, the concerns of the male partners occupy the couples' group sessions. Most of the men have been keeping their own concerns private in an attempt to be helpful to their partners; thus, they may be somewhat resentful. Reopening direct communication by having the partners check out their assumptions is a primary aim of the couples' sessions.

Bruce had not been initiating sex because he did not want to impose on his wife, Alice. Alice had not minded this situation since she had been concentrating on sex so intently during the previous two months. When Bruce voiced his needs, Alice was happy to accommodate. Although she had not felt like initiating sex, she was receptive to his suggestion. She had been operating under the misconception that work stress and other problems were causing Bruce's apparent lack of sexual interest. The simple discussion that took place in the group clarified the issue.

Another topic dominating the couple sessions is the worry the men have about their own sexuality—for example, occasional experiences of being unable to ejaculate or of ejaculating too rapidly. Generally, the men also desire more explicit information regarding the sexual preferences of their partners to enable them to become more proficient lovers.

For the most part, the men enjoy meeting the other men and their partners and give support when it seems to be needed, usually by sharing common concerns. I am always surprised by the relative ease with which the men discuss their intimate sexual problems and feelings. This openness may occur so readily because the women kept the men apprised of the content of the group sessions throughout the group process. Even though the men were not physically present, they felt emotionally involved. In any case, the sessions are attended with interest and generally are sufficient to meet the couples' needs. (However, conjoint sessions may also be necessary when changes in the sexual relationship have created an extensive disequilibrium in a couple's system.)