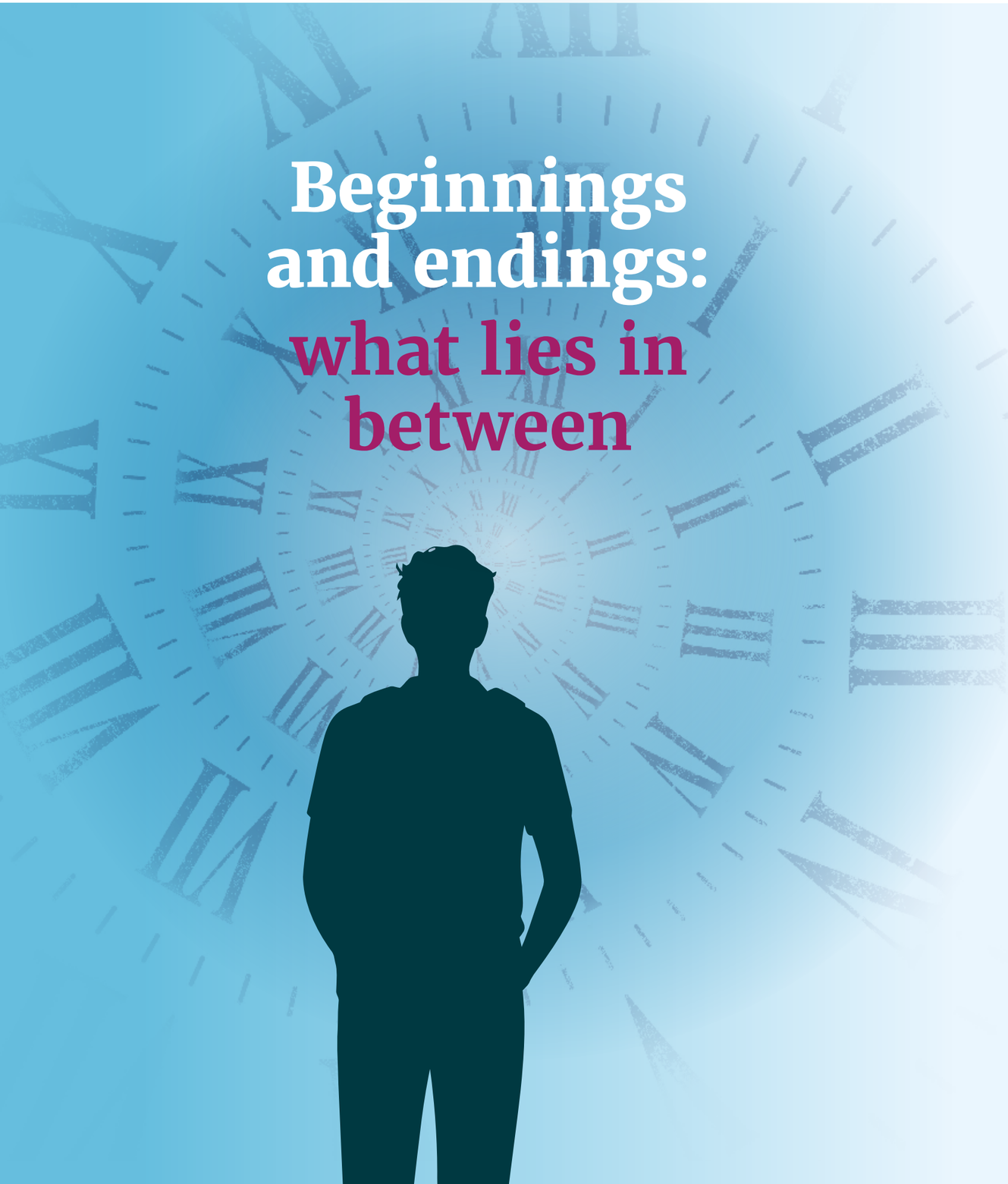
Beginnings and endings: what lies in between



Clare Myatt takes a somatically informed approach to exploring the 'good enough' ending in her integrated coach–therapy practice

The day a departing client slammed the door as they left my office – deliberately, loudly, defiantly – while muttering an expletive under their breath, I knew I could potentially be in trouble. Would they make a formal complaint about me? That they didn't may have been simply because they recovered, walking away from what was, to them, just another routinely slammed door; or perhaps they thought it wasn't worth the hassle; or they were simply too busy; or… who knows? But I was left shaken, with a deep uncertainty about my competence and ability as a practitioner.

This incident led me to question my skills around this important phase of coach-therapy, and I viewed the experience as an invitation to attend to a specific area of growth.

An opportunity for growth

Dedicated to lifelong professional and personal development, I explored the incident at depth with both my therapist and supervisor, determined to understand what had happened. I came to appreciate that endings come in all shapes and sizes – from rewarding and skilful (perfect in their own way) to disconcerting, disappointing and frustrating (when a client simply disappears, for example), with a variety of 'good enough' endings lying somewhere in-between.

This opportunity for growth coincided with the beginning of my work with a new therapist. We made a good initial connection, the fit was conducive to the work I wanted to undertake, and we had two sessions together. At our third meeting, following a week's holiday, she shared with me that she had made the entirely unexpected decision to retire early. I admired the integrity of her next step: she suggested either that I transition to an alternative practitioner, given that we had only just begun working together; or we proceed with a deliberate focus on our completion a year hence. While surprised and disappointed, I welcomed the chance to personally experience how a skilful ending would unfold from the client perspective, yet with my observing practitioner hat on. It was the perfect time for us both.

> **A somatically-informed integrated practice has a beginning, middle and end, reflecting every cycle across a lifetime. We are born, we live, we die. It's as (painfully) simple as that**

From the outset, then, my therapist and I imagined how I would metaphorically leave our final session. Would the door be left ajar, with the possibility of return? No, because she was retiring. In the face of that slammed door, together, we wanted to achieve the exact opposite – a simple and deliberate gentle clicking into place, indicating a successful completion, satisfying on both sides.

Therefore, while our sessions were not necessarily about the ending ahead, it was constantly held in the background in an implicit yet tangible way. I explored with fresh eyes endings that I had experienced over my lifetime, developing a deeper understanding of their impact – mostly difficult, not least of which was losing my best friend at the age of 17 in a tragic and traumatic accident. Small wonder that endings – whether personal or professional – were such a challenge for me.
As a therapist, I was already familiar with the concept of co-dependence and the roles of saviour and rescuer,[1] but our sessions revealed another layer beneath the obvious.
As I correlated my personal and professional experiences of endings, a series of signposts emerged, ones I hadn't until then realised were at play in my work with clients (see Sol's story). Given my therapist's Focusing orientation,[2,3] we consistently dipped into the felt-sense of 'all that', which dovetailed beautifully with my own experience in somatic coach-therapy.[4]

Focusing[2] and Focusing-oriented therapy[3] were originated by Eugene Gendlin, a colleague of Carl Rogers, in response to his abiding philosophical curiosity about why and how people change, both within and outside therapy. At the risk of over-simplification, Focusing can best be explained by imagining our emotions and feelings like an iceberg. What we see on the surface is a small proportion of the iceberg, the vast majority lying below the water level. Familiar and habitual feelings sit above the water level and a vast array of (often unexamined) feelings lie beneath the surface. Focusing involves a moment-to-moment deep exploration of what is generally inaccessible below the surface, providing we pause and use our naturally occurring *felt-sense* (this being Gendlin's phrase for what can be felt if attended to).[2,3]

Somatic coaching fits ideally with Focusing because both approaches are concerned primarily with accessing the wisdom of the body. In this context, *body* includes the environment we have been exposed to and shaped by in the past, as well as that of the current environment.[4]

Beginnings, middles and endings: the cycle of life

Before going any further, I want to clarify that I integrate therapy and coaching in my offer to clients, being clear in our original contracting conversation and written agreement that we will explore what I call the *depth of therapy* and the *breadth of coaching,* as needed. An outside observer during my sessions might assess that some sessions look more like therapy and some look more like coaching, yet the underpinning is always integrative. With my clients, there is an implicit understanding and agreement that we will flow wherever attention is needed. After all, the container in which I hold the work is somatic: I'm concerned with a client's whole self, their embodied presence (or lack thereof), how their history has shaped their body (literally and metaphorically), what stories their body carries and how that manifests, what they can achieve in the world and what skills would benefit

from refinement or expansion. As a somatic practitioner, my concern is with these types of questions: what are the sensations and contractions underpinning beliefs, behaviours and embodiment? Where and how are they being experienced? For me, separating coaching from therapy would be akin to disconnecting the head and intellect from the rest of the body, keeping its wisdom at a distance; hence an integrative view.

Consequently, distinguishing between how therapy ends and coaching concludes is not my area of expertise, and I will leave that discussion to those who are better equipped. Rather, I focus on how a *somatically-informed* integrated practice has a beginning, middle and end, reflecting every cycle across a lifetime. We are born, we live, we die. It's as (painfully) simple as that. Relationships are the same – they begin, they endure for a period of time (whether brief or sustained) and eventually come to a conclusion, whether the ending is desired, uninvited, messy or neat. In this way, an overview of how the relationship between practitioner and client evolves from beginning to end has particular relevance.

The notion of everything having a beginning, middle and end comes from somatic coach Dr Richard Strozzi-Heckler's theory of the Rhythm of Energy.[5] I have been studying with him for several decades, becoming certified as a Strozzi master somatic coach in 2000.

The Rhythm of Energy conceptualises the nature of the cycle of life, from first entering the world to our departure; hence, its relevance to the cycle of relationship between client and practitioner. At its simplest, any engagement between client and practitioner involves a process of beginning, middle and end. Paying attention to that process energetically, beyond the intellectual markers of session numbers, inspired me to view the nature of the engagement quite differently. In the case of a fixed number of sessions, it's easy to count and know where we are but in the case of a longer-term engagement, this is a useful measuring tool: where are we *in the process*? Beyond opening sessions, have we approached the crux of the matter? If so, what else has been revealed that needs attention? Being aware in this way also opens the opportunity to pause for review more easily, with client and practitioner in a truly collaborative and co-creative process.

Strozzi-Heckler is careful to comment on what happens when we disregard this process:

'When we're out of touch with our Rhythm of Energy, we will usually react in one of three ways: we prematurely end something that has not yet been completed; we try to extend beyond what has already concluded and keep alive that which is complete; we contain the energy out of the fear of the emotion of completion.'[4] (p136)

I found this simplification of how endings can go awry helpful. I'd definitely experienced clients ending prematurely – at least from my perspective – and those who defaulted to dependency in the face of an approaching ending. I began to gain clarity on why some endings had gone well and others less so.

How the door closes: a deep dive into endings

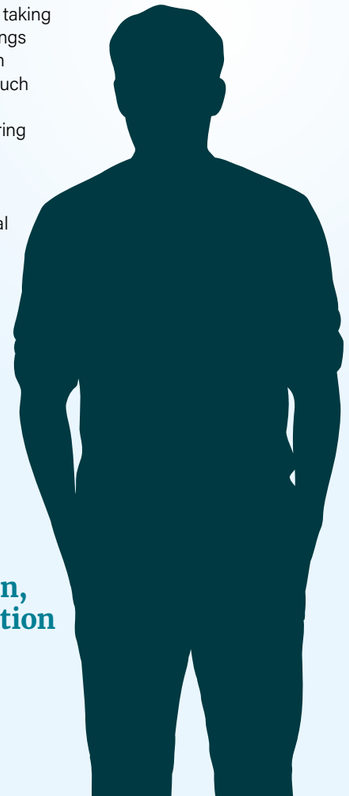
My research has made clear that whether you come from an integrative perspective like mine, or have a therapeutic or coaching orientation, the professional bodies such as BACP, International Coach Federation (ICF), and Association for Coaching (AC), etc. are all in general agreement: *the conclusion is best addressed from the very outset.* In addition to eliciting clients' goals and aspirations, does the arc of the work encompass a fixed number of sessions or something more open-ended? The former tends to be more straightforward to navigate, the latter more complex. Having said that, we've all likely experienced the classic 10-session coaching-oriented package concluding early, or extending well beyond our initial expectations. So, this begs the question: what is the *process* unfolding here? Can we stay shoulder to shoulder with our client, consistently and constantly assessing where we are, relying on professional assessment and collaborative conversations with them? Review, review, review.

My study of the terrain would be incomplete without regard to what constitutes a skilful ending in theory. I say *in theory* because there is always the possibility for things to go awry in the client's experience, no matter the practitioner's intention. BACP's *Ethical Framework*[6] and in particular the online article outlining what complaints tell us about endings, offer these 'key considerations for practice'.[7]

- Having the ending in sight – including regular reviews
- Being clear about the ending – is the engagement open-ended or time-limited?
- Understanding what ending means to the client, taking into account their previous experience with endings
- Readiness to end – ideally, mutually agreed upon
- Leaving the door open – interim or final ending such as retirement
- Changing the relationship – monitoring any blurring of boundaries.

This confirmed elements of the detailed case review I undertook in supervision. I noticed several themes emerging, the most significant being clients making the decision to leave, sometimes with clarity and intention, more often evidenced by a slow withdrawal, with appointments postponed or cancelled, allowing a gradual drift away from coach-therapy. Occasionally, a client would simply disappear, no drama building up to the event suggesting that kind of departure was imminent, an absolute evaporation. I've always found these the most disturbing because of the 'not knowing' how they are or what precipitated their decision – something that had unfolded in our meetings, or something else entirely? Supervision helped enormously in processing the emotion surrounding these experiences, ensuring they did not flow into my work in general.

> **Beyond any ethical obligation, we owe clients our full attention to making each ending as skilful as the context allows**



Sol's story: softening over-containment

When Sol started coach-therapy with me, I knew from the outset that our manner of completion would be significant. Having told his story multiple times to different practitioners, he had already done a lot of personal work before we began. His intention for our work was relationship focused – he tended to flit from one partner to another and wanted to make a commitment to his current partner. His story was poignant: his mother walked out on the family when he was eight, so he was shipped off to boarding school for the next 10 years. This was a very mixed experience – a new 'family' which both allowed for and had opinions about his sexual explorations, providing a mix of freedom and judgment. He was mentored by a teacher who had a life-ending heart attack when refereeing rugby at the tender age of 44… As you may imagine, none of these endings had been handled well at the time, but his prior therapeutic work had gone a long way towards healing these multiple losses.

A serious man in his 40s, Sol presented somatically with an underlying 'zipped-up-ness' that had the ability to soften with intention, which could also be described as being overly contained. We worked somatically on loosening the grip even further, intentionally allowing his heart to open with the possibility of admitting intimacy. He was responsive and made some real advancement. There came a time when we were 'done' with this chapter of his work, making way for him to enter couples therapy with his partner, which I strongly supported.

Aware it would be easy to simply pass the baton to the next therapist, transferring an implied trust, we could easily skip over a good enough ending… We explored the significance, the process, the for-the-sake-of-what, etc. and addressed the coming ending full-on. Would I have liked a few more sessions to go more deeply (mostly in support of his mother-loss)? Yes. And did we have adequate time to explore these facets? Yes again. Sol suggested that his partner join us for part of our last session. Initially I was unsure about such a move. Yet [his partner] had heard so much about me, and I had heard so much about him, that it felt right for him to join us to say hello and goodbye all at once. We closed on good terms and some years later he updated me with the welcome news of his marriage and potential for a family… I'm clear [with him that our work is] complete, yet welcome such an update.

The above case study is adapted from *How the Door Closes: Skilful Endings in Coaching and Therapy*, by Clare Myatt (Coaching International, 2026).[8]

The culmination of my deep dive into endings has been a book, which I hope will be of service to the profession.[8] Even though we don't tend to learn from others' mistakes, I hope to have shone a light on the essential nature of skilful endings to, at the very least, inspire greater self-reflection both in and out of supervision. Through a variety of case studies, the book explores the myriad endings I and other colleagues have experienced, alongside some significant signposts that now guide my approach to endings (including Strozzi-Heckler's Rhythm of Energy),[5] together with what constitutes skilful endings.

Of all the case studies in *How the Door Closes* I have chosen to share Sol's story – not because it ended badly, but because *it so easily could have* if I hadn't paid attention to precisely the things his own history had taught him to avoid.

That slammed door no longer haunts me, nor do I chase after doors clicking gently into place, because that simply isn't reality. Clients have agency in their own process, and no matter how good our intentions, there are always circumstances beyond our control that shape how an ending actually occurs. Beyond any ethical obligation, we owe clients our full attention to making each ending as skilful as the context allows. We also owe ourselves that same attention, because there will always be endings for us to face, in the practice room and beyond. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Myatt is a senior somatic coach-therapist working internationally with clients in person and online. She helps people navigate challenge and change with grounded, body-based awareness and compassion. Her second book, *How the Door Closes: Skilful Endings in Coaching and Therapy* explores the complexity of bringing professional relationships to a close and is available on her website and on Amazon.
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