On Fixing and Being Fixed: Metaphors in Psychotherapy

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The term “to fix” is explored with its multiplicity of meanings, and its relevance to such clinical issues as transference and resistance are discussed along with positive and negative denotations and connotations of the term. Cases are also presented to illustrate both positive and negative uses.

INTRODUCTION

The term “to fix” has a multitude of meanings, both positive and negative, which have significance in psychoanalytic therapy. The authors would like to address several of these meanings and their clinical application, offering two examples of how the term appears and can be handled in a therapeutic context.

Perhaps the most common and popular meaning of “to fix” is to restore to a proper condition, to repair, remedy, or heal. “To fix” is also to make better, to take care of, implying protection and nurturance. Also relevant are meanings such as refuel, feed, make safe and secure. The need to fix implies that a former state of wholeness has somehow been shattered or damaged. It is also associated in childhood with the expression, “Uh-oh—something has fallen, or broken.” A piece, or pieces are missing and the whole is no longer perfect. In emotional terms, the inner state of bliss, or status quo, is marred and there is a search, or directed effort to reunify, or fix it. Within this context, an addiction may occur to recurrent efforts at restoring, or recreating, the original state of unity, as was implied by Freud in the concept of repetition compulsion (1914, 1920, 1926). Thus, fixing can be both reparative and creative in serving either one of two ends: (1) making something new which feels like the old; (2) making something work, which never had previously. In the latter case the focus is on
the future anticipation of something which is better, while in the former instance the focus is upon recreating the past. In either case, the outcome is never identical with the intention. In the act of fixing a new entity emerges which is never totally identical with or free of the past.

“To Fix”: Positive Implications

To fix denotes bringing together, and in therapeutic terms it implies an interaction between healer and the one who presents himself to be healed. Thus, in a dream, a fixer of any nature is always suggestive of the analyst (Steiner, 1937). There is also an indicated reciprocity in roles. Does one become more whole oneself as one heals another? Or, alternatively, does one learn how to fix while in the process of being fixed? The latter implies the presence of mastery as part of the healing process. The former denotes that the core of shared humanity forms the basis for a never ending process of search for integrity and meaning. The repair of oneself, then, could only be conducted in the presence of another. It is the bringing together of two or more individuals, or groups, which assures the emergence of a new whole which could not be achieved without the presence of another, real or imaginary. Winnicott (1965) claims that the good mother is only “good enough,” always leaving a space for the child to grow in his strivings towards integration. Within this context, the perfect mother is stifling and smothers the infant’s intuitive strivings for mastery.

“To Fix”: Negative Implications

“To fix” has negative implications when the object relations are those of a power struggle, where one party imposes his will upon another. Thus, “to fix” implies the removal of sexuality. It means to spay or castrate, to remove the sexual procreative function, to make sterile in the female and effeminate in the male by removing sexual parts, causing a loss of muscle tone and a softening of tissue (e.g., a capon is a castrated rooster who loses its muscle tone, puts on more weight, and is softer for eating purposes).

Another negative implication of “to fix” is to avenge oneself, or to get even with, punish, or chastise. The sadomasochistic implication of these connotations is clear. Thus, depending upon the context, to fix means to help and to hurt, to benefit and to hinder.

Still another negative meaning of “to fix” is to be paralyzed, unable to move, stuck, transfixed, or to render stiff, firm, rigid and permanent. In another negative instance, “to fix” suggests a dilemma, a difficult situation, an awkward position, and a search for smoothing, e.g., a shot, an injection of a narcotic to make one feel better. Fixated; or a fixation, suggests an arrest, or stoppage. In