

Ep #39: Empowering Recovery: The Role of Clinician Happiness in Rehabilitation



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With Your Host

Heather Branscombe

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Welcome to *Clinicians Creating Impact*, a show for physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists looking to take the next step in their careers and make a real difference in the lives of their clients. If you're looking to improve the lives of neurodiverse children and families with neurological-based challenges, grow your own business, or simply show up to help clients, this is the show for you.

I'm Heather Branscombe, Therapist, Certified Coach, Clinical Director, and Owner of Abilities Neurological Rehabilitation. I have over 25 years of experience in both the public and private sectors, and I'm here to help you become the therapist you want to be, supporting people to work towards their dreams and live their best lives. You ready to dive in? Let's go.

Hi there, friend. Thanks so much for coming to listen today. This month has been a big family birthday month at my house because two of the five members of my immediate family have had birthdays in September, which has been amazing. We have a tradition of gathering for a meal for birthdays. So it could be either at a restaurant, at home or with takeout depending on what the actual birthday person prefers.

It's really fun to see how the differences of our individual personalities as a family reflect how this family tradition plays out. And so this month we had homemade Kawaii burgers for one meal and takeout pizza from our favorite pizza place for another meal. To me, it's so much less about what we actually eat or even where we eat it, but really the most important part is that we gather together as a family to do it.

And as my children are all now in their early 20s, it's really fun to see that they look forward to this family tradition as much as I do. I think one of the main reasons we all like it is even though we have this consistency of a family tradition, innate in that is our power to choose. And that makes sense because

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we as human beings love to be able to have a sense of control in our lives through choosing.

So today I thought I would apply that same concept to our work as clinicians and take some time to give you my take after more than 25 years in this industry, and why I'm so passionate about this take today. Now, this may be an unpopular opinion, but I don't think we focus nearly enough on the health, especially the mental health, of the clinician in the workplace. So today, I want to talk about why it matters, why it can be a challenge and the ripple effect that I see that it has.

So why does the mental health of a clinician matter? And I can think of one main reason. And that's the reason that the mission at Abilities, the company that I founded and now run, is to create an outstanding staff experience and an outstanding client experience. And that is because I truly believe that happy and empowered staff can show up and create a bigger impact for the clients that they serve.

So when I was doing my MBA, one of the stories that really stood out to me was how the staff at Nordstrom were given an extraordinary amount of authority to make the customer happy. So unlike a typical clerk at a typical retail store, sales associates at Nordstrom, as it was explained to me, have a huge amount of autonomy to actually help their customers.

Now, I'm not a Nordstrom regular by any means. And I can't even comment if this is still true. But really what struck me from that story was the creativity that some of the associates would use to help their customers.

So, for example, according to one story that the customer confirms, a Nordstrom once moved into a new location that had formerly been a tire store. The customer brought a set of tires into that store to return them. And then without a word of the mix up, the tires were accepted and the customer was fully refunded the purchase price. I love that story.

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The principle I get from this is that those who are working with the customer, or client in our case, knows what they need most. Especially because they're actually asking the client, and should have the autonomy to help to facilitate that. And I know from basic neuroanatomy and neurophysiology that we have access to the higher parts of our brain, that part that's involved with creativity, organization and planning, when our nervous system is more grounded and when we are less stressed.

So optimizing mental health for clinicians really allows the clinicians to access that part of the brain, which then allows them to truly help those that they serve. And so this is why mindfulness and the mental health of clinicians is so important to me. And there's a few reasons for that.

My non-exhaustive list would include the following. First, there's the lived experience of the individual clinician and how that affects the resiliency of their own nervous system. Secondly, there are the systems that we work in and engage in that prioritize the health and safety of our patients or our clients.

And what I mean by that is that health college guidelines that many of us work under and ethical frameworks are very important. And when we think about those guidelines and those frameworks, it also doesn't include the values, preferences and needs of the clinician, and that's okay.

But we're taught as clinicians to think about the guidelines and the framework in training. And we don't think about our own values, preferences and needs. And then we don't focus on those values, preferences and needs after either, in many cases.

Client-centered care is important. I think that I could be on record by saying, of course, client-centered care is important. And I don't think that anyone would think that client-centered care should be at the expense of the clinician. The issue is we just don't think about clinicians' needs often as part of the equation.

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And thirdly, I would say burnout and unhappiness often means that there are less clinicians working in the field, which serves neither clients or patients nor our fellow clinicians.

So what should we do about it? So having worked on this really specifically in the past 15 years as I have started and grown Abilities, I'm here to say there really are no easy answers. I'm here in the trenches with you trying to figure that out myself. And even for myself at Abilities, it really is still a work in progress.

What I would share is the following. First, you really want to prioritize your self-care as part of being a good clinician. And when I say self-care, that's beyond bubble baths and pedicures, although those are both amazing, but really focusing on your own mental and emotional health as part of your clinical toolkit.

Secondly, you want to think about your support systems. Be that friends, family, employers, coaches, therapists, and any other mental health professionals that you know and that you trust. And third, you want to think about the autonomy that you have wherever you can. It really is the single greatest thing we can do to empower ourselves and to empower other people.

So what that looks like for myself and how I show up for the clinicians that work with me at Abilities is things like the compensation structure, giving autonomy around caseload, how, when and if they use rehab assistance, and really speaking openly about mental and emotional health as a team.

And what this does, is it creates a ripple effect. And that ripple effect is happy clinicians that can show up and use their amazing brains to work with those they serve to deliver amazing results. I really do believe that it helps shape the future of our industry. And there are changes happening in our industry all the time. I know you see it, because I see it as well. And that's why it's so important.

So my challenge to you today is to see where you, as an individual clinician, no matter what your scope of work or practice is, see where the autonomy is in your work today, especially in those areas that feel more challenging to you. And where can you provide that autonomy to others that you work with?

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If you get stuck, please reach out. I've been thinking about this actively for 15 years, so I'm more than happy to help you. Please let me know how it goes because your stories of impact are really what keeps me going and why I will forever shout this from the rooftops. Have an amazing week and take care. See you soon.

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