

Ep #44: Why Befriend Your Nervous System at Work? With Leah Davidson (Part 2)



Full Episode Transcript

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. Thank you so much for coming to listen to this episode today. I'm really grateful to be able to introduce part 2 of my guest episode with Leah Davidson. One of the things that I really enjoyed talking about with Leah was just that we talk so much about the nervous system for our clients, and we don't often think about how important the nervous system is for ourselves.

So if you haven't checked out the first part of this guest episode, I would really encourage you to go back and just take a quick listen to that. And that will help you to understand the why. And once you understand the why, this is part 2 where we can talk about how to befriend your nervous system. I really enjoyed this. I've taken some of these actions and I'm actually incorporating them in my work right now and I'm really loving the results, so I hope you find the same. And with that, I'll give you part 2 of my guest episode with Leah Davidson.

Heather: All right, you have me convinced, Leah, I'm going to befriend my nervous system.

Leah: You're going to befriend your nervous system.

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Heather: You may be preaching to the choir.

Leah: I know, I know.

Heather: So if I'm a clinician and I want to befriend my nervous system, where do I even start? What do I even do?

Leah: Okay, I know. Well, okay, the way, again, this is the framework that I like using. I say to them, okay, you want to befriend your nervous system? You're going to join the nervous system befriending team.

Heather: Oh, I love that.

Leah: And when you join the team, there are three things that you're signing up for. The first thing is you're committing to daily practice and training. And daily practice and training, so it's not all fun and games. You've got to be doing some work for it. The second thing is, obviously, you're going to want to play the games, you're going to want to be in the moment.

So you're going to have to be trained for that and probably be familiar with what our strategy is and so forth. And thirdly, at the end of the games, we're going to have little debriefs to see how everything went. So that's what you're committing to when you're joining the team of the nervous system.

Now, practice is something that needs to be done on a daily basis because we often just don't know what we're doing. That zone of resilience that we have, it can change in size. We want to be as resilient as possible, which means we sometimes have to train ourselves.

Many of us have experienced, or all of us have experienced trauma in our life. We may have different adversities going on. We may have different personality characteristics, maybe challenging relationships. All these things will impact how wide our zone of resilience actually is.

And so we need to be doing things on a daily basis to try to get our zone as wide as possible. So things like movement and breath work and meditation, those are

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all things that will help us increase our zone of resilience, help us to feel safer in our life.

Now, coincidentally, the other thing that it helps us do is a lot of these things help us release stress out of our system. So really clean up our stress cycle on a daily basis. So there are these things that you're going to do. Not exciting things, you know, getting out and going for a walk. And, of course, there's the main things we've got to be taking care of: our nutrition, we've got to take care of our sleep, we've got to take care of movement in general.

So we have some basic pillars we want to do. And then it's just like every single day am I doing some exercise? Am I doing something where I'm connecting with somebody else? Am I working on my breathing? And am I practicing techniques that I know will be beneficial for me when I'm in the game? Because then the next phase is what do you do when you're in the game? When you're in the game –

Heather: I just want to pause here just before you go onto the game. As you were talking, I kind of had the devil's advocate kind of come. On the one hand, I could hear some clinicians who might say, "What? I need to do all this work just to show up as a clinician?"

But I think, and I'd love to get your input, the other piece is you're not only just doing this to show up to create a bigger impact for your client, you're going to create a bigger impact for yourself. That increasing your zone of resilience is going to be as impactful for you, if not more so than it is going to be for your clients as well.

Leah: Yeah, I would almost look at it, like all these things that I'm talking about, you are doing them for you. And everything that you do for you that benefits you, spills over onto your clients, onto your kids, onto your partner. You're going to be able to do all those things. It is an investment in you.

And I'll say that sometimes what happens is we don't set aside that time. So a lot of practice, it can just be looked at by some people as self-care. Well, what

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happens when somebody doesn't take care of themselves? They end up hitting a point where the body or mentally or physically it's like, well, you haven't been taking care of me and something's going to happen where you're going to be forced to take care of me.

And that's why we do see so many clinicians, so many people in burnout, because essentially that's what happens if you haven't been taking care of yourself. And you cannot keep burning the fuel without replenishing it because if you run out of fuel, you will burn you.

So I do look at it like joining this nervous system team, it's kind of a gift that you're going to give to yourself. And then it's a gift that you're going to be able to extend to everybody else who is sort of in your circle of influence. Your clients, your boss, your co-workers, your children, your neighbors, everybody around you will be able to benefit from that.

Heather: Yeah, amazing. All right, and now we're going to the game.

Leah: So now we're going to the game. And the game is just essentially our everyday living. Like what is it in this moment? Like, it's great, I know that when I feel really stressed during the day or at the end of the day, I can go for a really nice walk and I can burn off some of that energy. I also know that doing some breath work and doing some meditation is really helpful for me.

But when I'm sitting face to face with a client, I can't exactly be like, "I'm feeling a little charged right now. Would you excuse me a moment while I go run around the block and then I'll come back refreshed." I can't do that. So I have to be doing things in the moment that I can maintain my attention with you, but I can also let my nervous system know that it's okay and that I'm okay.

And essentially what it is, is self-regulation. We need to learn how to self-regulate in the moment. The simplest way I teach it, and it's what I taught when I did the presentation at The Life Coach School, is I said there's three components to self-regulation. The first component is to establish safety.

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This seems kind of bizarre, but it comes back to what I explained at the beginning. And this is why it is important for you to understand your nervous system, your nervous system is constantly scanning, safety, danger, safety, danger, and doesn't know the difference between a real threat and a perceived threat. So if it perceives threat, it thinks that you are in danger and it is going to be on high alert. And there's no way your body is going to relax if it thinks that it is in danger.

So you have to, in the moment, establish safety. And that just may be, I mean, if I'm sitting here in front of you I wouldn't say this out loud, but I would be saying it in my head, "Leah, are you safe?" And not, do I feel safe? But am I physically and empirically safe in this moment? Not maybe like 20 minutes ago, or something could happen in five minutes. But you and I, we're recording this podcast right now, I'm sitting here, I am 100% safe right now, physically.

So that's the first thing I just did. I checked my environment. I checked around me. I know that I'm safe and then I get to step two. And step two is, okay, my brain knows that it's safe and just communicated down that I'm safe. But my body is like, "I don't feel safe. I've got some tension. I've got some stress. You just said something to me that I took as a criticism, and so my heart's pounding, I'm feeling a little tension."

So you've got to get in your body. And when you get in your body, you are getting in the present moment. That's the fastest way to get into the present, is get in the body. Your brain can go to the past, your brain can go to the future, but you're going to get in your body. So you're just going to notice, okay, yeah, I know I am safe, but my body doesn't feel so safe. There's some tension. There's some discomfort. There's some stress.

Which leads us to the third thing, which is to then acutely relax your body. And a fast way to do it, I call it the rag doll, is where you just let go. And if you're sitting in front of a client, you're not going to be so dramatic as just totally letting go as a rag doll, but you can. You're softening your shoulders. You're maybe dropping your hands by the side, maybe leaning back a little bit. So you are relaxing your body.

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And the reason we want to relax our body is that a relaxed body cannot house stress. We can't house stress, we can't house anxiety when we are relaxed. And if you don't believe me, try yelling at your kids in a relaxed body. It doesn't work. Like you need tension. You need some hyper arousal if you're going to yell. But just relax and you're going to be able to let go of that stress.

So then you have, I know I'm safe. I know I don't feel safe, but I'm getting in my body. I'm relaxing my body. Now your CEO can come back online. Now I can re-engage with whatever it is that you're telling me. When I felt the agitation come up, and asking yourself and do you feel it, one and two can be interchangeable, because sometimes I may be sitting there and somebody says something to me and I sort of feel my blood pressure rising a little bit. So that's that feeling.

So I'm in my body. Oh, that's interesting. I'm feeling a little bit of agitation. Are you safe? I'm totally safe, Leah. Okay, I'm just going to relax my body. And you keep doing that over and over and over. You're checking in with yourself. When you feel your energy mounting, you check for safety, you get in your body, you relax your body, you bring it back down. And we just keep doing that over and over.

And as we do that, we're actually widening our zone. We're anchored in safety. So that's how you deal with game day. And then the third, debrief, is just sort of at the end of the day, you want to celebrate all those times that you were able to get yourself regulated again. And ask yourself, what were the times when I didn't do so well? What was going on there? What could I have done differently? What can I do next time?

We're not doing it to criticize ourselves, because criticism gets us back activated. We're doing it just to observe, oh, isn't that interesting when I'm always with this client, or isn't it interesting when I have clients between these hours, or right after lunch or right before lunch? You just start observing, when am I easily, and we use the word "triggered?"

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And basically that's what it is. When am I more likely to get dysregulated? And is there something that I can do? Is there something that I can do differently? Is there a go-to? Is there somebody that I could co-regulate, that's another thing we can do, that I can talk to that can help me? And then we'll be able to regulate ourselves in between, during practice and then while we're online with people.

Heather: As you were speaking that last piece, what kind of came to me is when you're befriend your nervous system, just like you have your friend that has their idiosyncrasies, my friends know do not text me or call me after 10 o'clock because I will not respond to you. But they know when to talk to me. They know how to talk to me. They know my needs and my preferences and they do accommodate, just like my friends. So I can see that analogy with your nervous system to come with compassion and curiosity.

Leah: With no judgment, right? Nobody's like, oh, my gosh, I can't believe her. It's just like, oh yeah, she's just not going to respond, and that's fine. That's great.

Heather: That's my nervous system.

Leah: Yeah.

Heather: Yeah, amazing. So if there was one takeaway that you would hope a clinician would get from today, what do you think that would be?

Leah: That your clients have a nervous system, and you do, too. And is running behind the show. It really has a big impact on us. It flavors everything that we do. And if we don't take care of it, it's still doing its thing, it just ends up being in charge. So I think that's the biggest take home. It sounds funny to just say you have a nervous system, they have a nervous system and it impacts everything you do. But I think we're missing that.

Heather: Absolutely.

Leah: I think we make a lot of assumptions that people do things deliberately or, oh, they said that, or they're acting this way, or they're not acting this way. Often

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it's just their nervous system. And I think that even as a clinician, but even as a parent, like sometimes my kid will do something.

And I remember years ago I was like, oh, they're doing that just to irritate me, or they're doing that, you know, they don't understand, what's wrong with them? Or I didn't do a good job as a parent. And now often, I can sit back and just be like, okay, I wonder why their nervous system is being activated like that? What's going on for them? What is their brain reading and registering as danger? And is there anything that I can do to help that? Is there anything I can do to support that?

It just changes, I think, our relationships with ourselves and with other people when we factor in the nervous system.

Heather: Yeah, what I hear behind that is that there's this assumption that if a person, be it ourselves, or co-workers, or family members, or clients, if they're in a more regulated state, then the choices that they make are going to make more sense than if they aren't.

Leah: Yeah, exactly. Because if you are on team hyper, your thoughts, feelings, actions, and results are going to be flavored that way. And I give this example of if you were, say you really liked my hair and you wanted to know where I got my hair done. If I was on team hyper and you said to me, "Where did you get your hair done, Leah?" I may say something like, "Why? What's wrong with my hair? You don't like my hair?" Because I'm in this activated state. I'm on the defensive, like there's an edge to it.

If I'm on team hypo, I may be like, "Oh my gosh, I know my hair is so terrible. I'm so embarrassed about it," because the flavor is one of sort of this helpless and hopeless. If I'm in resilience, I may be like, "Thank you, I get my hair done at such and such place and this is the number," and not think anything of it.

So just even in our response our nervous system is shaping the stories that we tell. It's shaping everything that we do. And it's just helpful to know that when

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you see what people's reactions are, okay, what team are they on? Why is it being flavored that way?

Heather: That's amazing. So where can the listener go to learn more about you and befriending their nervous system?

Leah: I have a podcast called *Building Resilience*, and so that is where you'll be able to hear lots more about this. I have lots of discussions like this. And I am at Leah Davidson Life Coaching, that's my Instagram, Facebook, and my website is leahdavidsonlifecoaching.com as well.

Heather: Amazing. And you have some resources, you have a course you mentioned. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Leah: I do. Yeah, so I have a course called the Advanced Training in Nervous System Resilience where we do, it's actually two sections, two levels. The first level we do a deep dive all about the nervous system and trauma. And then level two is sort of how the nervous system impacts all the other things. So chronic pain and illness and executive function skills and neuroplasticity and post traumatic growth, and then burnout, compassion, fatigue, and so forth.

And then I have a free video series called the 30 Second Solution to Burnout. And essentially, it just walks you through some of the things that we talked about today. It has some videos sort of giving some background information, and takes you through those three steps of self-regulation. Whether you're feeling like you're in burnout or not, it's a great introduction to the nervous system, so you can feel free to get that.

Heather: All right. Thanks so much, Leah, I appreciate it.

Leah: Thank you so much for having me.

If you enjoyed today's show and don't want to worry about missing an episode, you can follow the show wherever you listen to your podcasts. And if you haven't already, I would really appreciate it if you could leave a rating and review to let me know what you think and to help others find *Clinicians Creating Impact*.

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