

Ep #56: Stepping into Success: Leeza Pertsev's Guide for New Graduates (Part 1)



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.

Heather: All right, welcome. I am super excited and so grateful today to introduce you to Leeza Pertsev on the podcast today. So just by way of introduction, Leeza completed her undergraduate degree in Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia and soon after she graduated with a masters of occupational therapy. As a new graduate she remains open and curious to build on her knowledge and experiences wherever she can.

When she's not at the clinic, she can be found playing hockey or soccer, working at the Canucks Autism Network or spending time with her dog. So with that, I'll say welcome, Leeza. I'm so glad that you're here on the podcast today. Did you know that you are the first colleague at Abilities to be interviewed on the podcast?

Leeza: Wow, I did not know that.

Heather: There you go.

Leeza: But thank you for the warm welcome, I'm excited to be here.

Heather: There you go.

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Leeza: That's so cool.

Heather: I will give you your trophy later, it's all good.

Leeza: Perfect, thank you. I appreciate it.

Heather: And while you and I both work with some amazing people at Abilities, I think as you and I chat today, I know we were chatting before we started recording today, I know that other people will see what I see of why I was so excited to actually record one of our conversations. One of our many conversations that we have, because as you know, we connect pretty frequently.

Leeza: We do, yeah.

Heather: We do.

Leeza: And our conversations end up being an hour long every time.

Heather: They do. And so one of the things that I really like is just your honesty, as I've mentioned before, your honesty and your vulnerability, I think is so valuable to share, especially as you're literally in the middle of navigating your first year as a new grad therapist.

So with that, why don't you start to give us a background. Why did you choose OT?

Leeza: So why OT? I get asked this a lot. I thought I was going to be a physiotherapist for a long time. And then yeah, it wasn't until my very first course I took at UBC for my kinesiology degree that I learned occupational therapy was even an option. And it was about the time all I really knew about was you were either going to be a kinesiologist, personal trainer, chiropractor, and those poor physiotherapists. Those were really the only options that we knew at the time and that I knew of at the time.

And as long as I can remember, actually, even in high school I remember telling my family and being so set on going to physio school, I'm going to be a

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physiotherapist. That's before I knew how hard it was actually to get into the program, but that's besides the point.

Until my very first class in my kinesiology degree at UBC, where I took a course that was about adapting sports for people with disabilities. And my professor at the time was talking about universal design, which now I am very aware of from OT school. But at the time, I didn't really know that much about it. And I was still new to this whole kinesiology world to begin with.

And this professor made us go around the kinesiology building at UBC, which was a very old building, and basically compare the accessibility features. So, for example, how long a door stays open, which way it swings open and things like that. How long the ramps are. How wide the ramps are. And this is a building that we were going into almost every day.

And as we did this, what we realized was, wow, this really is not accessible for people, for example, in wheelchairs. And we didn't actually, and it's not something that we thought about at the time, because we just walk in and out of the building. But if someone, yeah, if someone in a wheelchair were to enter the building, they would have a really hard time doing it.

And then in the classroom itself, it was a big lecture hall, and the people with wheelchairs had to enter through the basement, because there's a massive staircase. So they have to go down a floor, enter through this long hallway. And at the end of the hallway they have to enter the classroom, which is at the front of the classroom, so it's probably not be the most comfortable way to enter.

The door, this is what our professor showed us, the doors are, they're like those heavy fire doors. And the way that they swing out is towards the person. So, basically, the person in the wheelchair has to wheel forward, press the button, and then wheel back, and then the door swings out, which doesn't make sense at all. And then it only stays open for like three or four seconds. Granted, like I was saying, it was an old building, but that just blew my mind.

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Heather: So it sounds like that experience was really transformational for you to kind of see the role and the power of occupational therapy.

Leeza: Yeah, and at the time I remember thinking about, oh, like, okay, I know what a physio does. I know what a personal trainer does. Like who deals with this kind of stuff, like the environment and like all parts of the person? And that's where our professor was talking a little bit about occupational therapy, you know, how they focus on what they can focus on, environmental adaptations and making sure things are accessible.

And from there, I remember leaving that class and that's the first thing I looked up. I went into a deep dive of occupational therapy, what it was, how to get into the schools, how it works. And yeah, I pretty much built my path from there and started pursuing – That was in my third year at the time and, basically, I started building my courses around things that related to OT.

And then from there, I pursued my master's and here I am.

Heather: Here I am.

Leeza: No regrets ever since.

Heather; So, obviously, I'm pretty aware of your role at Abilities since we work together. But for those that are listening, can you tell us about your current role here at Abilities?

Leeza: Yeah, well, I should say I'm still quite new. But I am a new grad, so it makes sense. So I started off here at Abilities, been here for about three-ish months now. Yay, I hit my three month mark. And I'm working full-time out of two clinics. And I am working with kiddos or my specific case load that I co-created with the team.

I'm working with kids anywhere from three years old to 19 years old on a variety of goals, anything from the physical, gross motor, fine motor skills, to self confidence, those mental health things. Yeah, so that's a little bit of what I'm doing here.

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I will say though, the learning curve has been large. It's been a really big learning curve, especially because it's so, in this specific setting, it's been so broad. As I mentioned, it's not just physical, it's not just environmental, you're really looking at all parts of a person. And in this specific case, for every kid or person that walks through that front door, their goals will be different. What they want to improve and work on will be different for everybody.

Heather: And I love that you're saying, like highlighting that you're new. And again, before we were recording, we were just talking about this is you being in that kind of messy middle of that first year. And I think that's important to kind of highlight.

So let's talk about some of the highs and the lows. Like I know some of the highs and lows, they might be the same as what you want to bring up, they may be different. But what would you say some of the highs and lows of your transition into your professional career have been so far?

Leeza: I'll talk about the highs first. I think just overall, being so fresh out of school, you're jumping into a career for the first time, especially after learning about it for so long, you're finally in it. The high is that excitement. That opportunity to finally get to work with people and as your own independent practitioner.

You're not a student OT anymore that's working underneath or working with or alongside a preceptor, you're the one that makes the decisions and you're deciding what's best based on your clinical reasoning. And you really get to build yourself into the OT you want to be. You get to be that OT that you've wanted to be for so long, so you can finally add those factors in.

And honestly, once I'd been in school, it was like the biggest thing that I was looking forward to is like, okay, finally I have that control. Not to say we didn't have that control in school, but in school placements are placed for you. So things like that. We do have options, you know, we have a list to choose from. But there's a lot of things that are kind of provided for you.

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Same thing, like you don't have a choice of preceptor or what type of teacher you'll have. So yeah, that was the biggest thing that I was really looking forward to. And I still am excited about that. It's something to get used to, that's for sure. That's where part of the low, that's where it comes into that. But that's definitely something that, yeah, I've been keeping in mind, is what's been keeping my excitement alive, because there's always something to learn, either about yourself or about the job, which is so great.

Heather: And before we go to the lows, I just want to just chat about the highs. I think one of the things that I think kind of just to extend on what you were saying, but to highlight is you're in an in-demand profession. And so you had a choice of positions, you had the option to change.

I know you started with us part-time and then transitioned to us full-time, which is not something you had to do. But you were able to choose to do it because you were able to make those choices, as what you said of like what was important for you as a professional, and then make professional career choices to kind of match your values at the time.

Leeza: And that's the thing, too, being someone who's so young and so fresh out of school. Like school is basically all I've ever known in this case. That's something that I carry with me too, in a sense the decisions I make now will not be the same decisions I make 10 or 15 years into the career, or in the next five years even it may be a lot different. My priorities may change and where I want to be and what sort of environment I can see myself in will probably change.

I doubt that, I mean, it might stay the same, we'll see. But I don't have an expectation of like, this is my forever, this is where I'm going to be my whole career. And that's, I guess, that's the beauty of OT. And yeah, being in such a high-demand position. There's always other opportunities. If you are unhappy in your position, you can go explore other things. Or if you have always wondered about a certain area of the profession, you can go try it. And if you don't like it, that's okay, there's other jobs out there.

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And that's also kind of what happened, or what I realized at this point, early on in my career and at this point in my life. I realized that, yeah, I realized that, you know what, maybe Abilities full-time or this type of setting full-time is more so for me. And I am happy about that decision. And there's not a day that I'm like, oh, should I have done this?

I think, I mean, it goes back to having that autonomy and that freedom. Like I can make these decisions and run with it. And that's the beauty of it. And I don't have to feel bad about it or be worried that I'm letting somebody else down, because they're my decisions and I'm doing what's best for myself.

Heather: Yeah, and I think that's up to each individual organization, or even if you decide, if a clinician decides to go on their own as their own entity as an organization, as you evolve and grow, which we would hope you would evolve and grow, that's part of the reason that we're in these professional careers that we are, that either you can grow and evolve within that organization. Or if there is a misalignment of values in that, you can grow and evolve in another organization or create your own organization to grow and evolve.

Leeza: Yeah, there are so many opportunities for us out there. And I think, it could just be me being so young and fresh out of school, like just seeing the potential. There's just so many ways that you can build your career and take your career and so many areas that you can work in as well. So that's, once again, the beauty of OT and how broad it is.

Heather: Yeah. So what have been sort of some of the hardest things in your transition from student life to working life so far?

Leeza: Oh, also my favorite question. Well, one of the hardest things, I think, the way I describe it is going from such a structured environment, such as school, where your schedule is built. Well, in this case my master's, everything is, like they gave our schedule to us, everything was built, we just had to show up, learn, study for things and complete the assignments.

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And then comparing that, and like I said, that's all I've really ever known. Stopping that and transitioning out of that and just going to work full-time in such a broad field where a lot of it is dependent on how you want to carry yourself as a professional, that was probably the hardest thing to get used to was, oh, my goodness, I can decide how I choose to plan out this next section. Or I can choose how I manage my caseload. I have so many decisions, like that is a lot.

And then, like I said, the way I was describing it is more so very much like a sink or swim situation.

Heather: Yeah, tell me more about sink or swim. How do you feel like that showed up for you?

Leeza: I can compare it to like this setting, because it's going to, again, and I imagine my other classmates that graduated with me that went into different areas of OT, they probably have different experiences and different feelings about it.

But with private practice in particular, I found that because there's so much independence and autonomy, which is fantastic, and that's why I chose to go into it. But what comes with that is you don't have as much of immediate support as you would in, for example, a hospital setting where there's a lot of OTs around or a lot of physios around, a lot of different professionals to talk to. But it makes sense because you're all working the same shift and you have that immediate access.

Whereas in this case, these are your one on one clients. This is your caseload. This is who you're working with, the families that you're working with. The families only know you as that professional. So by sink or swim, I mean, it's more so if you take that time to overthink and let those feelings of overwhelm take over.

Basically, I think it makes sense how quickly and how often new grads in particular burn out so easily, because this is such a quick adjustment. You

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graduate and the next thing you know, you're working. And work is so, A, it's so broad. And B, you're still trying to figure out who you are as a professional.

So there's so many moving parts that if you don't start to get into the groove of things or if you're not the type of person that can handle that abrupt transition or that change in your life, then yeah, I feel like it's very easy to sink almost and feel like, yeah, to feel that overwhelm or overthink or start to question things. You know, why did I choose this career? Oh, this is not what I expected. This is nothing like my placement. This is nothing like school.

And that's a big thing, too. They say this a lot while we're in school, but I don't think you really understand it until you're out of school and you're working. But they say in school a lot, our professors or any new grads at the time, they've always told us school really only teaches you the basics, right? They only have two, well in this case for UBC, well most of the master's in Canada, but you only have those two short years. Those years go by so fast.

And with something like OT, it's such a broad profession that they only have those two years to teach you as much as they can about this very, very, very, very, very broad profession. So it's difficult to hone in on specialized areas when you just don't have time for it. So it's very much like they give you the groundwork, the foundation, and then you build your house with it, basically.

And at the time, like I said, they told us this so much. And we were like, yeah, yeah, okay, okay, I get it. But it wasn't until I started working that that really hit me. Like, okay, there are areas that, based on my previous experiences before OT school, they helped me in this specific environment in this job. But also there are things that I don't know, there are actually a lot of things that I don't know about.

And then it's about putting that responsibility on yourself to be like, okay, I'm a professional now. It's my responsibility to, you know, if I need or want to learn about something, or if I'm unsure about something, I have the resources. I just have to look. I have to build on it. I can review whatever. It could be from school,

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it could be at work, wherever it is. Almost that accountability, like holding yourself accountable to do that, because otherwise no one will.

Heather: Yeah, I think that accountability piece, as you were speaking, this is what kind of came up for me, so I'm interested how this kind of resonates with you or not. Because you mentioned the structure that you had in school, and then also the structure that might be in some clinical workplaces and might not be in others.

And I'm wondering if the indication is, not necessarily the structure of having someone there or not, but I'm wondering if the impact is having somebody else telling you you're doing a good job, versus you being okay with it. Like you deciding that you are doing a good job on your own.

Leeza: Yes.

Heather: Tell me about that, Leeza.

Leeza: Oh my goodness. Okay. Yeah, that's another piece too. It's that imposter syndrome, right? I mean, you probably hear it all the time with the new grads that you speak to.

Heather: Well, and not just new grads. Yeah, not just new grads. People transitioning to private practice, transitioning to a different position. Let me tell you, imposter syndrome is not unique to the first few years. I'm here to tell you the awfulness and awesomeness of that. Because as you grow that can be, it doesn't have to be, but that can be a normal part of your career.

But I'm interested in you, so do you feel that imposter syndrome right now? Or have you felt that in part of your career? And what does that look like? How does that show up?

Leeza: Oh, all the time. All the time. I feel it all the time. I think it's a normal part of the process, but I think –

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Heather: You said that exactly the way like, “Oh, Heather said this, so I’m going to say it back.” You don’t need to believe it, it’s totally fine if you don’t believe it.

Leeza: I believe it, but wait, I might fight you on this in the sense of I feel like it’s even more intense, maybe this is because it’s all I’ve ever known. But it’s even more intense when you’re just out of school because you haven’t found a place where you’ve been working for a few years, like you haven’t found a place where you yet feel like you belong. And you also don’t know what that looks like for you, because you’re still learning so much.

But also, like I said, school only gives you that foundation and you’re working with the rest and depending on if you specialize. So for me, specifically, I went into pediatrics. This is a specialized field. And because of that, it’s not as black and white as other areas of OT might be or other areas of professions in general might be.

So because of that, and also being in school, for me, for so many years back to back, something that I got used to, naturally, because like I said, it’s all I’ve ever known is that feeling good or feeling accomplished or that confidence from grades, from I have this assignment – Basically, for me, I knew I did well in school. It’s why I got here. It’s why I’m where I am. But that sense of accomplishment or that feeling that, wow, I just aced this exam, that’s amazing, I feel great about myself.

And there’s a reason why they say too, grades don’t matter once you graduate. And it’s true. And we said this so many times. Even in your master’s it’s so hard too, because grades, they do matter but not nearly as much. They matter to get into the program. But that’s also a hard shift too, of like, what do you mean? This is all I’ve known, this is what has kept me going, this is where I find my sense of worth, which is a lot to say.

But it’s, well, for someone who’s an overachiever, like we were in order to get into – It’s not easy getting into these master’s programs and into an OT program. So that’s kind of where I found my, yeah, my sense of purpose, was through my academics and how well I did there. And then yeah, and these are

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professors and other faculty telling you that you're doing well. And you have that proof there. It's right in front of you. It's that A plus or whatever it is, it's that good grade.

Whereas, when you're working, you don't necessarily have that anymore. You don't have, well, it makes sense that you don't have someone watching over your shoulder anymore. But you don't have that proof that you're doing well. So because of that, I find I feel like it's harder to believe that you're where you need to be and you're doing well. I had to tell myself this multiple times. I still tell myself multiple times of those reminders.

And you're right, a part transition from actual school to work also comes with, yeah, that independence of starting to tell yourself that and shifting that, as opposed to someone else telling you. Of course, it's great when people tell you that you're doing great. But a part where that, yeah, like that imposter syndrome comes from, it comes from us. It comes from what we tell ourselves. It comes from how we view ourselves as professionals and as people.

Heather: I'll just say, first of all, that is such a beautiful and honest and vulnerable example of why I wanted us to record one of these conversations today. Second, I'll just say, I'll never fight you on how you feel about your feelings, because your feelings are super valid. And of course you feel like that for all of the reasons that you just shared.

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