

Ep #65: Why It's Normal to Struggle as a New Clinician



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. There are some weeks with this podcast that I bring you episodes because there's an issue that I've been discussing with a colleague or maybe even dealing with myself. And then there are times that I bring these episodes because I see somebody struggling, and my biggest hope is actually to relieve some suffering, especially for clinicians.

When I think about it, it makes sense that relieving suffering speaks so deeply to me because it's one of the reasons why I, along with so many other clinicians, choose the work that we do. I know that ultimately all of what we do as clinicians is to relieve suffering in some way. We might do it, we might call it a different discipline, so we might do it in a different way, but all of that fundamentally is to help to relieve suffering in other people.

And so for myself, where my focus has turned at this point in my career is really to help relieve the suffering of the clinician because I know that as I offer those kinds of opportunities for them to do that, or for you to do that, I have no doubt that you will be better able to go out and change the world for the better.

So today's episode is for the clinician who's starting something new. So be it, you might be new to your profession, new to a practice area, or maybe even just new to a work environment. If any of those things are happening or about to happen, this episode is for you.

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But before I start, I just want to highlight again that this podcast comes from this place of where I am in my career. It's a passion project of mine because ultimately I want all clinicians to be able to use this kind of tool set as a way to magnify their impact, even if they never work either alongside us or with us at Abilities. And one way that you can help me to do that is to spread the message.

You can help me to do that in a couple of ways. One, you can follow, rate, and review this podcast wherever you listen to it to help feed the algorithm so that when a clinician is searching for something like this, this podcast will come up for them. And second, and even more importantly, if you could share this podcast, or better yet your favorite episode, with a colleague.

If you've heard this before and you've meant to do it, but you maybe haven't done it yet, don't you have those things? You're like, oh yeah, I meant to do that. It's okay, let this be the sign that today is the day that you can help other clinicians. And if this is your first episode, I will say welcome. Thank you so much for listening. And hopefully as you listen, you can decide which of your clinical friends would love to hear more of this kind of information to help them at work. Thank you so much in advance for your action here. And with that, let's get back to the episode.

The first thing I want to say is that whenever we start something new, it is completely normal to have feelings that may or may not even feel normal to you. So those are feelings like anxiety, pressure, discouragement, or sometimes we package that together and call it imposter syndrome. And this may be obvious or even seem obvious, but time and time again when I see clinicians who are struggling in some way, this news that this is normal often hits them at the time as both revolutionary and comforting.

And it's because when we're in it, sometimes we are so in it, we can't actually zoom out enough to see what's actually happening. Our nervous system can get so activated that it is focusing on survival. And in this case, survival isn't actually escaping a tiger, it is surviving the perceived expectations, especially our own perceived expectations of a new job. So biologically, it makes total sense that the brain, as a default, senses any new situation as potentially dangerous and therefore activates that nervous system even just a little bit to be ready.

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Now, most of us will find out pretty quickly that our new workplaces are inherently safe, but many of us will retain a heightened activity level from our nervous system from a term that's called cognitive dissonance. Now, if it's been a while, you may have heard that, but if it's been a while since you studied that in a psych class or even in your clinical stuff, cognitive dissonance is really just the discomfort a person feels when their behavior doesn't align with their values or their beliefs.

So when you start a new career, a new practice area, or a new workplace, of course you're going to be learning a lot of new standards of behavior. No matter where you work, there are going to be new standards to get used to. And yet on the other hand, many clinicians, maybe even you, have a belief that, one, you're something of a high achiever or you're a good clinician, or good clinicians care about what they do and they behave the way they are expected to behave. We have a lot of things, we've gone through a lot of schooling, we will have regulations and regulators that are telling us that and reinforcing those beliefs.

So when those beliefs or values as a clinician don't align right away with how you see yourself performing in your job in that moment, cognitive dissonance ensues. So knowing that first understanding the why can help you understand that this isn't unique to you and there are distinct biological and psychological reasons for you to be feeling exactly how you feel.

Of course, in this age of social media perfection and a lot of small talk, no one is instantly going to share this common and totally normal discomfort that they feel. But that doesn't mean that it isn't happening every day. I'm here to tell you that it is.

So what would I advise someone, maybe someone like you, who's feeling this discomfort? I actually heard this amazing metaphor recently from Martha Beck that I love and I want to share with you. So as you are transforming your behaviors to a new standard that aligns with your own values and beliefs about how you want to be at work, this is like transforming from a caterpillar to a butterfly.

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Now, I know we have a sense of what that looks like. I mean, I feel like every grade three, maybe it was grade three or just elementary school, we all talked about caterpillars to butterflies and that whole metamorphosis. But did you know that when a caterpillar creates the chrysalis and then metamorphoses to a butterfly, they don't actually just grow wings? First, what they do is they literally decompose in their chrysalis to like a gel-like substance that is only protected by that chrysalis shell-like structure.

So when you are transforming to be a new clinician or a clinician in a new environment, you are also going through a similar, yet different kind of transformation. This is where the metaphor comes in. Now, unfortunately, you can't rush that transformation, just like you can't rush metamorphosis. So you need to give it time.

And during this time where you feel uncomfortable, where you feel this discomfort, you do have the ability to create that chrysalis-type shell by creating your own emotional safety and rest even when you feel discomfort. So what does emotional safety look like? It looks like a nervous system that has time to be regulated and re-regulated and not be as active all the time. It looks like taking time to do things that bring you joy and comfort. Those are things that naturally regulate our nervous system.

It could be through things like music, movement, laughter, or something else. It's a great question to ask yourself when you're feeling that discomfort, what would help you feel more comfort and more joy, even as you feel that discomfort? And again, not from a place of dissociating and ignoring or resisting that place, but giving yourself some islands of rest. Creating that solid and safe chrysalis-like structure around you as you're transforming. The things that you do to create that safe shell will help you to make that mental transformation to align your thoughts to your behaviors, and your behaviors to your values.

Now, this is where I want to say clinical mentoring alone will not help you feel safe. That helps you to know the standards of what you want to do, but you actually need a calm nervous system to better absorb and take in any of those kinds of clinical mentoring or other information provided. And you need the time and space to integrate them into practice.

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I remember when I was a new grad PT, being told that I just needed more time. And I will always remember where I was, what I was wearing, what I was doing, and the feeling that I had. I was so frustrated. And I was frustrated because time wasn't something that I could actually do anything about to make happen faster. I was trying to make this process happen as quickly as possible. And that frustration was actually suffering. And that's the kind of suffering I want to help relieve for you today.

I love the definition of suffering as coming from the attachment to things that we desire. Now, I wanted, in that new grad moment, to be a good PT. I wanted it as soon as possible. And I was so attached to that desire to be a good PT, as good as possible, that I wasn't willing to wait. And so I ended up suffering.

Now, as time went on and as I let go of the idea that I could speed up the process, that actually detached me from the desire from being a good PT in the moment, which fun fact, actually helped me to be more present in my sessions and outside of my sessions when I was planning for them, and ultimately allowed me to be as good of a PT as I could be in that moment because that calmer nervous system allowed me to access the higher part of my brain that had all of the knowledge that I had and my intuition to that point.

Now, again, I know that can sound a little woo-woo. And I know if I was to say this to my new grad self, I would probably say that is a little woo-woo, but it actually is biological and it's based on our physiology. We perform better at any given time when our nervous system is calm and regulated. It's why the highest performing athletes work so hard on mastering their thoughts and working with people like sports psychologists as part of their training for high, elite-level performance.

So if you're feeling the discomfort of the cognitive dissonance or the imposter syndrome of a new job, know that it's not only okay and normal, it's actually biological. You can seek comfort and safety to create your own hard shell, your own chrysalis, and use that to regulate your nervous system as you go through your transformation and perform at your best.

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As you do that, I guarantee that your best self will get better and your performance will eventually align with your values. So with that, give it a try and let me know how it goes. Yes, I am busy, but I'm never too busy to talk to you. Remember, this is my passion project, right? Email me at heather@abilitiesrehabilitation.com and let's talk about this further. With that, have an amazing week and I'll talk to you soon.

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*.

It doesn't have to be a five-star rating, although I sure hope you love the show. I'd really want your honest feedback so I can create an awesome podcast that provides tons of value. To learn more about me and the work that I do, visit my website at www.abilitiesrehabilitation.com/clinicianscorner to download your free Getting it All Done at Work process and to see what I'm up to. Thanks so much.

Thanks for joining me this week on the *Clinicians Creating Impact* podcast. Want to learn more about the work I'm doing with Abilities Rehabilitation? Head on over to abilitiesrehabilitation.com. See you next week.