

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Heather Branscombe

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

Hi everyone, this is Megan, one of Heather's podcast producers. Heather asked that we reshare the following episode with you this week all about neurodiversity. We're seeing more and more neurodiversity in the workplace these days, and as a society we're more aware than ever of the differences that brains can have.

In this episode we'll explore what neurodiversity means, its presence in the workplace, and practical advice on navigating neurodivergent interactions. Whether you identify as neurodivergent or you work with colleagues who do, this episode will enable you to achieve the results you truly desire in your practice, as well as provide valuable insights to foster understanding and collaboration amongst clinicians everywhere. Without further ado, please enjoy the episode.

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. How are you this week? How has your work week gone this week? I'm here to say I am loving my current work week. I don't know, again, there's the 50/50. But last week I took some time to meet with my support team that I work with at Abilities. And we came together to decide on the strategies and priorities we wanted to choose to work on for the rest of the year.

I love that kind of work, it is my jam. I always have. And what I really loved about it is now this week it's really left me with this new perspective and motivation to create a bigger impact both for myself and for the people that we're trying to

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

serve, and that includes you. There's also this season where I am meeting with so many new grads in job fairs and outside of job fairs. And it is so, so fun.

Do you remember being a new grad? Maybe you are a new grad. I just love that energy that's coming into all of our collective professions. Now, if you are or you know a new grad, specifically a speech pathologist, an occupational therapist or a physiotherapist who's interested in working with children or adults with neurodiversity and they want to live in the Fraser Valley, please feel free to connect them to me and to this podcast. Whether or not they choose to work with Abilities going forward, I really love helping them to decide what's best for them.

And again, I am so happy to do so. So you can send me a DM through Instagram or you can connect with me through our website, which is abilitiesrehabilitation.com. And so with that, let's dive into the topic today.

Let's talk about neurodiversity. Now, when I start this, I want to be clear on what I mean when it comes to the subject of neurodiversity. So I went on the internet and I found a definition that resonated with me. And so this definition comes from the Cleveland Clinic. And they say, neurodiversity is a word used to explain the unique ways people's brains work. While everyone's brain develops similarly, no two brains function just alike. Being neurodivergent means having a brain that works differently from the average or, and they put this in quotes, "neurotypical" person.

Now, I like that definition, because it really speaks to the range that I think neurodiversity or my definition of neurodiversity encompasses. To me, neurodiversity isn't a diagnosis per se, but it includes people that may have a diagnosis that would fall under this umbrella. So whether or not you consider yourself neurodiverse or you consider one of your co-workers neurodiverse, whether or not you have a diagnosis or not, it really doesn't make a difference. But what does make a difference is what we make that understanding of neurodivergence or neurodiversity mean.

Now, you may have noticed if you've been working in this field for a while that we really are seeing more people with neurodiversities in the workplace. And so

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

I started to think about that outside of the clients or the patients that we see. And I came up with a non-exhaustive list, but these are my three ideas, and then I'm interested in what you think.

So first, I think we are more aware of the differences and the differences that our brains have. And I think specifically as clinicians we're really trained to see it when others may not see it. So, for example, we typically as clinicians, no matter what our scope of practice is, we in general look at behavior and then we look at the underlying possible communication that it's providing.

So, for example, if someone doesn't like hugs, it could be a preference because of past trauma or they just don't like the sensation. Or it could be a combination or something else. Or someone who is walking on their toes, it could be because they have short heel cords, just maybe prenatally or something else. Or maybe they just like the feeling of being on their toes versus walking on their flat feet. Maybe it's both or maybe it's something else. My point is that as clinicians we are really uniquely trained to look for possible signs of neurodiversities as clinicians.

Secondly, I definitely see that there is more support for diversity than ever before. And not that there can't be more work in that area, but I've definitely seen this as part of my clinical career. The increase of disability or inclusion type services, really across the lifespan, has meant that work, including work as a clinician has become much more accessible than ever before. I don't know about you, but I really love that that possibility is true.

And the third thing that I came up with is that we see more diversity because there is potentially less masking happening. As we talk about neurodiversity, those that are neurodiverse really have that opportunity to feel more comfortable to be exactly who they are. Whereas before they may have masked their neurodiversities because of the feeling of fear or shame.

So again, that's not an exhaustive list, you might be able to think of more. And all of this is amazing and it could also bring some challenges. This is the 50/50 of life, isn't it, including our clinical life. The potential challenges and

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

neurodiversities in your workplace could look something like this. You or others are acting in a way that either you or others may not expect you to behave.

So what that could mean or what that could look like is something like time blindness, getting to deadlines for charting or reports or making it difficult to get to work on time. You may have some challenges with what we see as social or cultural norms, clinical professional norms of how we behave in the workplace as a clinician. It could look like challenges in communication, in the way that we communicate with us, be that in person, online, whether we prefer communicating in person or online. All of these things can be potential challenges.

Now, I talked about this a little more in episode 11, so if you want to dive a little bit more into the challenges of co-workers, I would recommend that you look at episode 11. The title is When Working with a Co-worker Is Hard. And that can really help you to dive deeper, and will be a really great resource for you to listen to.

But today, I specifically wanted to look at this as it relates to neurodiversities. And even more specifically, what do we do about it? So the first thing that I would suggest that you do is, number one, you just want to notice what the expectation is. We don't always think about what that expectation is, but just think about what is the expectation that you are either looking for for yourself or looking for in a co-worker? And what is the gap?

This is an opportunity to be super clear and as factual as possible as what is the underlying expectation, that implicit or explicit expectation, and where does the gap show up?

Then second, you're going to notice what your brain makes that mean. What I mean by that is, what kind of thoughts or feelings come up when you think about that gap? And then third, you get to decide what you want to do about it, if anything, from that place of awareness.

Now, I'm not saying to not speak up to somebody if you are noticing unsafe or illegal activities in your co-worker. But the truth is, that is rarely the issue that our

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

brain is trying to solve. It's that expectation gap that feels annoying or frustrating and that might be because of some kind of neurodiversity.

So this can look like two different versions of the same framework I've just mentioned. If you identify as neurodivergent yourself, what I want to offer is you have the possibility to share that neurodiversity as you feel safe to do so with those around you. And you might also want to explore what you make it mean for you when you think about yourself as neurodivergent and how it affects your work and your work with others, purely for your own benefit. I'm not saying for you to look at this for others benefits, but there may be a benefit for you.

Secondly, I want to offer there is the opportunity to seek assistance. Not necessarily to change, but ultimately to validate your feelings and the thoughts that you have around any potential expectation gaps. And then, using that same framework from that full place of acceptance, you get to decide what, if anything, you want to change about yourself as it shows up to work.

Now, secondly, if you work with someone who you think or may suspect is neurodivergent, again, you can explore your own thoughts and feelings about that behavior gap or that expectation gap and what that brings up for you. If you feel safe you could ask the person that you're working with, your co-worker who you suspect might be neurodivergent, to learn more from that place of curiosity and non-judgment, and to really learn more of what it's like to walk in their shoes. And then from that place, you get to decide what, if anything, you want to do to change about you as you work with someone with neurodiversities.

Notice that the framework is the same whether it is you that considers yourself being neurodivergent or having neurodiversity, or your co-worker. But it's the application that's different. Also notice, the brain wants us to think that the challenges that we have are around the people. It thinks that's the shortcut to feel better. We feel annoyed, we feel frustrated, that other person, if only that other person changed, then we would feel better.

And this includes a perceived challenge of neurodiversity. It can see that as the challenge. But the truth is, it's much more helpful for you to notice the impact of that behavior on yourself because ultimately, that's where you have the most

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

influence and that's the opportunity you have to learn the most about yourself, as a clinician.

Do you notice how much easier it is to use a framework of assessment for our clients or patients than it is for ourselves? I've noticed that for myself. Now, you might not have even mastered that framework of assessment for clients. And when I say that framework of assessment, I'm coming from that place of that watcher or that assessor. So if you haven't mastered it for yourself, that's totally fine. But one reason I think that we may be more familiar with that role as clinicians is because it's often our job to assess.

And so assessing really does ask us to look at things from a more broader perspective. So you have that opportunity to take that mindset of assessment or that watcher mindset, and apply it to yourself and to your co-workers, including yourself or any co-workers that you have with neurodiversities. That is the mindset that will be much more effective to help you to create whatever result you're looking to create at work.

And before I go, while I'm on that topic of mindset I just want to share some of my thoughts about neurodiversity that you are welcome to borrow to use for yourself if it helps you. Before I share my thoughts, I'm curious as to how you see neurodiversity at work.

When you think about the concept of neurodiversity at work, either for yourself or for others, what thoughts or feelings come up for you? You might see neurodiversity as a deficit to be overcome. And if you do, you wouldn't be alone, and it makes total sense. We are often in a role as clinicians to help clients with neurodiversity. So it makes sense why you may see that as a deficit.

But what if neurodiversity is actually a strength? What evidence can your brain find that neurodiversity actually is a strength for yourself or for your co-workers? And what evidence can you find that neurodiversity can be a strength for the organization you either work for or work with? What impact would that attention and understanding bring to the clients or patients that you work with that may be neurodiverse?

Ep #73: Neurodivergence in the Workplace

I would love for this to be the start of an ongoing conversation. So please share this with someone that you think it might be beneficial or helpful for. And also feel free to connect with me to let me know what your thoughts are after listening today. I can't wait to see the impact that you create with me. Thank you so much for listening, 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.