

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients



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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, friends. How are you doing? I'm actually doing amazing. I'd like to think that the weather doesn't affect me as much as it does. Maybe it does you too. If you were listening to this when this is first recorded, it is spring time. It is the beginning of March and spring is finally starting to show. And whether or not this is a false spring or it's not, it's sure nice to see the warmer weather and sunnier days.

So with that, today's topic is one that actually comes from an in-service that we are planning here at Abilities. So I thought it might be nice to share a little bit about what we talk about at Abilities. Now, of course, the in-service is going to be a lot more participatory, is going to be more than just me and a lot more in depth. But I think I can share the meat of it with you and have it have value for you.

The reason that we're talking about this at Abilities is because, again, as you know, this is a very relationship-based business and relationships, specifically difficult clients, can feel really hard. And it makes sense because we want people to be happy and we are uncomfortable when they aren't happy. And it can often feel like there are demands or expectations from clients that don't

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients

either feel reasonable or possible. And then when that happens, it can be hard to know what to do next.

So if that has ever happened to you, maybe it is happening to you in real time, today I want to share a three-step process through an easy-to-remember analogy that can help you in the moment when you're dealing with a difficult client to feel better and ultimately create a better outcome for everyone.

So before I start and share that, I know many of you already know this, but I want to share that this podcast is a passion project of mine because I really want all clinicians to have the ability to use this kind of tool set and tips as a way to magnify their impact, even if they never work either alongside us or with us at Abilities. I consider myself so lucky to be able to do this and to share this as part of my work week. This is a fun part of my work week. It's awesome.

And you can help me to make it even more meaningful by helping to spread the message. More clicks that come from other people helps more clients and more clinicians just like you. So let's work together to make that happen, shall we? You can help me to do that in a couple of simple ways.

One, you can follow, rate, and review this podcast wherever you're listening to it to help to feed that algorithm. So when there's a clinician just like you searching for something just like this, this podcast will come up for them. And second, you can also share this podcast or better yet a favorite episode with a colleague that you want to help.

If you've heard this before and you meant to do it before and maybe you haven't done it yet. It's okay. It's totally okay. Let this be the sign. Today is the day that you can help clinicians just like you. But if this is your first episode, first, I just want to say welcome. Thank you so much for listening and hopefully, as you listen, you can decide who of your clinical colleagues would love to hear more of this kind of information to help them at work as well. Thank you in advance so much for your help here, and with that, let's get back to the episode.

So when I started to think about how to help other clinicians with managing difficult clients, I started to first think about why it actually feels so hard in the

[Clinicians Creating Impact](#) with Heather Branscombe

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients

first place. And again, as clinicians, one of the amazing things about the work that we do is we actually get to deal with so many amazing people in a day. Isn't that really true? But because our brains are wired to notice the negative, anyone that feels some sort of flavor of difficult is naturally going to take up much more space in our brain. It's awful, isn't it? But it actually is true.

Brains are amazing problem-solving machines, and they are wired for connection. So, it makes total sense that your brain is going to be more activated when a situation with someone else, especially a client, feels difficult to you. Now, I want to say activated brains are not a problem, that is exactly what your brain is supposed to do. It's doing what it was designed for. It's designed that way to supercharge your problem-solving ability, which may or may not be life-threatening, right?

That's part of the thing that it's trying to figure out in the first place. There was a time that not having good relationships with other people could actually be life-threatening to you as a person. So it makes sense that one, your brain tracks that as a problem, and two, it wants to solve that as soon as possible.

So, depending on how activated your brain actually is, it can prevent you from using all the parts of your brain that helps you to actually make the best decisions in the best interest for both you and your client. And that, in a nutshell, is that fight, flight, freeze, or fun response.

So when I think about our brains being activated like that, it actually caused me to think of another situation where the brain wants to quickly solve a problem that feels life-threatening and could actually be life-threatening. And that's when you are literally on fire. So, we are taught when we're young, if someone is on fire, they should what? You know it. Stop, drop, and roll.

I love that because it's short, it's easy to remember, and it gives you some concrete things to do, especially when you're in that fight-flight-freeze mentality. So today I want to show you how that same mantra, stop, drop, and roll, could actually work when you're feeling super activated, overwhelmed, or extra frustrated with a client that feels difficult.

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients

So first, let's talk about the stop. So first we stop. The first step is to stop taking it personally. Now, it makes sense that often clients that feel difficult feel that way to us because they're either making direct personal attacks, saying something like, you don't know what you're doing, why can't you do this for me, this is ridiculous, or because they say something that either intentionally, as I talked about before, or even unintentionally triggers something in us personally that feels personal to us.

So the difference, even if you have made a mistake, is to notice as those words and the information that they're sharing with you feels like either guilt or shame to you. Now sometimes people use that interchangeably, but there really is a difference, or there can be a difference, between what is guilt and what is shame.

So guilt feels like, yes, maybe you did make a mistake. Maybe there was a mistake that was made in the system that you work in. But it also feels like compassion for both you and the client at the same time. That's really different than shame.

Shame may feel like, yes, I may have made a mistake, or the system may have made a mistake, but also I am a bad person. So notice that difference. Guilt is a mistake has been made. Shame is the person is bad. Shame is taking it personally. Because shame and taking it personally, it really goes hand in hand.

It's the difference between things could have been better, things could have been done differently, or I should have done something, or something should have been done differently. It's the should, like if only I were better, did better, spoke better, thought about it better. That's the shame that we need to remove.

So before we move on in managing a difficult client, there's an opportunity to take personal inventory and notice the thoughts that your brain is feeding you and what you are personally feeling and making that mean, creating for you.

So the less compassionate you feel for both your client and yourself, the more personally you're probably making it. And vice versa. The more compassionate you feel for both yourself and the client in the moment, the less personally you're

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients

probably taking it. You are less defensive, and therefore, you are no longer taking it personally.

So a quick tip to figure that out in real time is to ask yourself, am I taking this personally? Or, how am I taking this personally? So once you've stopped taking it personally, next you're going to drop. In this case, you're going to drop the urgency that you feel on your end for a quick fix.

When a situation with a client feels difficult, we often feel like there's some kind of urgency to it. Now sometimes it can be because the client is requesting urgency, making repeated calls, talking to multiple people and you're hearing about it, or actually giving a deadline. And with those situations, it can be your brain telling you that solving the problem quickly can then therefore solve the difficult feeling. Something like, let's just get this over with and let's rip the band-aid off.

Now, while I can concede that there are times where urgency can be helpful, in my experience, especially with working with the kinds of clients that we do and what I mean by that is by working with them for longer periods of time, more often than not, the urgency in the form of panic to solve for that feeling of discomfort is actually not very helpful. So as we stop to take things personally and find compassion for all sides, that actually allows us to use all the parts of our brain, like the higher parts of our brain, that can do more effective thinking and planning.

So time, sometimes just a little time, sometimes a longer amount of time, is just what the brain needs to recalibrate and to become a much more effective problem solver. So, how can you slow things down while acknowledging your client at the same time, it could be as simple as saying something like, let me think about this, or you've made some good points, let me do some work on my side and get back to you, say tomorrow or whatever, you insert your timeline there.

I'll say, I have literally done this at work. I still do this all the time when I feel my brain being activated. I will say things like, let me think about this. And what that

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients

allows me to do is to tune my attention inwards and to literally and figuratively take a breath. And sometimes, that's all I actually need to find that much more objective, more compassionate, less urgent space.

Other times, I've asked to set up another meeting so I can give myself more space to slow down and to drop any urgency I have to fix it and to escape that feeling I have. So that's something that you want to do. You want to drop that feeling of urgency.

So after you've stopped and you've dropped, then you're going to roll. And in this case, it's rolling in your resources. So with a calmer brain and a more compassionate heart, it is so much easier to more effectively roll in your favorite resources to help create the most ideal solution on both sides.

So when I say resources, it could be like the policies and procedures in the organization that you have for yourself or within your organization to review. You can use resources like your own wants, needs and boundaries in this situation. And you can use other people like colleagues, friends, families, or professional resources to help you identify the options available, and then to be able to feel what the next best step forward for both you and the client moving forward.

Now, of course, your mileage is going to vary because your favorite resources are going to vary. But notice if we brought in the resources first when your brain was feeling super activated and it wanted to create that solution as fast as possible, those resources probably wouldn't be as useful as when you are in a more regulated state.

So next time you're trying to manage a difficult client, try this. Stop, drop, and roll. Stop taking it personally, drop any urgency on your end, and roll in your resources. Give it a try and let me know how it goes.

Yes, I am busy. We're all busy. But you are important and I am never too busy to talk to you. Please always feel free to email me your feedback, questions, comments, and concerns at heather@abilitiesrehabilitation.com.

Ep #102: 3 Steps to Effectively Manage Difficult Clients

With that, I hope that you have an amazing rest of your day, 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*.

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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.