

Episode: 16**Title: Neurodiversity Affirming Occupational Therapy****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari****Mahek Bansal**

Welcome, everyone, to the new PossibilOTs podcast. Larissa and I are super excited to be back with you again. Today we are talking about neurodiversity affirming practice in occupational therapy. So we just wanted to start this episode by saying that as neurotypical people, we are not the experts in this topic. It is important that we acknowledge that while we are sharing information based on what we know from neurodiverse people and sources, as well as our own clinical experience, that we are still continuously updating our knowledge and we have a responsibility to keep up to date as new information from lived experiences emerge. In the past, medical models were more prescriptive. However, this new shift allows for a more collaborative relationship for health professionals to work alongside clients to find approaches which support their individual differences.

And this aligns really well with occupational therapy, which focuses on meaningful occupation and function. So we thought it would be a great topic to start people's thinking around this area and share our experiences and see where we go.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, Mahek and I were discussing how we could touch base on this topic just because, as she mentioned, we are definitely not experts. And I think I've seen a bigger movement in that sense of having conversations about neurodiverse, neurotypical neuro affirming. And that can be a little bit confusing, even for us, because we don't want, again, to have the say in something that it's not up to us to define. But we are learning a lot from people who are now advocating for themselves and explaining their point of view, sharing their experiences when they were younger. And now we can have a better understanding of how what we do impacts their lives and therefore rethink what we do, if that's right to say.

We could start by just saying a little bit of, I think, the main things we're learning from it up to now and how we incorporate this into our practices. What do you think, Mahek?

Mahek Bansal

We could start by talking about what does neurodiversity affirming practice really mean to us? It sounds quite big and scary sometimes of, like, something really new, in the sense of - I don't know what it is. It's a really big word, but I feel like when we talk about it and when we look into it's really just supporting people to be who they are and affirming people's individual differences. What do you think, Larissa?

Larissa Ferrari

I would say recognizing who they are, like, it's whatever they present like to society that is part of their. That's themselves, that's how their brain is wired. That's why they've learned how to communicate. That's how they live their lives. So therefore, it's more so understanding who they are just to be able to help them to be more independent and to be able to exchange who they are with others, to communicate with others, and just to facilitate everyone's understanding about who we are.

I understand when you say, Mahek, that it seems like a big word, but as professional therapists, when you say that this aligns with us, it's almost like this is what I've been doing

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my whole career, to try to have a better perspective taking, to try to understand, to try to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, even though this can be so limited, but to try to find, to collaborate and find how we can do this together, how we can go through this journey together and just to be able to live a life in our fullest

Mahek Bansal

Definitely. And I agree. I think from what I've learned my whole career as an occupational therapist, it's understanding the person, it's understanding the environment, it's understanding what do they do in their day to day life, and how can we create harmony in these three areas? OT is all about looking at every person's unique situation. So I think that it really is, OT is so underpinned by this philosophy, but I think where we need to be more conscious is now, in some of these interventions and assessments that we have learned, that they, in the past, have been very heavily evidence based, and potentially, their approach doesn't match the neuro-affirming practice.

And that's where we, as clinicians now need to revisit our clinical reasoning of why we're doing some of these things or how we're doing it, and whether they are really affirming someone's differences or if they're trying to change or they're not strength based and things like that. And I think that's now where our responsibility lies.

Larissa Ferrari

And I think, as you're saying, about what we've learned in the past with the evidence based and assessments and the way we would write reports and everything, I guess the biggest impact for me is also how we shift our language to encourage other people to also look at the strength and how to use the strengths to support this client or this person, this individual, to be able to learn more or for us all to learn as well. Because sometimes it is a back and forth experience. I learn just as much as they learn. But it's more so to shift that language to be more positive, to focus on the strengths, to focus on the possibilities instead of just focusing on the cons and no. And what I cannot do, what is difficult.

So just to be able to say, this is what we can do, this is where we're going towards, this is how we're doing things and how we're experiencing success. And this is a great learning path for us all. I think that shifting language is the biggest takeaway for me personally.

Mahek Bansal

Definitely. And I think just as you're saying, it's something small, it's something practical, but it makes such a big difference not only for us when communicating with the client to help the client feel able and empowered, but also to, as you say, spread that empowerment and advocacy for the wider community. I know just small things that we've learned, we used to talk about autism spectrum disorder in terms of levels and some autistic people being high functioning, low functioning, but that doesn't show what they can do. So a simple switch to talking about level of support, like this client needs low support to achieve these things or moderate support to achieve these things, it's just showing an assumption that they can do it, that ability is there.

Mahek Bansal

I think it's things like this where we need to just revisit what we're doing, what we're saying, what we're writing and think about, well, what message is that portraying?

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And adding to what you're saying, the other thing is that when we look at ourselves, and I think that's when this exercise of putting ourselves in someone else's shoes is really strong for me. When you think of when we were growing up, the things that were hard for us and the thing that was easier for us, how much we have learned from what was hard and how many things we've learned with the things that we considered easier or that we had a bigger interest in. So I think that understanding the person's potential and using their strengths, their great interests, areas of interest, is so good to reach them as human beings and to be able to learn and exchange more. So just as well to have that little shift in what is too hard. What is too difficult.

Wait a minute. But what are they great at? What are their interests? And can we use this as a bridge so we both can learn more about each other and we can facilitate? Because in the end, we all want to be able to, we live in community, right? So we want to be able to. If I'm having difficulties in my life, I want to be able to reach out to you, Mahek, so you can help me to go over. But this requires so many things. But if I can access you and if you understand me, so many things can emerge from this relationship. So just to have that bigger picture of their interests, their strengths, their potential, and learning their profile in the sense of what they really like, they're good at.

Mahek Bansal

I think when we're also choosing our interventions or our approaches, we're supporting clients. I think we need to make sure that the way we talk about these things or the purpose for doing them is almost to add another tool to this person's toolbox. We're not trying to change the way they think or change the way we're doing things, but hopefully give them tools or skills that they can use in the way that they feel most comfortable, or that matches them in the situations that they feel comfortable in as a way to communicate their needs or to be understood, or for them to understand others.

So it's almost like we're creating a bridge between differences for two different people to sort of be in harmony rather than changing one to match another.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. And I think this is so on top nowadays, especially when we are learning how to communicate through the social media thing and how like us in our life, just to be able to reflect on these and think on how we are all different from each other, but how we all have our potentials and to create bridges. I feel like this thinking as community and being part of a whole, this is so important. And so, yes, something I think we all need to work as human beings to support each other in whatever we have difficulties with, but in a more positive way, in a more understanding way.

Mahek Bansal

And I think we can talk a lot about what's right and how we should be doing these things. But I can imagine for some people, if this is a relatively new thought or new conversation, that it can feel like, how do I actually do this? How do I do this in my practice? And really, it's not that hard. Small things can be so impactful. Like we've been talking know, even just considering our language in our goal setting, in our reports, even in just emails and

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communication with people or you know, Larissa and I spent some time with our team at our clinic, reviewing all of the wording around some of our groups that we have and making sure that they are actually, at their core, neuro-affirming.

So I think it's looking just relooking at some of our language, our goals, our reports, our intervention, making sure that do we actually know what is really motivating and what a child is really interested in? And are we incorporating that in a meaningful way? And are we using what we know are their strengths to support them to achieve those goals? So I think if we just step back and think about these things of, okay, we want to be strengths based, we want to incorporate interest, we want to know what's meaningful. We can have really big impact with these small changes.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, I would say even because we work with children, even when we help the parents in their busy life or sometimes when the children are going to a lot of group settings, when they cannot be as neuro-affirming, just because of how routine is a little bit chaotic, but when we start bringing that strength based approach, the interest approach, and when we invite the parents to embrace that journey with us, I agree with you. We can see so a big meaningful impact even in how we establish this relationship amongst us, the clients and the carers and therapists, and they become to be advocates of themselves, to be able to learn from the language we use, and I think we are learning from each other. So just being mindful of these small changes, we can impact so many people around us as well, positively. So, yes, I agree with you on that one.

Mahek Bansal

It was nice to sort of open the conversation on this topic. And it's something that, as Larissa and I have said earlier on, that us, we are continuing to learn and we're continuing to try and find more information and lived experiences to inform us because we are not the experts. We hope that this has encouraged you as well to open yourself up to the lived experiences out there. You know, maybe Larissa and I might need to rerecord a new episode as we learn more or as new information comes out or do an update, but we are so more than happy to do that because we want to continue learning and share those learnings and experiences with you as well.

Larissa Ferrari

And I think this is a great opportunity as well to connect with other people, someone who has a lived experience that could share with us and help us to evolve as therapists as well. We would love to have that conversation and open communication with the community as well so we can continue learning. So please feel free and more than welcome to connect with us and help us as well. If you're interested in this topic and maybe this is something people want to listen more about it, we can probably find more sources and help to bring even more updated things about this topic.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, definitely. So thank you everyone for listening and for joining us again on this episode. And we look forward to another episode with you all. Thanks. Bye.