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Title: Supporting Emotional Regulation – Tips and Strategies

Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari

Mahek Bansal

Hi, everyone. Welcome back to the New PossibilOTs podcast. Larissa and I are super happy to be with you again. And this is our third and final episode in our series supporting emotional regulation. So in this episode, Larissa and I are hoping to delve a little bit deeper into understanding the function behind behaviour and specifically trying to discuss strategies of how to support the people in a child's life to try and understand what this function is. So in our previous episodes, we've talked a lot about how we view behaviour as occupational therapists and how this supports us to be able to put in appropriate strategies and support a client to engage and meaningfully participate in different areas of their life.

And while it's amazing for us to be able to problem solve and understand what that function might be, often we're not the people that the child or the client sees and is with 100% of the time or most of the time in their life. So it's really important that we also work within the team, you know, with the school or preschool or home and carers and siblings and things like that to make sure that they are also feeling equipped to think in the way of understanding and trying to identify what behaviours might be trying to communicate. So, Larissa, maybe we could just give a little bit of an overview into some of the factors or some of the ways that we might be thinking to try and problem solve what might be contributing to a behaviour or a dysregulation.

Larissa Ferrari

We might review some things from the first episode of this series, Mahek, because first of all, I think it's always important for us to learn that we break this into three main factors, I would say. So we have the person, we have the environment, and we have the occupation, and us occupational therapists. So the main area that we work with is the relationship between these three factors. So how we perform the tasks we have to perform every day in the environment that we have to be. So how are we at home, at work, at school, in playgrounds, and things like that? So I think, first, if we break these three factors, it's easier for us to think in, or how can we support people? Does that make sense?

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, I totally agree. So I think it's the same as when we are trying to support emotional regulation, is thinking about it in these three factors, and as you said, understanding the relationships in between them, because these are the things that would bring up maybe some of the underlying reasons or the communication that's behind the behaviours.

Larissa Ferrari

Maybe for the people who are listening to us to make it a little bit easier, I would say it's pretty common that, newborns are learning how their body functions. So mothers and parents or main carers, they are very attuned with their children, the newborns, to pick up the clues and kind of teach them the meaning of this. So it's very person centred, and we're trying to support the regulation, thinking of that physiological response. Maybe that's a good way to think how each one of these things can bring a big impact in emotional regulation.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah. So are you saying Larissa, obviously, as a newborn, if we consider the person factor, that a newborn still has like, has a lot of development ahead of them, still developing a lot of

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even the everyday functions of our bodies, our brains, like, or an understanding the environment, understanding who's around them, there's a lot of sensory input that they're exploring. So in terms of as a person, their capacity to regulate is highly dependent on their environment and the people around them in that environment. So that sort of describes the person factor in that situation. The environment factor would be, as we said, the people around them. If they're so dependent on what's around them for their regulation, then they're relying on their parents or their carers to engage in that co-regulation, to be able to engage and be regulated through their day.

And then obviously, the occupations of a newborn is to sleep, is to eat, is to start interacting with, you know, the people and the objects and things like that. So in order to do that, they need to be regulated, and they are relying on their environment to do that.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes. Perfect. You nailed it. And then maybe it's easier to understand, I think, because there's so many things involved when we grow up. Maybe if we think of a newborn, it's easier to understand how these three things are strongly inter-related and how one thing can support the development of the other or the regulation overall.

Mahek Bansal

If we're saying that the person, the environment, the occupations, they all contribute and their relationship between them, obviously they all contribute to regulation, and they all contribute to a child's ability to maintain their regulation and engage and participate in everyday life, maybe we could give some examples, of some of the factors in each of those categories that might contribute to regulation. For example, if we start off with the environment, maybe we could just give some general examples, Larissa, of the things in a child's environment that might be contributing to their regulation.

Larissa Ferrari

Well, there's a lot of things to consider, but let's imagine a child in a very childish environment. So a place where children are always in. Let's talk about a playground, an indoor playground, for example. If we consider the environment, the first one I would bring is like the amount of sensory input the child needs to deal with, and then how that could affect their regulation, their ability to focus, their ability to feel safe, if they're scared that they're going to be touched, if they're feeling it's too noisy, or if overall they're very overwhelmed. That could be one example of an environment factor affecting regulation.

Mahek Bansal

The people in that environment, if there are lots of kids, not just the sensory component, but the social component of having to interact or maybe the ability to navigate the social interactions and the social conflict and the social problem solving. And, you know, even their trusted adults being present in that environment are their parents or carers or, you know, educators or things like that. People who they trust in that environment to feel safe and to make that environment feel safe.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. And adding to that, this is a place where kids move a lot. And then if you think about

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the person, and again, physiologically speaking, are they drinking enough water? Are they feeling hot? Can they feel when they're feeling hot and how this changes in temperature or if I'm feeling hungry or thirsty, how that can affect our regulation as well.

Mahek Bansal

Moving on to the person factor we talked about, you mentioned the sensory demands of an environment, but then there are also the sensory preferences of the person. And it's the relationship here between the person and environment that might impact regulation. For example, do the sensory preferences of the person match or meet the sensory demands of the environment? And it's often when there isn't this match that we see maybe some contribution to or impact on regulation.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. And on the other hand, Mahek, if there is a lot of social demands in an environment that is already sensory challenging, it's also another component adding to it. And it's almost like a traffic jam where there's so many things happening and they're also challenging, that triggers a lot of emotional dysregulation, because I'm not sure exactly how am I feeling or what's happening. And I think in those situations, just moving forward, it's when we cannot, as an occupational therapist, focus on one thing because those things are all interrelated. So it's not like if I bring a sensory tool to provide regulation, that will be enough to address all the challenges the children are going through.

So I think that when we think of the person, the environment, and the occupation, that kind of helps us to think that sometimes the strategies need to consider a broader view. So you have to anticipate a lot of things or try to, to be able to provide with sufficient strategies or not sufficient, but appropriate.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah. And thinking about, like, examples of occupational factors, like, in that example, you know, if you're in an indoor playground, then some of the occupations might be to play, you know, by yourself or with peers, and playing by yourself might be including climbing and balancing and going on the swings and things like that. And maybe the person factors are that there may be some physical or motor delays, difficulties due to, you know, disability or anything like that. And so then that would create a barrier to be able to engage in these occupations, and that could also have person factors like, you know, confidence and self-esteem and resilience and things like that. So I think it's so complicated, and we probably can't give examples for every situation, Larissa. But I think it's hopefully just starting to have that bigger picture, thinking of what are all of these factors that could be contributing and not looking at these factors in isolation, but how they all sort of intermingle and impact each other. And then, as you said, Larissa, when we are looking at strategies, we need to consider this dynamic and how our strategy maybe providing, say, sensory supports might support the environment, or making maybe modifications in the environment might support the environment factor, but has it then also had its impacts on the person and the occupation? So we need to look at that whole dynamic almost, and the strategies, how they address all three factors.

Larissa Ferrari

And when we're thinking of strategies as well, is how much each environment will provide a

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different level of expectation for the child. So a strategy that sometimes applies to one environment and addresses a lot of those factors might not be the same strategy I'm going to use to a different environment in which I could perform a similar occupation. For example, play is pretty common across different environments, but maybe in a bigger group is different than with an adult or with smaller groups or only with one peer. So just this minor difference can be extremely different in terms of emotional regulation and participation for a child.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah. And I think just continuing on with what you said that the behaviour might look the same in both of those environments or those different situations, but the reason could be really really different, or the communication could be really really different. And so that's why it's important for us to look at these things in a bigger picture, because maybe we have problem solved the behaviour in the indoor playground and applied an amazing strategy, but if we try and just apply that same strategy to a different place in a different time, it might not be so successful if we haven't actually looked into the reason behind that behaviour.

Larissa Ferrari

A classical example, Mahek, and you probably already have that before as well in your practice as an OT, is that sometimes we trial a strategy in our OT session, for example, to support transitions. You try anticipating what's happening, you try visual schedules, you try using an object to facilitate the transition, and it could be a sensory tool. And then when you ask the parent to try at home, it triggers the opposite effect. So if the child is presented to a visual schedule anticipating, they actually get hyper arousal, whereas in the session, it regulates. So then that's when you have to think, okay, so we might be seeing the same behaviour, but what's triggering and the strategies needed is different. And then you have to partnership with the parents and have a better understanding of the home environment. Should then be able to find more appropriate strategies for that situation.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, 100%. So we sort of now talked a little bit about mapping almost these different factors and understanding the dynamics of these different factors to be able to better identify the communication behind behaviour and the function of behaviour. But as we said at the start, Larissa, like, we, as the OT, are not involved in the day to day life of the client on a regular basis, as much as other people, such as the parents or the educators and families and things like that. A part of our role is also then to support these key people, to also have this frame of thinking, of trying to understand what's happening under the behaviour that they're seeing, rather than reacting to the behaviour that's being presented, so that when they're responding, they can be addressing what's the real reason. And these, like people who are in a child's life regularly, can be so attuned to a child's needs and to a child's strengths and areas of support that they have things that they can do, and they can pick up on clues easily. So sometimes it's just that extra layer of thinking to look a little bit deeper. So how do we support the people that are important in a child's life to also see the function behind a behaviour.

Larissa Ferrari

And I'm not sure if that's what you meant, Mahek, but I feel like sometimes being very attuned means sometimes that you are already putting strategies into place without realizing.

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So I feel like in my practice, there's a lot of people involved in the child's life that are already doing things to accommodate for the child's needs so they can maintain regulation and they can perform their occupations and they're not even aware of the things they're doing. And then I would say specifically for that situation that I've mentioned is by asking questions and asking, so what happens and what do you do and what's the response? And then helping these people to understand the strategies they are already putting in place and then trying to understand the underlying issue or concern or difficulty.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, definitely. I think that's really key, is really getting, asking lots of questions because I think that also, obviously, you know, not too many questions, that's overwhelming. But asking the questions that you need to get a better idea of the situation in terms of the person, the occupation, the environment. But asking the questions can also show the people in, you know, that we're supporting how we're thinking through what's going on and that we are trying to look at the different factors so that when they are presented with this behaviour, they can understand that just like us, they might need to consider the other things that are involved. So it's almost like, you know, coaching to see that through questioning and through curiosity, because a lot of the information that we would need for these different factors would come from them. Like they are the ones that are there and know what's going on and know what the environment's like and things like that.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes. And I feel like through these conversations, when we ask those questions, not overwhelming then, like you said, but it's through asking them questions that we also get them to reflect on what's happening in the daily practice. So it might be that they come with a concern, and when we start asking questions, they're like connecting the dots. Oh, true. And then we kind of guide them to identifying patterns in the environment, patterns in the occupations, patterns in the child's needs, their personal needs. So sometimes what comes as a difficulty with playing with peers, it come out as, I don't know, difficulties actually with self-confidence or motor performance. I don't know. It's just giving some random examples to see how much the main focus might change when you start asking questions and trying to understand underlying difficulties.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah. And I think what you said mentioned there, Larissa, with patterns, gives a bit of an insight into another thing, which I think is trying to see behaviour is not just a singular event, but looking at it maybe more in relation to, like, the bigger picture of if they have, if this behaviour happens in different places or there are different behaviours that are occurring in different places, which often there if we're supporting emotional regulation, then looking at sort of getting a picture of all the behaviours or, you know, the most common behaviours and how they all fit together or don't fit together. But sometimes that can give a little bit more information and understanding into the child and the child's needs, rather than sort of, you know, problem solving each behaviour individually and applying strategies individually to each behaviour, which might, you might need to do once you do the problem solving and if you see that they're all unrelated and different. But I think looking at the bigger picture sometimes can help us again with that holistic view so that we're not just looking at the surface level of the behaviour. We're understanding how it all fits in together, and then that

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could potentially help us with understanding what the function and communication is of these behaviours.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. And if there's any parent listening, don't get us wrong. I think us as OTs, we have these questions in our brain every time to ourselves, as well. It's easy for us to say, because that's literally what we do, at least it's what I do every day in my practice. I'm always asking questions like, what did I do before that? And then what was the outcome? What happened last session? Was it similar? Was it different? What's changed? So that reflection and these questions that help us to identify patterns, it's already what we do in our practice. We're kind of just getting them to support us in our reasoning while we support them with their understanding.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, definitely. And we're not saying that everyone needs to be, like, experts at understanding functions behind behaviour, because, you know, that's not, that's not what they're trained to do. We've been to university. We've done, you know, professional development, and we do this as a career and as a job. But I think it's just having that openness to see and to validate that there might be something else contributing, that maybe a child's not just being dysregulated because, you know, they want to, because we've said before, Larissa, you shared that quote about, you know, if children could, they will. If they can, then they will do.

But so it's more just being open and, understanding that, you know, there could be something going on that children need our validation of the fact that things can be really tricky for them, and they just might not know how to express it in the best way because they're still developing. And just to have that mindset so that we can move forward and sort of support them in the right ways. And that's a collaboration. That's not, you know, one person having to figure it all out themselves. It's us as a team collaborating and problem solving and working together to figure out what's going on and what might be the right supports.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah. And Mahek some people might be listening to this episode, waiting for those magic strategies, and unfortunately, they're going to get a little bit upset because we're actually giving them more things to consider and think about. But that's me trying to support the OT's out there saying that there is no magic wand but collaboration and stop thinking of the behaviour itself and trying to dig in and try to find these underlying issues. Maybe this behaviour is just a child communicating that something's really hard for them and they need help. And when we change the lens, then we can easily find those strategies that parents might think it's magical, but it's just the whole team putting a lot of effort to support their child.

Mahek Bansal

Exactly. So I have loved this series, Larissa. I feel like we've been able to, or I hope we've been able to delve a little bit into how we think as OTs in terms of supporting emotional regulation and the different factors involved, the different people we work with. So if you have any comments, ideas, tips that you'd like to share, since Larissa and I didn't get to that

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this series, then please feel free to share with us. We would love to hear from you, but in the meantime, this is the end of our series. But we are looking forward to an extremely special episode in two weeks where we have our first guest on the show.

Larissa Ferrari

Mahek you just dropped the bomb.

Mahek Bansal

We might share a few little glimpses of our guest and yeah, we're super excited.

Larissa Ferrari

I am super excited. Yeah.

Mahek Bansal

Okay, so we'll see you in two weeks.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes. Until then. Bye.