Developmental Disability WA, Online Course: Foundations to Understanding Behaviour

Module One: Understanding regulation

Video Transcript

We have come a long way in our understanding about behaviour, and how we might be able to support a person to have less of a need to use behaviours that concern us. Much of history, taught us that through rewards and punishments, a person can learn to adapt their behaviour. However, more recent research and knowledge now helps us better understand the reasons for behaviours of concern. We now know that behaviour is an expression of a person not being regulated. Most behaviour is actually a sign that the person is experiencing something out of their direct control. If we just focus on what the person is doing, we don't get to the point of understanding why the person is doing what they're doing and what needs they have as a person. Behaviour actually stems from stress. Just think about yourself. Our goal is to support people to be less stressed, so that they can behave differently.

To understand what regulation is, we can start by thinking about what happens when a person reacts. Often behaviour can be seen as a cycle, a period where the person is calm and happy, followed by early indicators that the person is agitated or stressed. If the person is not responded to, the person can escalate and become quite aroused. Sometimes a person might reach a point where they lose control or react in ways that we find challenging, like physical or verbal aggression. When it’s over, the person starts to recover and can often feel remorse, confusion, and exhaustion. Think about a time where you might have gone through this cycle. What was it like for you? What was the difference in your ability to control your behaviour? Also think about what was your ability to control your thoughts and actions at each point.

Before knowing how to manage behaviour, we need to know how our brain responds to stress. Put simply, there are three main areas of our brain that helps us manage stress and our behaviour. The survival brain, which helps us immediately respond to threats, this is unconscious. The emotional brain, which helps us process stress in our emotions, and the smart brain or thinking brain which helps us problem solve, socialise and think about our actions. These parts of our brain are connected and respond in specific ways when we experience stress. Our brain is developed in such a way that we need to feel safe before the thinking or smart brain can actually be activated. So when we feel stressed or under threat, our emotional brain takes over, and we stop being able to control our behaviour by logical thought. A scientist called Dan Siegel explains how the brain responds to stress by talking about his hand model of the brain. Let's hear from Dan.

One of the most rewarding experiences for me has been to study brain science and apply it to the experience of parenting, and the hand model of the brain that I use to teach parents is very useful to understand that. So if you take your thumb and put it in the middle of your palm, put your fingers over the top, this is a very useful model of the brain; and when we can actually see in front of us what's going on in the brain,

then we can change what the brain does. So, let me walk you through very basically what happens in this brain and the structures in it. And it goes like this, the spinal cord comes up represented by the wrist, and then you have coming up into the skull, the brainstem and the limbic area which work together to help regulate arousal and your emotions and the way you have a fight, flight, freeze response. These are below the cortex the limbic and brainstem areas, and the cortex is this higher part of the brain that allows us to perceive the outside world and think and reason; and this front most part of the brain right behind your forehead, when the person's oriented like this, is actually the part that regulates the subcortical limbic and brainstem areas.

This regulation is very important because sometimes we can have all sorts of things happen in life; we're tired we're exhausted, or someone pushes a particular emotional button, and we can flip our lids. So rather than being tuned in and connected and balanced and flexible, we can lose all that flexibility, even lose moral reasoning and act in ways that are terrifying to others, including our children. Now, you can actually bring yourself back online and come back to the highroad and make a repair with your child, and that's important to explain to them- and you can also use this hand model of the brain to explain to children, even as young as five and six, how to understand when their emotions are rising up from the brainstem and limbic areas here, and how it's overriding the prefrontal area and making it so they may be about to flip their lids. So, I've had kids come tell me that they're about to go flip their lids and they need a break. They need a timeout and by even just naming that, they can tame it. And that's the power of using the hand model for ourselves and our children to help us all make sense of what goes on in the emotional communication that we have in the course of day to day life.

Just like Dan says, when the emotional and survival parts of the brain are activated, we can flip our lid or lose control over our behaviour. We are less in control over our action’s energy levels and arousal as our thinking brain is switched off. During the day, we might move in and out of the stress response, and our ability to regulate our emotions and actions. This is often called states of arousal. When the parts of our brain are not working well together, and we are being led by the emotional brain, we can become highly aroused or really flat and slow. Feeling good, calm and able to think well is called our optimal arousal zone.

When not in these optimal regulation zones, we can see behaviours which show us that children or adults are experiencing either heightened arousal, where they are highly stressed and anxious, or really low arousal where they feel helpless sad and slow. In both cases, it is important to remember that the person is finding it difficult to think and control their actions when in these zones. There are many reasons why a person might not be in a regulated state.

To summarise, when we focus on what a person's actions are telling us about their regulation and arousal, we can then better understand what is happening for them, and what their needs may be. Understanding regulation and what they might be experiencing are really important to understand behaviour. We must first understand what it is like to be that person before we can hope to help them in ways that reduce the likelihood of behaviour repeating itself, that may concern us.

End of transcript for module one.