

Developmental Disability WA, Online Course:

Foundations to Understanding Behaviour

Module Two: The importance of relationships

Video Transcript

Relationships are really important when we are thinking about behaviour. We often think about relationships as something that makes us feel good. This is certainly the case, but relationships have an even greater role in helping us to be happy, healthy, and functioning well. Relationships are the central most important factor in supporting someone's well-being, their regulation, and the quality of life. We are all wired to connect. How we connect with people is a key factor in what helps us feel safe, both emotionally and physically. Feeling connected helps the survival part of the brain to calm the way our body works in response to stress.

Our brains are always working to keep us safe. This is part of our survival mechanism. Our brain and body are connected, so the quality of our relationships will have an impact on a person's mental and physical health, whether this is something we are conscious of or not. So, what do relationships which create a sense of safety and connection look like? Relationships are about spending time with a person, being present and feeling connected at an emotional level. Some people think that just by being with the person is enough for our underlying need for relationships. But have you ever been at a party and still felt alone? It is the social nature of the interaction and our conversations that matter. Interactions that are conversational, and social in nature are what helps to meet our needs and balance our internal regulation. The need to feel connected to others is so strong that we are all driven to seek and maintain relationships. It is part of our human nature.

Often behaviour is interpreted as wanting to avoid interaction. In most cases, a person is trying to meet their underlying need for connection and interaction. In fact, we will do anything to meet our need for connection, even if it means doing something that might be harmful for myself, or others. So how can we support people with disability to feel safe? Often, we can fall into a pattern of interacting with people with disability, by telling them what to do or asking them lots of questions. However, people need interactions to be social in nature to meet their needs for connection and to feel safe. So how we engage with people matters, and the style of our interactions is really important. Interactions need to be social in nature. This means chatting, using more comments and less questions and instructions.

Often when we analyze our interactions with people with disability, most of them are questions and instructions. Questions and instructions put pressure on people to know the right answer, or to be able to do what other people want them to do. They reduce skills in initiation, and they place pressure on our regulation system. If a person is already anxious and dysregulated, this pressure to perform can increase their distress, and the likelihood they will behave in challenging ways. This means social chat is really important.

Social chat is the building block of relationships. The ordinary things we say really help people to feel socially nourished and connected. Things like; making comments, sharing observations, giving opinions, telling jokes, being silly, and having fun in your interactions will all help to reduce anxiety. It's also about our approach. Our facial expression, eyes, tone, body language and warmth convey connection and relationship. It's not so much about what we say, or about saying the right things, it's about creating a sense of connection on an emotional level that meets the person's needs to feel safe. When we create this sense of connection, we can really help people to regulate their emotions. This is much more than comforting people when they feel distressed. It's about engaging in frequent warm social interaction, which creates an ongoing sense of security throughout your time together.

Sometimes people with disability may have had experiences or have unique qualities that makes interaction difficult. People may struggle to express themselves through words. They may appear to not respond or pay attention when you speak to them. Even when people with disability are not appearing to respond. We should never assume that a person does not want social connections. It is rarely the case. They might just be struggling with knowing how.

You can really help somebody by just being yourself. It can feel uncomfortable to engage with somebody who appears to interact differently but remember that people with disability have the same needs as everyone else. You can notice what you say to other people when you chat socially. It's okay to say the same kinds of things to people with disability. It's also okay to experiment and trust yourself to find ways to connect.

When people behave in ways which challenge us, we can think they are pushing us away, but it's much more likely that their behaviour is signalling their deep need for connection and relationship. It is how we meet a person's unconscious need for interaction, connection, and well-being, that matters.

End of transcript for module two.