

Ep #4: Negativity Bias



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With Your Host

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You are listening to episode four of The Autism Mom Coach: Negativity Bias.

Ever find yourself fixating on all the things that your child can't do while paying little to no attention to the tremendous gains they have made? This is your brain's negativity bias at work. To learn more about how this is impacting your parenting and an exercise you can do to bring some balance when your brain is feeding your negative thoughts, keep listening.

Welcome to The Autism Mom Coach, a podcast for moms who feel overwhelmed, afraid, and sometimes powerless as they raise their child with Autism. My name is Lisa Candra. I'm a certified life coach, lawyer, and most importantly I'm a full-time single mom to a teenage boy with Autism. In this podcast I'll show you how to transform your relationship with Autism and special needs parenting. You'll learn how to shift away from being a victim of your circumstances to being the hero of the story you get to write. Let's get started.

Hello everyone and thank you for being here. It is a nice sunny day while I'm recording this and I have the windows open. So, you might hear children running by and screaming. That said, it's just way too nice of a day to not have the windows open. Anyhow we have been really busy here between launching the podcast and getting ready for our move. We've had some pretty busy weekends but it's fun.

I have packed up most of our belongings, who knew we could have so many things in a two bedroom apartment, but we do. And I have stacked the belongings up near our front door and my cats seem to think that this is a treehouse especially made for them. So, they're way at the top of it and they're fighting over who gets to sit where so it is pretty hilarious to watch actually.

Anyhow, this weekend I will be a guest speaker for the Autism Parenting Magazine's annual summit. And I'm going to be presenting how to keep your cool while your child is melting down which is a really fun topic to talk about because it's something that we all deal with. So, this summit will

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include Autism experts and speakers including Temple Grandin. So, if you're listening to this episode on the date of release you still have time to get a free pass for the summit. And I'll include the link in my show notes.

So, meltdowns. When I talk to my clients about meltdowns one of the things that I ask them is, "What went well?" And they look at me confused, maybe a little annoyed. And they say, "What do you mean? It was a meltdown." And it's not that I'm doubting or dismissing their experiences, I'm certainly not. I get that meltdowns are hard and I can certainly empathize. But as their coach I'm not here to say, "You're right, it's terrible, sorry, good luck." No, that's not how we roll.

So, what I do instead is I teach them what I'm going to teach you today so that they can begin to bring more awareness and gain more authority over how they show up during a meltdown. So, let's get started. As we all know meltdowns by their nature are not pleasant events. That said, they're usually not as bad as we make them out to be. In our minds the sky is falling, we will never have a normal life. No one understands us. Nothing is working and life is not fair. Dramatic.

But this is your brain, this is all of our brains. Human brains are dramatic and for good reason. They are built to ensure survival, not happiness. Our primitive ancestors' ability to survive depended on their ability to prioritize negative information like where the lions hang out, over positive information like which plants are delicious. Those who were more attuned to danger and who paid more attention to the bad things around them were more likely to survive and hand down those genes to their offspring.

So, while most of us don't live in environments where we need to be in constant high alert to ensure our physical survival, the negativity bias still looms large in how our brains operate. Research has shown that human beings begin to develop their negativity bias in the first year of life. So, in addition to having brains that are hardwired to over-remember, over-focus on and over-rely on information that is negative. We've been practicing this skill since we were infants. So, we are good at it, really good.

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One of the things that happens when we start noticing our thoughts is that we judge them and ourselves because we're like, "Wow, I'm negative, I'm a negative person." And if this is you, find some comfort in knowing that these negative thoughts are your brain working exactly as it's designed to work. There is nothing wrong with it or with you. That said our propensity to favor negative over the positive in many instances, it's not serving us especially when it comes to parenting our children with Autism.

Let me give you some examples of how I see this showing up. First, we tend to focus on all the things our kids are not doing versus what they are doing. It's not that we don't see the good and that we are not amazed by their progress, it is that we prioritize what scares us, remember, the brain wants to keep us alive, over what delights us. For example, when my son began to read I began to fixate over the fact that he was multiple grade levels behind his peers because to my brain being behind meant danger.

Second, we don't enjoy the good because we are bracing for the bad. We are afraid to feel happy. We are afraid to let our guards down because we know that something's going to happen, it always does. And when we do that we are having a bad time in the present moment and in the future moments. And finally, we fixate about all the things that might go wrong without considering what could go well or what is actually going well. But still our brains prefer this. They would rather us be on high alert scanning for danger and miserable than uncertain.

Brains hate uncertainty, it feels dangerous. So, what we do is we fill in the uncertainty with terrible thoughts and stories. And as if that weren't enough, the negativity bias, it's like a gateway drug. The gateway opening up the floodgates to all of our brains' cognitive distortions like confirmation bias where we seek out evidence to confirm what we already believe while filtering out evidence that contradicts it. Like the last time we had a good week it was followed by two bad ones. So that's why I need to brace myself.

All or nothing thinking where things are either one way or the other with no in between like my son reads at grade level or he will be homeless.

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Catastrophizing where we imagine worst case scenarios like if my child has a tantrum at the party we will never be invited back. Or if my child doesn't learn how to read and write by the time they graduate from elementary school they will never have a fulfilling life. Now that I have explained what I'm talking about, I want to give you an example from a recent coaching session where I walked a client through what went well during a meltdown.

So here is the situation. It was a Friday night and her brother and sister-in-law invited her and her family to dinner at a new sports bar. She really wanted to go, they'd never really got invited out by their family and she thought that her preteen son who has Autism and loves football would really get a kick out of this. So even though it was out of the ordinary for them to go out to dinner on a Friday night, especially when they had not extensively previewed this to her son, she decided to give it a go.

After an hour at the restaurant her son was done. He yelled, he kicked and he hid under the table while the adults quickly ate their dinner. Here were some of my client's thoughts. I knew it, we can never do anything spontaneously. Confirmation bias. He is never flexible. All or nothing thinking. And we will never be invited to dinner again. A little bit of catastrophizing. During our session we went through the entire event taking a more balanced look at it. And here is what my client discovered.

Her child was actually very flexible. It was a Friday night, this was a last minute decision. He usually relaxes on Fridays and instead they were going to a new restaurant with new people, and as it happens, this restaurant was a sensory explosion of loud TVs, crowded tables and a packed arcade. Her son used clear communication. He told her several times in the car ride over that he didn't want to go. While he was at the restaurant he used multiple coping strategies. He put his headphones on because the TVs were way too loud.

And he also played with his game to distract him while they were waiting for a table. He recovered quickly. Once he was in the car he fell fast asleep and he was fine the next morning like nothing had ever happened. And finally, my client had the opportunity to bond with her brother and to feel

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seen. Her brother doesn't spend much time with her son so this was the first time that she saw her son have a meltdown. And afterwards he reached out to her and he told her how impressed he was by her and her son and that he had even ordered a book to learn more about Autism.

So, this exercise is not about rewriting history. It's not about putting a positive spin. It's about seeing the whole picture when our brains only want to focus on the negative. So here is an exercise that you can practice on your own. The first step to bringing awareness is first to notice when your brain is feeding you negative thoughts about yourself, your child or a particular situation.

Then picture a scale, like the scales of justice with one side piled high with all of your negative thoughts and tilted far in favor of the negative. Your task is to even out the scale even just a little bit by looking for evidence that will begin to tilt the scale more towards neutral. You can do this by asking yourself some powerful questions like, what else might be true about this situation? What am I missing? And what if I'm wrong about these negative thoughts? Give this a try and see what you find.

Before I go, to celebrate the launch of the show I'm giving away self-care packages that will include handmade soaps, soothing lotions, and other goodies from one of my favorite places in Philadelphia, Duross & Langel soap shop. I'm going to be giving these care packages away to three lucky listeners who follow, rate, and review the show. It doesn't have to be a five-star review, although I sure hope it is because I sure hope that you love the show. I want your honest feedback. I want to create a show that provides tons of value. So let me know what you think.

Visit theAutismmomcoach.com/podcastlaunch to learn more about the contest and how to enter. I'll be announcing the winners on an upcoming show. Thanks, and talk to you next week.

Thanks for listening to The Autism Mom Coach. If you want more information or the show notes and resources from the podcast, visit theAutismmomcoach.com. See you next week.