

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

You are listening to episode 10 of *The Autism Mom Coach*. Catastrophizing.

Do you find yourself time traveling to the future and imagining a worse case scenario for yourself or your child? This is called catastrophizing. And while catastrophizing is a 100% normal, it is not useful. When we catastrophize we imagine a worst possible outcome while simultaneously developing amnesia about all of the ways that we and our children are resilient and resourceful. Keep listening to learn a simple way to reframe your worst case scenario thoughts.

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 welcome to the podcast. I am so glad you are here and I hope you're doing well. Today we are going to talk about something I think we all do which is catastrophize. We think of worse case scenarios in our head and then we put ourselves into a full blown panic thinking about them.

Before I get to the topic though I want to share a review from GC Mom titled A Supportive Hug. GC Mom writes, "I'm so glad I found Lisa's podcast through The Autism Mom's page. I'm always eager to listen to the next episode when it launches. Lisa is real and I love that she gives examples from her own life and clients." Well, thank you so much, GC Mom for the review and I am really glad that you find the stories helpful. I also hope that you entered to win one of the self-care packages that I'll be giving away for folks who review the podcast.

Listen up, the giveaway ends today. So, if you're listening on the release date of this podcast which is Wednesday May 11<sup>th</sup>, you still have time to

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

review the podcast and enter to win one of the self-care packages I'm giving away. You can enter to win by going to the [Autismcoach.com/podcast launch](https://www.Autismcoach.com/podcast-launch).

Alright, onto the topic for today. So, let's say you get an email from your child's teacher and immediately you start worrying that your child has done something wrong and they are going to get kicked out of school. Or after a few months of speech therapy, you tell yourself that your child will never speak, they will never be able to communicate and their lives will be terrible. When you do this you are catastrophizing. So, let's just start with a definition.

Catastrophizing is a cognitive distortion that prompts people to imagine all of the possible negative scenarios that could happen and emotionally react to them as if they are real. Now, catastrophizing is incredibly common. Remember from episode four, Negativity Bias. Our brains are hardwired to focus on the bad stuff this is because once upon a time the tendency to focus on the bad was essential to our survival. And now thanks to evolution our brains are still constantly on guard and scanning for danger.

The problem isn't so much the catastrophic thoughts themselves, but the fact that we tend to buy into them. Remember, we believe our own stories and when we believe them we ruminate over them even when no actual threat is present. And the fascinating part is our brains don't know the difference between an actual and imagined threat. Your brain just knows what you tell it. And when you think about the worst case scenario happening your brain actually thinks it's happening. This is why your heart starts to race and your throat catches a bit.

Your brain is releasing chemicals into your body, cortisol and adrenalin which are the stress hormones. And then your body, it actually feels like something is happening to you because it is, you're having a chemical reaction to the thoughts that you are having about something that's not even happening.

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

Before I share with you how to handle worse case scenario thoughts I want to tell you what I don't recommend. I don't recommend that you tell yourself, just don't worry about it. It probably won't happen. And this is for two reasons. First, I don't know, maybe it will happen. Maybe you're catastrophizing about your child getting older or getting bigger, or your child's life when you are no longer around. And chances are hopefully all three of these things will happen.

Your child will age, they will grow, and they will outlive you. And even for the things you may be catastrophizing about that aren't certain to happen, telling yourself it won't happen usually doesn't work. It feels like empty reassurance and your brain is likely to pop up with, well, but it could. It happened to someone else I know. And then your brain goes out searching for all the ways that it could possibly happen and you're back in that loop.

The second reason I don't say, assure yourself it won't happen is because whether the thing you are catastrophizing about happens or not, is really not the issue. The issue is that you think catastrophizing about it is useful in the first place and it's not. It is really just a way to scare the shit out of yourself now in hopes that this will make it less painful in the future or that by scaring yourself now this will somehow prepare you or maybe even prevent the thing from happening in the future.

Okay, so here is what I do recommend for you when you are having worst case scenario thoughts. First, notice the worst case scenario thoughts and name it. In this step we want to separate the act of catastrophizing from the thoughts you are having. So, let's say you find yourself spinning about how awful it will be to find another school for your child if they are removed from their current school setting. As soon you notice the thought, stop and name it. I am having a worst case scenario thought about whatever it is, in this case the school placement.

So just to give you an example I do this every day with my son with his OCD loops. And OCD loops and worst case scenario thoughts are very similar, if not actually the same thing. They are really similar because what happens when you're having an OCD thought or a worst case scenario

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

thought is that your brain is telling you, this is really important, this is urgent. You must think about this now. So let me give you the example for my son.

Let's say he is looping over whether he said sorry to one of his friends. He will ask me over and over, he will try to tell me the story again and again, giving me more and more context each time. So, here's how this plays out. I pause him and I say, "Ben, what's happening here?" Now, Ben knows the routine so he will usually reflexively respond, "OCD." Then launch right back into the loop.

And so again just slow him down, stop him and say, "What's happening specifically?" And Ben will respond with something like, "My brain is telling me it is important to tell you this and to get an answer and then I will feel better if I keep talking about it." That is OCD. And this is the distinction we are working to make because really it doesn't matter what he's looping about. The issue is, is that he's looping about it in the first place.

Second, now that you have named it, decide, do I want to hang out with this thought or is it time to redirect my brain? Here's how it plays out with us. I will say to him, "Okay, now that we know that this is OCD and your brain is trying to tell you this is important, what are our options? Do you want to redirect your brain or do you want to hang out with these thoughts?" Sometimes he's able to redirect himself to one of his strategies rather quickly like distracting himself or just saying, no. But sometimes he wants to hang out, it feels real, and it feels urgent, and it feels important to him.

And this might happen to you too especially when you first start practicing the skill. So okay, fine, let's hang out with the thought. But here are the rules. If you want to hang out with your worst case scenario thoughts you have to play them out all of the way. This is because when you are catastrophizing your brain doesn't actually take the scenario all the way. What usually happens is it ruminates about the thought that you find the scariest or the saddest and it just loops there. It doesn't play it out. So that is what you need to do.

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

So, going back to the example of the phone call from school, let's just say your child gets kicked out of school, now what? Do you say, "Okay, thanks", and read up on homeschooling? Or is it possible that you would contest the decision? Maybe you hire an advocate. Maybe you enlist the school to identify another appropriate environment for your child. Would you probably manage to find another school? I'm not saying this is a pleasant situation, trust me, I've had this experience a couple of times.

But a child being removed from a school usually is not the end of the world. And in fact, it can be an opportunity to find a school more suited to the child's needs. Not only that, but if your child did get removed from their school and your thoughts are, I can't handle this, then that's what you're going to make come true. Remember The Little Engine, if you think you can you will. If you think you can't you won't?

Either way you are right, this is because if you think I can't handle it, it's going to produce a feeling of hopelessness. Then you're not going to take any action to help yourself and you are way more likely to end up with no options. Whereas if your thoughts are, I'll figure this out, then that's what you'll do. Your thoughts will create your reality because they will motivate you to take the actions that will create the result that you want. Or let's just say your child doesn't speak, this is the case for some children with Autism. They remain non-verbal, does this mean that they will never communicate?

Might they be learning ways to communicate in speech therapy? Might you obtain an AAC device or make use of PECS, sign language or some other modality for supporting non-verbal communication? Is there evidence in the world of people living lives without speaking? Might your child be one of them? Again, this is hard, it's not what you expected and it is scary but what I'm saying is if you're going to hang out with these worst case scenario thoughts, plug it all the way out and get concrete.

Don't just accept your brain's story that this is clearly a life ending disaster or that you are powerless.

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

Next, I want you to give equal airtime to other possibilities. When you are spending so much time with your worst case scenario thoughts you're not even considering other possibilities. And guess what? If you're not opening up yourself to other possibilities you may never even let them in.

Remember, our brains search for evidence to confirm what we believe to be true, this is called our confirmation bias which is another cognitive distortion that we'll talk about in a later episode.

So, if we spend all of our time in worst case scenario land, our brain will be looking for evidence to confirm whatever stories we are telling ourselves and filtering out evidence to the contrary. So, if you're going to let your imagination run into the future, which is really all just a fantasy, let it tell you another story as well.

For example, if you're telling yourself that your child getting removed from their current school is a terrible thing, consider that they might not get removed in the first place. Consider, you may identify a school you prefer over the current placement. Consider a different placement might serve your child better.

So again, accept the premise, it might happen but don't accept the premise that it's automatically a disaster. Accept that it might happen and then follow it all the way through mentally to see what you actually need to do. What actions would you need to take? What would you need to decide ahead of time? This is going to free you from all of the anxiety and fear about the catastrophizing.

So, to recap, notice and name it, decide am I hanging out with this thought or am I going to redirect my brain? And then if you're going to hang out, plug it all the way out and give equal airtime to other possible outcomes. Now, remember it is human to go to the worst case scenario so don't be surprised when these thoughts pop up because they definitely will. This is okay and the more practiced you get at redirecting your brain and playing the scenario all the way out the more automatic it will become and the less overwhelming these worst case scenario thoughts will be.

## Ep #10: Catastrophizing

Alright, good luck and I'll 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](http://theAutismmomcoach.com). See you next week.