

Ep #13: Managing Summer Break Anxiety



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With Your Host

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You are listening to episode 13 of The Autism Mom Coach: Managing Summer Break Anxiety. If you are feeling anxious about the summer break, you are not alone. Summer breaks can be especially challenging for parents raising children with autism. Keep listening for some tips about how you can manage your summer break anxiety.

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'm so glad you're here and I hope you're doing well and that your summer break is off to a good start. I'm recording this podcast in late May and so as of this date my son still has a couple of weeks left of school and I am savoring every minute of it. A few more precious weeks of daily structure courtesy of the school district until school is out for summer and my son is looking at me and asking, "What should I do today?"

As you all know, summer breaks typically include less structure, less support and new routines for our kiddos who thrive on routine, who benefit from multiple supports and struggle with transitions and new routines. And even though I have been doing this for 10 years give or take I can still feel myself bracing a bit and spinning with thoughts like, I can't give him the structure he needs. I need to figure out a way to fill up his time. And I wish he could go to camp. I don't know how I'm going to balance my son being home with working my full-time job.

I probably won't have any downtime this summer. I hope he doesn't regress. I hope he doesn't resist going back to school. What will I do then? Just saying these thoughts out loud I can feel my chest tightening and my heart beginning to race. And this experience inside of my body, this is

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anxiety. Anxiety is a feeling or a vibration in our body in response to thoughts in our brains. We all have different experiences of anxiety. You might experience symptoms of tension like increased heart rate, sweaty palms, clenched jaws or your shoulders creeping up around your ears.

You might notice that your brain doesn't quite work the way it normally does. You might feel unresponsive, or foggy, or like your mind is racing. Now, while the physiological experience of anxiety can be intense, anxiety in and of itself is not a problem. In fact, anxiety is a normal evolutionary response to danger, real or perceived. It is a tool our bodies developed to try to keep us alive while we were being hunted by lions. And it played a central role in human survival.

Nowadays though most of the things that cause us anxiety like the phone call from the school, or the meltdown in Target, they're not going to kill us but our bodies react in the same way as they did to the lion sniffing around the cave. So again, while this experience is not pleasant it's not a problem. Is a feeling like any other feeling that will come and go, that is if we don't resist it.

But we usually resist it by telling ourselves, this is terrible and freaking out about how uncomfortable we feel. And spinning for all of the reasons, our situation is terrible and there's no way around it and no one understands. Sound familiar? This resistance is like throwing fuel on the fire.

So instead of ebbing and flowing the wave continues to rise and rise. And as a result, you are more anxious and you are likely no closer to addressing the underlying issue triggering your anxiety in the first place. And this is because for most of us anxiety usually does not lead to productive action. It usually leads to more spinning and more anxiety.

Now for those of you who are like, "No, anxiety helps me get things done. When I feel good and scared I get up and I get going." I'll say this, no, it doesn't, maybe the adrenalin gives you a boost but you were getting things done in spite of your anxiety, not because of it. And even worse, you've created a neural loop for this and a little reward system for yourself. Get

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jacked up, get good and scared, get things done. Now, this is not sustainable. And the science concerning chronic and acute anxiety shows it's not good for you.

So, what to do, I'm going to give you three things to do when you are feeling anxious. First, notice and name. Now, I know how basic this seems but it is important for a couple of reasons. First, some of us are so used to the constant hum of anxiety that we barely notice it. So, notice it. Get familiar with how and where anxiety shows up in your body. What does it feel like? Is it tight? Is it clenching? Is it fast? Is it sweaty? Does it stay in one place or does it travel around?

Second, when we name it we demystify it a bit. You create space between you and the experience you are having. This is the difference between I am an anxious person versus I am experiencing anxiety.

Third, when we notice and name we give ourselves the chance to slow it down. And this is important because speed is an accelerant to our stress response. So even the few seconds we take to notice, and name, and explore our experience, all of this is a chance for us to slow it down.

Second, allow and breathe.

The next step is to allow the discomfort and breathe into it. Again, the opposite of what we usually do. When we are resisting the feeling of anxiety we are usually holding our breath in some way and creating more anxiety. So, when we take the time to pause and breathe we are able to reset ourselves in the moment. I'm going to walk you through a breathing technique called four seven eight. I learned this along with my son a couple of years ago from his therapist and we still use it.

So, you start by breathing in deeply like you are breathing in slowly through your nose for four seconds. And at the top of the breath, you hold it for seven. And then you breathe out slowly through pursed lips for eight seconds. When you are breathing in, imagine taking in the smell of flowers, or a candle, or essential oils, or really whatever you like to smell. Flowers don't do it for me because I'm allergic. When you are breathing out, purse

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your lips like when you are blowing out birthday candles while you relax the muscles in your face, jaw, shoulders and stomach.

So in through the nose for four seconds, hold and then out through pursed lips for eight. This breath work begins to send a signal throughout your body that you are safe. It slows your heart rate, decreases your blood pressure and that feeling that your heart is beating out of control. It also relaxes your muscles, releasing tension and allows better blood flow through your body. And this increased circulation alone can help reduce anxiety and panic as new fresh oxygen filled blood floods your entire body.

Again, the four seven eight breathing technique, I will leave a link in the show notes so that you can see how this is done and begin to do it yourself.

Third, write it down. Once you've had the opportunity to calm down your body, consider downloading your thoughts onto paper so they aren't swimming around in your brain. Get them out of your head where you can see them and do something about them. Now, writing them down is just another way to create space between you and your anxiety, and you and the thoughts that you are having that are creating the anxiety.

Once you take a look at these thoughts like my child won't have enough structure, you get to decide if you want to keep thinking this thought which plunges you into the abyss of anxiety. Or if you want to think a new thought that brings you into a new place of control over your own mind. No matter what the situation we always get to decide what to think. So, if a thought we are thinking doesn't serve us, we can choose one that does.

No matter the situation we always get to decide if a thought we are thinking actually serves us and whether we want to keep it. To determine this I ask myself, does this thought support me right now? How do I feel when I think it? Does it help me take productive action or does it keep me spinning in anxiety? What else could I think instead? I will share with you some of the thoughts I am practicing about the summer. I can figure this out, I always do. I can be flexible and it does not need to be perfect.

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Now, these are not grandiose or Instagrammable thoughts but they are thoughts that feel better to me than, oh shit, it's summer, I don't know what to do with him. When I feel just a little better, how does that show up in my actions? Well, for one, I'm not hanging out with my worst case scenario thoughts, so my body feels more relaxed and my brain is clearer. I get my calendar out and take a look. I fill in the plans we do have like ESY, my son's trips with his father. Okay, what's left? How else might I use this time?

Well, he really likes his tutor, maybe the tutor can stay afterhours and they can go on a hike or swimming. Or maybe unstructured time isn't the worst thing. He is 14 after all, maybe there are things that he wants to do. Maybe he can create his own schedule. Now, depending on the age and functioning of your child this will look different for you. The point is, your ability to take productive action opens up when you are willing to process the feeling of anxiety and explore new ways of thinking about the circumstances.

This is a process, it is not a one and done. But over time you can begin to rewire your deep felt thoughts to ones you want to think on purpose in order to create the feelings and fuel the actions you want to take. And of course, we will talk about this lots more in upcoming episodes so stay tuned. Thank you so much for listening and I will 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.