

## Ep #25: Back to School Series: Mental Rehearsal



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 25 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Setting Yourself Up for Success Part two: Mental Rehearsal.

It's show time, the 2022 school year is here and if you are finding yourself feeling a little more anxious than usual then this is the perfect time to practice the skill I'm going to teach you today. It is an emotional regulation skill used by Navy Seals, elite athletes and CEOs just to name a few to successfully manage high pressure situations. And if it works for the Navy Seals, it can work for us. 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 and welcome to the Back to School series of *The Autism Mom Coach* podcast and part two of Setting Yourself Up for Success. Last week we talked about making decisions ahead of time and this week we're going to talk about mental rehearsal. I first learned about mental rehearsal or coping ahead of time which is what it's called in DBT therapy which is dialectical behavioral therapy about two years ago. So, for those of you who don't know, DBT is an evidence based psychotherapy that focuses on four main skills, emotional regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness and mindfulness.

Mental rehearsal or coping ahead of time is one of the emotional regulation skills. And it is specifically aimed at navigating difficult and intense emotions more effectively. Sounds good, right? Well, it is and this is the part I like the most. It is research based. Research shows that we can learn new skills and ways to cope by simply imagining them and rehearsing them in our minds.

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Studies have shown that many of the same areas of the brain that are activated when we are imagining an activity are the same ones that light up when we are actually engaging in the activity which is pretty fascinating. For example, elite athletes mentally rehearse everything they do before a competition. They will perform the activity repeatedly in their mind and each time performing it perfectly. By doing this they are strengthening the neural pathway needed to reinforce those skills to help them become more automatic.

So, what does this mean for us? It means we can improve our ability to cope with the challenges we face parenting a child with special needs like emotional regulation by simply rehearsing it ahead of time. So, let's pause right here. If you're like, "I'm way ahead of you. I rehearse worst case scenarios in my mind all of the time." This is not what I am talking about. When we are catastrophizing, we are imagining things going wrong and that we are helpless to do anything but feel terrible. This is very different.

In the catastrophizing scenario we are helpless and hopeless. But in this situation where we are coping ahead of time we are empowered and in control. Alright, so here's how it works. First, identify the situation that is likely to prompt uncomfortable emotions. Now, for this we just want the circumstance, facts only. For example, morning drop off at school, I am nervous that my child will not get out of the car. Second, decide what coping or problem solving skills you want to use in this situation.

Now, a coping or problem solving skill is what we talked about last week, making decisions ahead of time. When you decide ahead of time how you want to think, the feeling you want to create and the actions that you want to show up and do, when you make that decision ahead of time that is actually a problem solving skill. So, for example, if my child resists going to school and does not want to get out of the back seat of the car, I can remind myself of whatever thought I have decided to think on purpose in this situation. This is normal. He is afraid. It is okay.

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Whatever it is that you decide ahead of time that will help support you in this situation with creating an emotion that will keep you calm, or just even neutral, this is the problem solving skill that you want to bring into this situation.

So, in this situation when my child is in the back seat of the car and he doesn't want to get out of the drop off line, the thought that I have decided to practice ahead of time is, change and transition is really hard for him. When I'm thinking this I'm calmer. My body is calmer and my urge to maybe yell, or scream, or to threaten him, "If you don't do this then I'm taking away your toy."

All of that is subdued when I'm calmer, when I'm more in control and when I'm doing this I can stay focused on remaining regulated so that I'm not escalating the tension inside the car.

Third, then imagine the situation in your mind as vividly as possible. And when I do this I always think of – was it Sophia from the Golden Girls? Remember, she would tell those stories, picture it, Sicily 1922 and she would describe all of the characters in lots and lots of detail. You want to do this for yourself when you are mentally rehearsing. Imagine yourself in the situation right now, who was there? What are they doing? What are they saying? What are you doing? What are you not doing?

So, for example, I just pulled up to school and we are in the drop off line. I see other children exiting their cars without incident. We are up next. My child is in the back seat, he's kicking the front seat and he's yelling, "I don't want to go to school." I feel my chest tightening, my heart is beating faster. I make eye contact with my child's one-on-one aide who is curbside to greet him and I feel my face burning hot with embarrassment. I see myself looking around to the other parents, to the other teachers and wondering, what are they thinking of me, what are they thinking of my child?

Next, number four, I rehearse in my mind, coping effectively. I pause, I take some deep grounding breaths, I remind myself, I am safe, my child is safe. Transitions are hard, the staff is here to support him. I only need to focus

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on this moment on my child and nothing else. I take some more deep breaths. I put my hand on my heart. I remind myself, you've got this.

The aide opens the door. My child struggles a bit but he eventually does get out and now he's with his one-on-one aide and he is crying. He is crying for me. But I tell myself, it is okay. He is okay. They will take care of him. I make eye contact with the one-on-one aide, and he gives me the sign, we've got this. I drive away, deep breaths, deep breaths.

Number five, practice relaxation after rehearsing. So just notice what happened. You have escalated yourself to a heightened state and practiced dealing effectively with the problem from that heightened state. Even as I was just rehearsing this out loud to you, I can feel my heart beating faster and my chest tightening. But it's okay, it's a controlled and supported atmosphere. Still, you do want to take the time to bring yourself back in whatever way works best for you.

For me it's always the deep rhythmic breathing with the hand on my heart. Maybe for you it is taking a walk, maybe it is running in place or doing some jumping jacks, whatever you need to do to return yourself to this moment of safety. And now I just want to tell you, if you are doing this it's a lot. It is a lot to put yourself in harm's way even in your imagination but there are benefits to doing this in a controlled and supportive manner while simultaneously practicing the skills and coping mechanisms that you want to bring to these moments.

When we do this again and again we build novel brain pathways and new positive habit patterns. This practice enables us to move from our default patterns to purposeful ways of thinking, feeling and showing up that align with how we want to show up in these moments.

Okay, there you have it. Practice, it doesn't make perfect but it starts the process of creating the new neural pathways and the new habit patterns that will support you in showing up in a way that you want to show up in a more effective way. That's it for today's lesson. I encourage you to check out the show notes.

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I am going to leave a link to an article about mental rehearsal and I am also going to leave a link to the DBT workbook worksheet about coping ahead of time so that you can print this out for yourself and have it with you whenever you decide to practice this.

Finally, if you are liking what I am saying and it's resonating with you, and you want to learn more about how we can work together to uplevel your skills parenting a child with Autism, now is the time to schedule a consultation with me. All you need to do is go onto my website, schedule a free consultation and we can chat about how we can work together to best support you. Thank you 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](http://theautismmomcoach.com). See you next week.