

Ep #26: Back to School Series: Navigating Grief



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With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 26 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, podcast, Back to School Series: Navigating Grief.

This time of year can bring on heavy doses of grief for special needs parents. If this is you know that you are not alone. Stay tuned to this week's episode to learn more about the grief you are experiencing and how you can support yourself through the process.

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.

Welcome to the podcast and I hope you're doing well and that the school year is off to a good start for you. A couple of updates. The Ask the Autism Expert episode with Darren Sush, that is going to be pushed back one week. I needed to postpone this episode because of some big news in my world that caused me to completely pivot in some of my plans for the fall, including my interview with Darren. But not to worry, I am still going to interview him and you will hear that interview in early September.

Since this week's episode isn't what I expected it to be, it's not the interview with Darren, I had to come up with another topic and this one was pretty easy because it's a common theme that I have been experiencing myself and that I have been seeing in my clients. And that is back to school grief. Now, when I talk about grief and special needs parenting I am referring to the sense of loss we feel between what we wanted or imagined for our kids and what is actually happening.

Here is how I am seeing this show up, seeing your child's classmates for the first time and thinking, wow, this is what neurotypical five year olds are like. My child is so behind. School announcements about extracurricular

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activities knowing that your child's therapies and other challenges will make participating in these 'normal' activities unlikely. School drop off, watching other kids running to one another and engaging with one another and wondering if your child will be included, if they will have any friends. Or whether they're going to be left out.

First day of school pictures on social media, watching your child's elementary school classmates entering high school while your child isn't. This final example is my example. I knew for some time that my son's high school experience would not look the way I had imagined it, the way I originally imagined it pre diagnosis, him attending the local high school. Or even how I imagined it five years ago, attending the local high school with some supports.

Instead of a local school he would be attending a smaller school and a more therapeutic environment. And this was perfect for him. This is what he needed but then life happens. He's not starting high school as planned. Just a few days before the recording of this episode we got a call that a spot had opened up on a waitlist for a program that we have been wanting to get into. And just like that we are going to spend the next couple of months in a hotel or Airbnb in another state. While I am so glad to be here I'm still feeling the grief.

I see the pictures of his elementary school classmates from New Jersey and Connecticut as they enter their freshman year of high school and my heart sinks. What about my son? If this is you right now, if you are bawling in the car after orientation or back to school night, or the first day of school drop off, you are not alone. Like I said in episode eight, riding the wave, emotions are like waves.

They peak, they break, they dissipate and it's the same with grief so long as you allow the emotion to flow through your body rather than getting stuck, literally stuck in your body. And presenting as headaches, stiff necks, clenched jaws and other fun stuff like whatever is going on underneath my

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eye right now. I think it's a clogged tear duct but I don't know, but it's not a good look, I will tell you that. So, what to do.

I want to give you some things that you can do in these moments to support yourself so that you can ride the wave of grief rather than getting pulled under or knocked over by it. So first, hand on your heart and take three long deep breaths, in through your nose, and out through your mouth. Get yourself back into your body, present and grounded.

Two. Radically accept whatever is happening right now. Whatever emotion you are feeling let it be there. Allow it. This means opening up to it. This means dropping your resistance. Like I said in episode eight, if we stand firm and try to resist a wave it's either going to knock us down, pull us under or both. So instead of resisting the feeling of grief, allow it to be there and flow through you as you breathe through it. Watch it peak and break, ebb and flow. This is how you ride the wave of an emotion.

Now, this is a practice because allowing ourselves to feel pain is exactly the opposite of what our primitive brain wants us to do. It is only interested in seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, not hanging out with it. When I am allowing an emotion I like to pair it with a verbal reminder. This is a feeling, it will not last forever. So, I remind myself of this with some phrases like, right now, it is like this, this is what grief feels like. This is what sadness feels like. This is a wave.

Finally, number three. Support yourself with tons of self-compassion. Now, again, this does not come naturally for most of us. We are actually quite good at being pretty mean to ourselves and being our own worst critics. And we have years of experience so we're pretty good at it. But this is not helpful at all, it actually undermines our confidence and self-concept. And it makes it really hard to make decisions. Self-compassion on the other hand builds self-confidence and safety.

Like allowing an emotion, practicing self-compassion is a skill and a habit that you can build. You can start off small and build over time. Now, I think the gold standard of a self-compassion practice is to treat yourself the way

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you would your best friend, assuming that you are loving and kind to your best friend. But for most of us being as loving to ourselves as we are to our best friend is a bridge too far. So, we can start off with what Kristin Naff who is the leading expert on self-compassion and an Autism mom calls a self-compassion break.

I will link this in the show notes but here's how it works. There are three parts to self-compassion, mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness. So, think of a situation in your life that is difficult or causing you some stress. Call the situation to mind and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.

Then say to yourself first, this is a moment of suffering. This is the mindfulness part of it, noticing it. Other options include this is stressful, this is what grief feels like. Right now, I am experiencing a painful emotion. Then next, number two, say to yourself, suffering is a part of life. This is the common humanity part. You can use other options like other people feel this way. I'm not alone. We all struggle in our lives.

And then finally, number three, say to yourself, may I be kind to myself? Or maybe a phrase like, may I be nice to myself? May I hold space for this? Or may I accept myself as I am? If this feels really weird to you, start with using my voice if that's helpful. I have heard from some clients and podcast listeners as well as folks who reach out to me on social media that they sometimes hear my voice in their head reminding them of the think, feel, act cycle, or questioning, is this a fact or a thought?

So, if my voice is helpful to you, go right ahead and use it. I will bear witness for you. When you are seeing your child struggling, when you are telling yourself that they are suffering, when you believe it is your fault, when you think you are not doing enough, this is painful, this is suffering, this is hard. It is normal to feel this way, so many moms just like you feel this way. I feel this way sometimes. You are not alone. And finally, you are doing a great job even on the days you lose it, even on the days you break down in the grocery store or hide out in the car.

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You are allowed to feel the way you are feeling without judging yourself, you are allowed to be kind to yourself right now because I said so. So, if that's helpful please use it. There is no need to take this pain you are experiencing and turn on yourself and create suffering. You can allow this emotion and you can be kind to yourself while you do it.

Alright, that's what I have for you this week. Before I go I want to invite you to join my one-on-one coaching program, six months of coaching with me to change your life and your relationship with Autism parenting forever. You can learn more by scheduling a consultation with me and we can chat about where you are, where you want to be and how we can work together to create the results you want in your life. You can do this by going to theautismmomcoach.com, the website and click on Work With Me and schedule a consultation.

Alright, that's it for this week, 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.