

Ep #28: The Comparison Trap



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With Your Host

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You are listening to episode 28 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, The Comparison Trap. Have you ever found yourself comparing your life to the lives of your friends, family members or strangers on social media and thinking they have it so easy, they are so lucky, I'd love to have their problems? And then almost immediately being hit with a wave of guilt and thinking, I shouldn't be judging other people, it's not right. I shouldn't compare myself to others.

Or feeling sad about a circumstance in your life and then telling yourself that you should not be sad because other people have it worse. Well, if you've ever found yourself here, you my friend are in the comparison trap. And so long as you are hanging out there you are stuck somewhere between feeling bad about yourself, bad about other people, or all three. And so long as you are hanging out there you are stuck somewhere between feeling bad about yourself or feeling bad about other people, or both, not a great place to be but one that we find ourselves in so often.

Here is the good news. The more you learn how to manage your mind the better you will get at avoiding this trap or at the very least not staying stuck in it. Keep listening to learn more.

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 another episode of the podcast. I hope you are doing well. And for those of you with school age children I hope the transition from summer to school year is going well. This has been a really strange September for us. We are out of state while my son attends a program and I am finding myself really exhausted which I find odd in some ways because I'm not at

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home. There is not much cleaning at all to do. And I have less things to do in some sense.

But although in some ways I have less to do I think it's the emotional labor of the program and some of the decisions I have been making lately that has just left me exhausted. And it's in times like this when I'm already feeling depleted, when I'm already feeling afraid and nervous about whether this program is going to work that I find myself more susceptible to comparing myself and my situation to other people and not in a good way.

Tell me if some of these thoughts are familiar to you, thoughts like other people are so lucky. They have it easier. This is not fair. And then almost immediately the pendulum swings and I start scolding and judging myself for comparing myself to other people and telling myself that I have no right to be upset since there are other people who have it even worse. These are examples of two types of comparison.

The first is compare and despair which is basically like other people have it better than me, or it must be nice. And then there's comparative suffering which is like literally ranking pain. My pain is not as bad as someone else's, or my pain is worse than someone else's. The end result of both forms of comparison is more suffering for us. No good.

So, let's just first talk about why do we compare ourselves to others? The short answer is because we are human. We are social beings. Comparing where we stand in relationship to other people is deeply embedded in our biology. For our ancestors, their survival literally depended on remaining a part of the group which meant being acutely aware of the things like social hierarchies and status. In other words, how they compared to others around them.

And comparison is not altogether bad, it can be a very prosocial tool in that it enables us to model our behavior in ways that will allow us to be part of a larger group. And it can also be useful in terms of setting goals and motivating growth. The coworker who gets promoted, the friend who gets remarried after a bitter divorce, the neighbor who loses five pounds by

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adding an evening walk to her routine. We can use comparison as a way of looking at other people to see what is possible for us. If they can do it, so can I or why not me?

But this is usually not the way we use comparison. We usually use it as a way of feeling bad or worse about ourselves and other people. I'm going to give you some more examples. Let's start with compare and despair. And again, if I were going to sum up compare and despair it would be with the phrase, 'it must be nice'. It must be nice that your kid can talk. It must be nice that you can use your money for vacations instead of therapies. It must be nice that you don't even know what Autism is.

When we compare and despair we feel bad about ourselves and bad about other people. And then so often like I said we go straight from compare and despair to judging ourselves for comparing in the first place. This is the comparison trap. You feel bad about yourself, you judge other people, you judge yourself.

And then there is comparative suffering which again is the act of ranking pain. And I would sum this up as the quest to determine who has it worse or who has the right to be sad. Some examples, I should not complain about my son's constant looping, at least he can talk, some parents of Autistic kids would love to have this problem. I shouldn't be sad that my son is missing his freshman year at school, at least we got to be here in the first place, some people don't even get that opportunity.

Or they have no right to complain, their kid is high functioning and can talk. My child is severe and non-verbal. Do you see it? In both these instances we are judging ourselves, we are judging other people and we feel terrible. Even if we feel slightly better because we aren't as 'bad as someone else' or we believe we are doing it better than someone else. That lasts for about a second until we are hit with a wave of guilt and judgment.

So, these types of comparison, there is no upside. There is no growth here. We are staying stuck in our sadness, fear, resentment or whatever it is and we are creating even more disconnection in our lives. And to top it off, none

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of this does anything to change whatever we are upset about. Me resenting other people whose kids are starting their freshman year of high school isn't doing a darned thing to ease my sadness and it doesn't change the facts of the situation. It's just creating more misery for me.

And then telling myself I have no right to be upset because my kid is high functioning. Well, that's another shit sandwich too. When you are telling yourself that your emotions don't matter, that other people have it worse, you don't only get to feel sad, you get to layer in some guilt and judgment too. Again, no upside.

So, let's talk about what to do when we find ourselves getting pulled into the comparison traps. Notice always, notice it first. Now, not only is comparison deeply rooted in our biology, it is also a well-practiced habit. So, the first step always is to notice when and how am I comparing myself to others. What am I telling myself? How am I talking to myself about this? Next, acceptance, this means after you notice what you are thinking and what you are feeling, that you then don't jump to judging and guiltting yourself.

Just acknowledge the thoughts and feelings and allow them to be there without judgment. And then finally, self-compassion. When we are in the comparison trap we are not being kind to ourselves at all. We are diminishing our own pain and we are judging ourselves for having it. What would it be like in these moments of suffering when you are comparing your life to the perfect lives you believe your friends are living or when you are telling yourself that you shouldn't be sad and that you should be grateful because other people have it worse.

What if in these moments you just showed yourself some love and compassion. If you noticed your own pain and offered yourself support, would it take the pain away? No, but it would likely ease it. And above all, you would not be layering your pain with additional suffering that comes when you compare yourself to others.

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So how to do this. Back in episode 26 I talked about self-compassion breaks. This is when we take a moment to notice our own suffering and to provide ourselves with care and support. So, there are three parts of a self-compassion break, the one is the awareness, the noticing. The second is to recognize the common humanity. And the third is to offer ourselves support. So, this could look like this is a moment of suffering. This is really painful for me. This is difficult.

And then second, of course I feel sad, or scared, or whatever it is, anybody would. And then the third, may I be kind to myself right now? May I allow myself to feel this emotion without judgment? So, when you do this you can take a couple of deep breaths, put your hand on your heart, slow things down and become present for yourself. Because when we're comparing ourselves to others we create disconnection not just with the other people but with ourselves.

We are quite literally in their business and out of our business. And so, when we practice self-compassion we put ourselves back in our own business and in charge of supporting ourselves first.

Alright, that's all I've got for you today. But before I go I do want to invite you to sign up for a one-on-one call with me. If you want to compound the benefits that you've been getting from listening to this podcast and implementing some of the tips and tricks that I teach you, you can explode your growth by working with me one-on-one. So, if this is of interest to you, now is the time. Set up a call and let's talk. Thank you so much 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.