

Ep #65: On the Hard Days



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 65 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, On the Hard Days.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach* podcast, I am your host, Lisa Candra. I am a lawyer, a life coach, and most importantly, I am the full-time single mother of a teenager with Autism and other comorbid diagnoses. I know what it is like to wonder if you are doing enough or the right things for your child and to live in fear of their future.

I also know that constantly fueling yourself with fear and anxiety is not sustainable for you or of any benefit to your child. That is why in this podcast I will share practical strategies and tools you can use to shift from a chronic state of fight, flight to some calm and ease. You are your child's greatest resource, let's take care of you.

Hello everyone and welcome to the podcast. In this week's episode I am sharing an interview I did with Megan Champion on her podcast, On the Hard Days. In our conversation I talked to Megan about my early years following my son's Autism diagnosis and how like so many of you I was constantly in go mode. I was trying to do as much as possible as fast as possible to help my kiddo all the while pushing down my own emotions.

It was not until my son was 12 years old that I finally took a breath and not really because I wanted to, but because I had hit the proverbial wall. I was burning out. I hit the ground running and I ran and I hit the wall. And so when I did, I looked up and I really wanted a better way of doing things. And I've said before, I wasn't in the position where I wanted to chit chat about my life or my background or all of the things leading up to these moments.

I wanted a better way of doing, tomorrow. And that is when I found coaching and I am so glad that I did. And now especially when I am coaching moms of young kids who coach with me, I'm like, "Oh my God, I wish, you are so lucky, I wish I could go back and know then what I know now and what you know now." And when I say, what I wish I knew, not so much in terms of Autism, although a crystal ball would be nice, but about

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how my default thought patterns and my nervous system responses were contributing to my anxiety in ways that I could have actually done something about.

I always viewed really life as happening to me. My son is Autistic. I work full-time. I'm a single mother so therefore of course I'm anxious. Of course I'm stressed. I really just thought it was the result of the circumstances in my life and I didn't understand how I was contributing and also how I could help myself and that is really the power of coaching. That's taught me so much about how I can recognize my patterns and I can interrupt them. And I can create new ones which is really truly the magic of coaching.

So if you spend all of your time up in your child's business and ignoring your own, if you are fueled by fear and anxiety. And if you struggle to actually be present and enjoy spending time with your child because you're so preoccupied and catastrophizing about the what if's, this episode will be helpful to you. Stay tuned.

Megan: Welcome back everybody. I am so glad that you are here today and I'm welcoming this amazing mom, Lisa Candra. Lisa, thank you so much for being here.

Lisa: Thank you so much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Megan: I'm excited and I know that you are the *Autism Mom Coach* so I'm excited to hear more about that. Let's just start, jump right in, tell us about you and about your family.

Lisa: So I am a full-time single mother to a 15 year old teenage boy who was diagnosed with Autism at the age of two, anxiety probably at the age of 12 and OCD at the age of 12 or 13. We keep inviting guests to the party.

Megan: Yeah, because I mean I find in my home, very rarely is it just one thing. The circles all overlap and so there's pieces of each of these things.

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Lisa: Definitely, yeah.

Megan: What was it like in those early years, not only for your son but for you as well?

Lisa: Sure. So I guess I think the way that I would describe it is I didn't come to this dirty flatfooted in that I grew up with a neurodivergent sister. And so her diagnosis back then would be under the Autism umbrella now. And it makes so much sense in terms of things like elopement were a regular part of our lives. But we didn't call it elopement back then, we called it running away. And so things start to click into place. But I had witnessed the struggle of my parents for years going from doctor to doctor to program to program.

And so it was really instilled in me from a very early age how important it was to live in a school district that had a good special needs program because I saw my parents struggle. And so before I even got married, had a child I was living in a very particular school district because of that. So anyhow, when I got the diagnosis I was very much hit the ground running and I ran and I ran and I ran. And I hit the wall many, many times. And it got really to the point where my son was entering his tween years where I was just like, "How am I going to keep doing this?"

I mean I was really white knuckling it through those years. And so early on those years looked like trying to do as much as possible as fast as possible, not knowing what will work, what will stick, what he'll respond to, a lot of trial and error. And I really just think that I was probably in this anxiety and fear fueled zone where I was just going, going, going. Was working full-time as an attorney. I would get home at night, he didn't sleep. So I'd have the night shift with him, go to work in the morning, rinse and repeat.

Megan: I feel this. And I'm thinking, my very first thought was when your son was really young and you realized that you were going down this path. Yes, you grew up in a neurodivergent home, what were your emotions in

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that time? Because on the one hand, yes, you're kind of prepared and ready to hit the ground running but at the same time it's still hard.

Lisa: I was scared to death. I mean really my whole thing was, my son won't suffer the way my sister did. Not because my parents didn't do everything that they could and they did. They did an extraordinary amount, but I know ahead of time, I know what I'm dealing with. There's no guesswork. I just very much went into this go mentality but yeah, there was just the underlying fear was I could do all of it, all of the things, all of the right way and he still might suffer. He still might have an outcome I never would have hoped for. That's still the fear.

Megan: So how did you work yourself through that fear?

Lisa: I honestly don't know that I did for honestly for a really long time because I think I was just in go, go, go mode. And my son, he struggled in some ways, a lot of ways but then he was talking and he was super hyper verbal. And he was very engaging. And so I saw all these really, really positives and I just, I hung on to those I think so tightly and that really drove me. I don't know that I really ever dealt with the fear and the sadness until, oh my gosh, really until, so what happened was is as he was entering his tween years and his anxiety was ramping up.

I got to the point where I'm like, I need a better way of doing this. That's how I found life coaching as a client. At the same time, COVID hit and puberty hit. And he really suffered. He deteriorated. And as things really escalated with him I really came face-to-face with some of my greatest fears. I might not be able to provide him with everything that he needs. He might need a greater level of care than I can provide. And there was all that, that I have been fighting against for so long came into my reality and there's still a grieving period going on. I'm still grieving that.

Megan: And I think that that is completely normal that we can champion our kids and do everything we can so that they are happy and healthy but you're still going to grieve a bit, how can you not? And I feel otherwise it just feels like denial because it is hard and it is sad, not every moment. But

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when your child especially is struggling or suffering, I mean how can you not be feeling those things?

Lisa: So one of the things that, I'm sorry to interrupt you but because you were ... I think one of the things that I used in a way to not deal with those emotions is just to be very, very busy doing the next thing and the next thing and the next thing. And maybe there is a better this, a better that. Have we tried this? That was my way of not dealing with the sadness and the fear.

Megan: So tell me about that. Were you too busy or just the right level of busy?

Lisa: No, but it was just always what can I be doing more? Am I doing enough? It was instead of letting myself sit in what was happening and be present with it, I was always trying to figure out how to fix it/make it better. And so I think I used that as a way of not sort of facing some of the fear and the sadness I was feeling.

Megan: Yeah, very relatable. I'm kind of like that in life just in general.

Lisa: Yeah, and it's rewarded. Like being busy and very overbooked and very overscheduled. There's a moral flavor to it these days. But I really do see it as just a way of just a lot of times avoiding something else.

Megan: Yeah. And things come up and I tend to immediately go to, alright, well, how can I fix this before I even let it sink in.

Lisa: Yeah, definitely.

Megan: That's a me thing I think but it's hard.

Lisa: I find that with so much of my clients too because what I say is for moms or people who are high achieving or used to working hard and getting a result, they're like, "Give me the list, I'll get it done, no problem." And Autism is like our kryptonite because it's like we don't care about your list, we don't care about any of it. It's going to evolve the way it evolves.

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And so that's a real challenge. When you believe that you're putting all this input in and you're not getting the result out that you expect. That can be very, very frustrating and a hard pill to swallow.

And look, I'm generally used to, I worked really hard to go to law school at night, work full-time during the day. I put in my hours, I put in the time. And I got the result. I graduated. I became a lawyer, all of the things and so it's like work in equaled result out. And now it's like, if you put all of the work that I put and effort I put into my son, there's a disconnect because sometimes we look at the way someone's doing and we make assumptions about the effort or the commitment and all that kind of thing. And it's just a total disconnect.

Megan: Yeah. And that's where the breakdown happens because when there's that disconnect, us high achieving, people pleasing, perfectionist moms, we start to say, "What am I doing wrong?" Because my entire life I worked hard for good grades and I worked hard for sports and whatever it is. And now all of a sudden you're working your absolute tail off to pure exhaustion 24/7, if you're not physically taking care of your child you are mentally thinking and preparing what's next, what do I need to pack, what do I need to talk to the doctor about, whatever it is.

And so that disconnect happens and then it's low self-esteem just plummeting because you're obviously doing something wrong, there goes your confidence. And maybe you weren't even meant to be a mom in the first place and the thoughts just spiral. Is that what you've gone through?

Lisa: That is so true. I totally find that. And then what I find is it puts you in this position where you've eroded your self-confidence. The decision making hasn't stopped, you still have lots of decisions to make. And so now you're doing it from the viewpoint of you're not competent to make the decisions in the first place, that makes it even harder to do it.

Megan: That's a good point because mentally you can sort of hit rock bottom, I'm not good enough and I'm not doing a good job. And I have guilt and doubt and shame. But you still have to figure out what you're going to

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put on the table that your child is going to eat from the four things that he eats. You still have to get to that therapy appointment. You still have to get them ready and in the car. Yeah. And so tell me about being a coach and where that falls into play. I mean I have a feeling it has something to do with this right here, this disconnect.

Lisa: Yeah. Well, it evolves, so I found coaching as a client when I basically got to the point where how am I going to keep doing this at this level, keep going? He's about to enter middle school. I was having so much anxiety about how I would help him manage that transition. And so I was at the point where I'm like, I don't feel like talking to somebody about my past and what's going on. I want a better way of doing tomorrow and so that's how life coaching spoke to me. I found it really useful, the coaching program and then I wanted to learn more.

The type A, you'll give me a little but now I want to see how you make the sausage. And so I got certified. And then as I got certified, as I continued on coaching as a client I just saw the power of the coaching in my own life in my ability to manage my struggles with my son. And it was just like, I have to share this with other moms like us. Because there really are no resources specifically designed for parents facing kids with Autism which is a huge problem.

And I know for me one of the challenges I've had with therapy and interestingly, I have a lot of clients who are therapists and the reason that they come to me is sometimes you just want to talk to somebody where you don't have to explain, where they just get it. Because there is something to explaining what our day-to-day is to somebody who's looking at you quizzically. It's just another layer of not being seen. And so the ability to be seen without judgment instantly I think is a really powerful thing for me. I think it's a powerful thing for my clients.

And so that's how I got into the coaching. And now I coach parents, moms raising kids with Autism about burnout, about the burnout cycle, how we can interrupt it. The things that we are doing to keep the fires burning and how we can re-pattern some of our default thought habits, our default

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nervous system responses and support ourselves. So that we can show up as the parent we want to be even when.

Megan: Yeah, I love it and it's so important. I wonder what did you do for yourself that you now work with moms on when you were facing your own burnout, what are some of those strategies that can help?

Lisa: So I mean I think a lot of it, I remember saying to one of my coaches, I was really heartbroken about something and she was just, she said to me, "Let your heart break. You love him so much. Why wouldn't you let your heart break? My son really was looking forward to his skiing season, it was a couple of years ago, for an entire year. And we got to ski season and we had to cut it short because of difficulties he was having. And I just knew how heartbroken he would be about that and I was heartbroken for him.

And that urge to want to do something, to want to rationalize it and instead to just let yourself be sad about it. Actually letting yourself be sad and processing the emotion is what lets it pass. And so that to me has been really helpful. I did somatic coaching. I offer this with my clients too is getting into your body, processing your emotions, that kind of thing I found really helpful for me in order to just sort of release some of that heaviness and that tightness in my body.

And other things I do, deep breathing really has helped me because I notice that when I'm really stressed I hold my breath. I get very clenched up and so I have learned how that actually helps exude and regulate my nervous system. So when I'm calmer I can show up calmer. And I really have just gotten to understand better at any given point what state of my nervous system I'm in so that I can understand what's happening. And so when I'm in a sympathetic fight, flight state I only have access to certain thoughts, the all or never, all or nothing kinds of thoughts.

And so when I notice that in myself, the ability to just pause and kind of go inward a little bit to self-soothe, to take a break, to take a walk, those are all things. They're not glamorous but these are all the things that we are not doing and so they seem like such little things to do. But when you actually

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make it a priority and you practice it, it does help you to calm down a bit. I mean because I think that we all pretty much live our life in a chronic state of that stress response and we're waiting for the other shoe to drop all of the time.

We're just always at a heightened elevated state so whatever you can do to sort of bring yourself down a little bit, it gives you just more access to your own rational thinking too which is a plus.

Megan: Yeah, for sure, I love all of those. And a lot of them are simple and like you said, not glamorous. You said many moms aren't doing this and I wonder why. Why do you think, including you I guess, from years ago, but why do you think that moms are not taking those initial steps to help themselves?

Lisa: Yeah, I think that there are a lot of reasons. I mean I always really start with socialization is that the good mom, the martyr mom, the one who puts everyone before herself, that's what it's supposed to look like. And so if you're not suffering then how much do you really love your kid? I think that whether you believe that, whether you think that, whether you've ever thought that, that it is deep in the background engrained, you saw it growing up. You see it now on Instagram. There are messages that we receive about what it's supposed to look like, that self-sacrificing mother.

So I think that's part of it. I think that socialization is part of it. I think that the way that self-care is sold to us, commoditized, it makes it look like well, you're either doing all of these things or it doesn't really matter, almost. And so the massage, the manicure, the pedicure, the vacation, that's what we're told self-care is. That is not real self-care. Real self-care are the everyday things that you do to enhance or preserve your own emotional, physical and mental wellness. And so that could be petting your cat. That could be calling your friend.

And that perfectionism, I'm going to do it the right way or I'm not going to do it at all. That all or nothing thinking gets in the way. So I think there are many things that sort of combine to result in, that we just do nothing.

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Megan: Yeah, I love that and the key word there for me was every day, the everyday things. I agree, I mean society glamorizes the whole term. I mean it's misused and misunderstood. But the fact of the matter, yes, taking three minutes to pet the cat, because even if you don't see in the moment that it's going to help, it's like you're banking this for later. I know I'm like this. I love to take walks. I love walking. If I can't do my full four mile loop then I'll do nothing.

Lisa: Yeah. Right, all or nothing.

Megan: My husband is like, "Why don't you just go out for 20 minutes?" I'm like, "Why?" Well, it's a mental block and it's so annoying.

Lisa: Yeah, it totally is. It totally is but it's doing just the minimum baseline I call it with my clients. So what I say is, set your sights really low but commit to it. And I will say, I don't care what you do because it doesn't matter what you do, it's the practice of carving out this piece of earth is mine and doing it. So whatever it is, it's really the pattern and the practice that you're creating, the habit that you're creating, that this is important because I'm important, that's why I'm doing it, non-negotiable.

Megan: Yes, that's it right there. It's the act of commitment to self, whatever it is. And that's I suppose what society is not understanding, what we're not thinking about. We're looking at the what can we do for self-care. And so moms say nothing, I'm too busy, I'm too exhausted, I'm too whatever. But we're looking at it wrong and it's really the, are you able, are you ready to internalize that you need to be taken care of too? And some moms are not there and they say, "No, I'm not. I can't possibly take care of myself even if it's five minutes alone, I can't do it."

But it's less about the free time and it's more about not feeling like they can commit brain space to themselves.

Lisa: I totally agree with that. And what I like to tell my clients is, "The best news about self-care is that it saves you time and here's how. One of the simplest ways that you can take care of yourself is managing your own

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mind.” Our brains feed us 60,000 thoughts a day, most of them are thoughts that we’ve thought for a long time, just the regular loop of thoughts. And when some of those thoughts are catastrophizing, spinning in doubt, all or nothing thinking, they are time and energy sucks.

When you start redirecting your brain away from those thoughts and thinking on purpose, you get to save all that time and mental and emotional exhaustion to actually do something for yourself. So when you are practicing real self-care, you save time. When you’re practicing real self-care you’re managing your calendar. That’s another thing. And look, I mean if you have time to wake up and the first thing you do is look at your iPhone or you ever find yourself scrolling on social at all, then you have time for self-care.

It's really just reframing what it needs. And I've always thought, maybe they just start calling it something different. And so I start referring it internally to myself as sanity management. I have time for sanity management because I know when I'm not sane, things aren't working out so well.

Megan: Yes, love all of that. And I think that you should be saying that phrase out loud, not just in your head, sanity management because I think it's a perfect way to put it. And you said self-care actually saves you time. And moms are not going to believe that right away, how do you prove to them?

Lisa: Well, I ask them, “How much time of your day do you spend in worse case scenarios worrying if you’re going to get the phone call from the school or not? Thinking if they’re doing this at five, what will they be like when they are 15, avoiding going outside because they might have a meltdown. How much time do you spend in your brain?” And all of them will say, “A lot.” And so there you go right there. So it’s not just the time that you’re spending sitting in your brain, it’s when you’re thinking thoughts like that, they create an emotion in your body.

And if that emotion is fear, stress, anxiety, that is taking a toll on your energy, on your ability to show up for your day. It’s related. And so I always

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say, “If you take a toddler to a Target, any Target”, all Targets are laid out differently. “They will find the junk aisle. They’ll find it and when they do, you’re not like, “Hey, go for it. You found it, go at it.”” No, we redirect them. And so our brains are the same way. Our brains will always find the junk aisle of thoughts. We are programmed to overfocus on the negative, that is our negativity bias.

And so when you start to train your brain that when it offers you up those thoughts that you’re not going to hang out with them, that you’re not going to give them airtime, that you’re going to redirect your brain, you’ve saved yourself time. You’ve saved yourself emotional exhaustion and mental exhaustion. That is the simplest thing that any of us can do. It takes no time at all and it’s always available to us.

Megan: I love it. I think the hardest part both in terms of with my community mothers together and your coaching program, same thing. Getting moms to walk through the door is the hardest part. It’s the first step, it’s the, I deserve this, that I am worthy of being taken care of, that I can do things for myself. That is the absolute hardest part for moms raising neurodivergent kids. We give our entire beings, our whole selves to our children and think that we absolutely have nothing left for us. And that’s the hardest part to convince moms, that you do, you do.

Lisa: Well, it’s twofold and I hate to be the one to put more on our to-do list but the fact is and I have a podcast episode about this. Self-care is a responsibility. And your self-care is your responsibility because the cavalry is not coming. No one’s going to do it for us so that’s one. And then two is, this journey does not stop for us when our kids turn 18, go off to college, get married, all done. That’s not the way it goes. We are in this for the long haul. We are our children’s greatest resource.

There is no doctor, no medicine, no program that’s more important to the long term success and prognosis than we are. So if we burn out, if we are not doing well then we can’t show up for them the way that we want. So even if you don’t buy that you have inherent worthiness as a human and

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your whole focus is on your child, well, it is quite literally in your child's best interest that you are at your best. It only serves them.

Megan: Yeah, I completely agree with absolutely everything that you are saying. And it's so important, so crucial, and that's why I like the term 'sanity management' and just taking away from the whole self-care stereotype which is just overused and misunderstood. But I love it, I love all that you have to say. And so tell me about you in terms of as a business person, as a coach. Tell people more about what you do and how they can find you and all that.

Lisa: Sure. So I'm The Autism Mom Coach everywhere, Instagram, Facebook, my website, my podcast, very consistent. And I coach moms one-on-one. My coaching program, it is a 12 week program where we meet hourly over Zoom like this where moms will come to me. We will talk about what their goals are. Some moms come to me because they're melting down alongside their child. Some moms come to me because they can't make a decision without second guessing them to save their lives, some are burnt out for a variety of reasons.

Anyhow we look at what their biggest pain points are. We create goals for them and I coach them on it. And part of the coaching program is that I teach you cognitive and somatic tools that you can use and incorporate in your own life and apply them to your own life. So that you can start shifting from whatever your default patterns are that aren't serving you to ones that will. And it's so interesting, when I tell the benefits of coaching. So I've had several clients who just in the past couple of weeks, they're wrapping up and it's so interesting how the portion of time we actually spend talking about Autism.

Because after a while then we're just talking about everything, we're talking about marriage, we're talking about weight and health goals. We're talking about relationships with other people. And one of the biggest benefits I've seen to my clients of the coaching is that they start to actually enjoy time with their child. They love their child so much but how much time they actually enjoy spending with their child when they are always so

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hypervigilant, when they are always afraid, what if they do this, what if they do that, what if somebody this, what if somebody that.

When you take all of that away and just to be able to be present and have a really savoring experience with your child as they are, I think can be one of the most rewarding things and plus you get to manage your own mind and learn how to self-regulate, so that's good too.

Megan: Yeah. I notice similar things when moms are in mothers together in a community setting and it's the same idea. They think that they're there to meet other moms. And they are, but what they don't realize is going to happen is how they're going to feel better about themselves. And then they say things like, "I was way more patient tonight than I normally am. I was calmer."

And that's the self-care, that's what we mean, you and I when we say, "You have to. It's not an option that you need to take care of yourself in a way that makes you not only better about yourself but about your relationships with your children and partners and spouses and the whole thing."

Lisa: Yeah, I think it's interesting because some of my clients who really struggle with it, some of them have daughters but especially for the ones who have daughters I will say, "Does she count? Does she matter? And it's at what point will she stop mattering? Will she stop mattering when she has a child? Will she stop mattering when she has a special needs child?" And they're like, "Absolutely not." Then why are you different?

Megan: Yeah, why are you different? And that's undoing so many pieces and years' worth of what we've been told and the way we were raised and then the do-gooders, if you will, of taking care of other people, especially our children. So there's so much to unpack there.

Lisa: Yeah, there is, I mean, and for sure it's not accidental that most women feel this way. It's not an accident, it's very purposeful. And so when you can start to, I think especially for me, look at things from the 10,000 foot view, because otherwise we default to what's wrong with me. And it's

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like, no, no, no, this is all by design. This is not an accident and this is how you fall into it and this is where you have some agency to start unraveling those things. I feel it's like the shame goes away and it's so much more empowering.

Megan: I love that so much. You sound like an amazing coach and I'm really hopeful that some of the listeners will go check you out and reach out to you and find out more about you if they don't know already. Any last parting words in terms of moms who are listening who feel they have walked in your shoes, they are living your life that you are now a few steps ahead and things that you could pass down to them that would be helpful?

Lisa: I would say stop waiting. Honestly, I waited for a long time before I actually reached out to a coach for help. And I thought about it for a while. I was doing a lot of the sort of self-guided self-help and it's all nice but application and implementation is everything. And when you can do that alongside somebody else who can hold the space for you but is also going to challenge you in the most loving and kind way, that's how you're going to get results and you're going to get them quickly. And so I would say, stop waiting.

Megan: Yeah, I think that's great. I think absolute mic drop, that's exactly what we all need to do, it's time, it's past time. But no day like today to start to take care of yourself in this way. So, Lisa, thank you so much for being here. This has been wonderful.

Lisa: Thank you so much for having me. I love speaking with you.

Alright, everyone, I hope you found that conversation helpful. I just want to add that if you're listening to these episodes and you're getting aha moments or yeah that's me and you're feeling a little bit better, you're feeling a little bit seen, this is just the beginning. All of this is fantastic but it's temporary. You shut off the podcast, you go on about your day. If you

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want to integrate this work into your life, if you want to apply it to what is happening day-to-day in your life, coaching is the way to do it.

If you are interested, if you are ready, schedule a consultation with me on my website theautismmomcoach.com under Work With Me or go to the show notes. Alright, 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.