

## Ep #86: Processing Fear



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 86 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Processing Fear. In this week's episode I am joined by my former client, Anna, and we are going to walk you through what it is like to process fear. Keep listening.

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. I hope you are doing well. We are continuing on in our discussion of fear. And this week we are going to talk about how to process fear. Now, of course I can and I will give you a list of things that you can do to process fear. And I'm even going to share with you a tool that I use all of the time. But sharing a tool, telling you what I do it's really not the same as experiencing it. And so that's what I want to do by bringing Anna on so she can come with a real life issue for her.

We can talk through it and focus on how she can process this fear without letting it run her. Before we get to that, I'm going to share with you my favorite tool for processing fear, and it is called RAIN, R-A-I-N. It's an acronym. RAIN was developed by Tara Brach, who, if you're not listening to her, she's amazing and you should, RAIN stands for recognize, allow, investigate, and nurture. So when I feel fear crushing down on my chest or bracing my heart, I go to RAIN. And the first step of RAIN is to recognize, to recognize that I am feeling fear. This is what fear feels like in my body.

It feels like a rock on my chest. It feels like I can't breathe. And then I allow it to be there without going to my brain and thinking of all the reasons I shouldn't feel this way or all the ways that I could fix it or all the ways that

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this isn't fair. Remember, when you're in a fight, fight state and you start thinking all those fight flight emotions, you're just creating more fear.

So instead of going to all of those thoughts, I allow the emotion to be there in my body. I breathe through it. And I try my best to relax myself, to get myself to actually breathe because when I'm in the state of fear I'm usually holding my breath. And then I investigate, what is it that I am telling myself? What is it that I am believing right now that is causing me so much pain?

And this just allows me to separate the experience that I'm having from the thoughts that I'm having about it. Instead of getting lost in all of these thoughts that I think are true, just recognizing that right now I am having an emotional biological response to something that I'm believing that's causing me pain. And finally the N of RAIN is to nurture. And this is what we do for ourselves. The deep breathing, I like to put a hand on my heart and to feel the hand on my heart and the heart with a hand on it. That's a way for me to relax and to get into my body.

Saying things that are comforting to me, that are self-soothing, like, of course, you feel this way. This is really hard. Anybody would feel this way. When you are in a fight, flight state you can down-regulate that state by processing the fear, not avoiding it, not resisting it, but actually allowing it to be there, breathing through it and being kind to yourself.

When you do this, when you slow down, when you go from feeling that bracing fear or tension in your body. And instead of doing something, instead of getting on Google or telling somebody off or writing a strongly worded text or whatever it is, if you're able to pause, you are slowing things down. Because speed is an accelerant to the fight, flight. So when you're in fight, flight, you want to slow down and RAIN is a way that you can do that. It's a way that you can slow down. It's a way that you can process the emotion so that you come out on the other side of it.

And the other side is more safety, more rational thinking, more of an ability to respond the way you want versus react from fear. Alright with that, I am going to turn it over to Anna.

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Lisa: So now I want to take a live example of processing fear. And for that, I have invited my former client, Anna, on to the show. She's going to explain to us a situation that she's having, and then we're just going to go from there. So over to you. Tell us what is creating fear in your life right now.

Anna: Well, thanks for having me and helping me process this. So the fear that I'm having right now is kind of a, I guess you could say it's a recurring fear that has recently kind of bubbled back up to the surface after I had already tried to process it once in the past. And it really revolves around school safety. Unfortunately, we all know that we continue to have these tragic situations with school shootings. We hear about it all the time in the news. And I have five year old twin boys who are in kindergarten this year.

And so the interesting thing is I'm actually a former teacher. That's kind of pretty far in the past now. But as a teacher, I went through active shooter training myself. But I guess I have a totally different perspective on it now even, that I'm a parent and I have kids that are school age. And so back when the Uvalde shooting happened, that produced a lot of severe anxiety for me. And you had actually helped me process that at the time and I was able to get past that.

But then what's kind of bringing it back to the surface now is my husband just got back from a conference. It was a conference for educators and school professionals. And there was a heavy focus on school safety from a facility standpoint. And they specifically talked about active shooter situations and things that they can do with the school facilities or buildings themselves to try to make schools safer in those scenarios. And so my husband came back and shared a lot of this information with me.

And I actually had to tell him at one point, "I understand that you're really fired up and passionate about this, but you're actually giving me a ton of anxiety right now." And it took a lot for me to process this fear before. And I literally told him, "You're going to give me nightmares if you keep talking

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about this.” And one thing that has changed is, as I mentioned, our boys are in kindergarten now. They’re at a different school building this year.

Back when the Uvalde shooting happened, one of the ways that I tried to process my fear was I contacted the preschool principal where they were at the time. And just kind of shared my fear and asked if there was anything she could share with me about how they handle school safety at the preschool, and that helped at the time. But now I’m like, “This is different because they’re in a different building. It’s different administration.”

And one thing that concerned me about the physical building when we walked through for open house is pretty much every classroom from what I could see has a huge glass garage door facing into the hallway that can be raised and lowered. And it’s supposed to be a cool aesthetic thing. And so they can do neat classroom activities utilizing this garage door feature. But I can’t help but think that that could be a safety concern. Hopefully it’s bulletproof glass, but besides that, anyone can be in the hallway and look in and see everyone in that classroom and where they are and what they’re doing.

So that’s kind of where I’m at now is just some of this anxiety creeping back up again after the information that my husband shared from this conference and just kind of worrying about a potential scenario. And I think as special needs parents in the back of our mind, we always fear, if something like that, God forbid, was to happen, how can our kids in particular be kept safe because of the challenges that they have? Would they know how to follow the safety protocols? Would they be able to stay quiet? Those are just all the thoughts that kind of run through my head.

Lisa: Okay, just going to go back a second and ask you, after the Uvalde shooting in Uvalde, Texas, that was the circumstance. You said that you were having some concerns about school safety and so you contacted the school. And they did what, they told you what they do in terms of?

Anna: So what she told me and reflecting back on it now I also realize I’ve been wondering, why aren’t schools more transparent with the community

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about these school safety issues? And why aren't they more proactive in letting parents know these are our safety protocols, this is what we're doing to keep your kids safe? But I also realize that's tricky because you really don't want to leak too much of that information out, because then you're potentially...

Lisa: Giving a blueprint.

Anna: Yes, exactly, to people that could potentially be active shooters. So I can appreciate how it's a fine line for them. But basically her response was, it was a very compassionate response. And she reassured me that I think it was on an annual basis the school district has to collaborate with law enforcement and other entities. And the school has to update their overall safety plan and that has to be approved by the law enforcement and those other entities that have expertise in those areas.

And then she also told me specifically regarding the concern about special needs students, she said that the school staff did what they called tabletop drills. So my child's classroom team would sit down at a table together and they would talk about my child in particular. And if we had an active shooter scenario, what would we do to keep this particular student safe in that situation? And so that definitely helped put me at ease somewhat. But then I just kind of wonder, that was the preschool's response and how does that translate throughout?

It's a very large school district with a lot of buildings and thousands and thousands of students. So how does that kind of carry over throughout the school district as they move from building to building? And on one hand I don't want to be that mom that every year when they go to a new building or they have a new classroom team that I'm asking, "What are you going to do to keep my kids safe?" But at the same time it's a valid concern.

Lisa: So just first let's just assume you contact all of those people right now and you know all the schools your kids are going to go to from now till whenever and they all are very compassionate. They are very reassuring

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and they give you this top down protocol and all the same things that you got a couple of years ago, then what?

Anna: That's a good question.

Lisa: You still have the fear, don't you?

Anna: Yeah.

Lisa: Yeah. Alright. So let's talk about the fear and what's really causing the fear because it's not whether or not they have protocol.

Anna: And they know that they have to. I mean, they have to.

Lisa: Right, but it's not the protocol. It's not the training. What's, when you distill it down, what are you afraid of?

Anna: That this could possibly happen and my kids might not be safe. And something tragic could happen, yeah.

Lisa: My kids could be harmed, of course.

Anna: Yeah, exactly. And you always, you want to believe that wouldn't happen to my kids. That wouldn't happen in our community. That wouldn't happen in our school district. But I'm sure that's exactly what parents in all of those other school districts thought, too.

Lisa: So I want to sit with you a little bit with the fear because you, a person, when they get into that fight, flight, you go into action mode. You want a spreadsheet, that gives you this brief sense of I've done something and I've gotten answers and now I can let myself feel better. So I want to try a new way. So I want you to, if you're comfortable with it right now, is to take a couple of deep breaths just as you're sitting in your chair, feeling your feet on the ground, your tush in your seat. Just feeling into your body.

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And now I want you thinking about your husband coming in and showing you that information or seeing the latest school statistics or whatever it is. Where does that hit you in your body?

Anna: Tension. Before you prompted me to rearrange in my seat and start the deep breaths, I was hunched forward and my shoulders were up on my ears. That's kind of my default anxiety mode.

Lisa: Yeah. So where you hold your tension in your body is what, shoulders up against your ears, what else? Where else do you feel it in your body?

Anna: My overall posture is just not relaxed. It's very tense.

Lisa: Yeah. Which makes sense if you remember, you and I talked about this a bunch when we mapped your nervous system is that when you're in that fight, flight state of your nervous system, your adrenaline is pumping and your body wants to go. It wants to do something. So you tensing forward, that's part of that biological response. Tell me where else you feel it in your body if anywhere else, is it in your chest? Is it in your stomach? Is it in your throat?

Anna: Most of the time it's just kind of that overall tension and mostly up by my shoulders. I've had it manifest in other ways before, that weird throat, clogged throat issue that I had a couple of years [crosstalk] that. And then here lately I've been Googling everything and I'm hoping it's just seasonal vertigo or something. But I've been having vertigo issues. And I don't know if that has anything to do with sleep deprivation or stress, it possibly could.

Lisa: It doesn't help. They've never been said to be helpful towards anything. Okay, so you feel that tension in your shoulders, around your ears, in your throat area. So tell me about it, is it tight? Is it gripping? Tell me how it feels?

Anna: Tight, tense, just kind of like I'm white knuckling it.

Lisa: What does that mean to you?



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Anna: The other thing I just thought of too is sometimes at night, if I'm under a lot of stress, sometimes I clench my jaw at night when I'm sleeping, I will grind my teeth.

Lisa: Those are all classic ways that we hold stress and tension in our body.

Anna: And it just feels like I'm just bracing for something.

Lisa: Yeah, you are, by fighting or flighting. So I want you to right now just be there with that feeling. You've had the thought. We've talked about what you're afraid of. Just being there with that feeling and just breathing into it so letting your shoulders relax a bit, opening your mouth, wiggling your jaw and just breathing. It looks like we're doing face yoga right now.

Anna: Loosening up.

Lisa: Yeah, just loosening up and just breathe into that just for three breaths. And so when we do that, we want to let the fear know that we're here, that we see it.

Anna: Aware of it.

Lisa: Yeah, we're not ignoring you. And sometimes for me, I like to put my hand on my body. I feel it in my chest a lot. I feel my heart is bracing. And so it's just that pause. I think about it as what your body is primed to do. You have told your body through your thoughts that there is danger out there and your body's like, okay, let's go. And right now you're going to be like, "Okay, listen, we're actually not in an active shooter situation right now." Bringing your body down a little bit. When you do that, is there any shift, is there any change for you?

Anna: I feel like my mind stops racing. It's just a slow down, okay, let's just slow down. Let's relax. Let's be rational.

Lisa: Yeah, and that's exactly what it is. And this is for everybody who's listening to this, is that when we are gripped by that fear, emotion, we feel it

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in our body. The state creates the story. So here comes a playlist of all those thoughts. It's like a marching band that's coming in, it's playing louder and louder and louder. So the thoughts come in and then we're thinking the thoughts and then we're thinking more thoughts about them.

Then we're finding evidence and then we're probably going to Google. And so we are keeping it going. And so when you're in a fight, flight state, speed is an accelerant. So whatever you can do to slow yourself down is going to be able to bring you back to some of that ventral vagal safety energy. And when you're in that you can access more of your rational thinking. And so right now for you, when your mind stops racing and you're slowing down a little bit, what are the thoughts that are coming up about the circumstance that school shootings happen?

Anna: I mean it's still scary knowing that it could be a potential. But just trying to tap into more of those rational thoughts, this is a phenomenal school district that we live in. It's a large district. They have their ducks in a row. They have protocols. They review this every year. They train their staff. They're prepared if something like this happens.

And I just need to trust the system because really the radical alternative is I pull my kids out of school and I homeschool them. And sure, that would probably guarantee their safety more. I mean, we could still experience an active shooting situation somewhere else in the community.

Lisa: My kid would not have been safer homeschooling with me, that's for sure.

Anna: But then it's at what expense though. I can't be everything for them. I can't replace their speech therapist. I can't replicate the interactions that they have with peers.

Lisa: And so just in that, you're making a conscious decision. We're all making a conscious decision to live in this world where there are dangers. I mean, quite frankly, the most dangerous thing we do every day is drive our kids to school probably, especially with everybody on their iPhones while

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driving. But it's bringing it back down, this could happen at any time and we're just all sitting ducks. It has a really different feel from that.

I just also want you to think about is we're not trying to get rid of fear. Fear is not a bad thing. It's a signal to us but it's whether or not we want to be run by our own fear. And so for you, of course, this isn't just your fear. This is all of our fear. This is held by all of us. If that's a way that you can calm yourself down is every mother fears this. I'm not alone. I don't know if that is helpful to you, but you get into these situations.

It's almost like they feel like we're going to ground. Okay, kids, we've got the beans, we've got the water. You're coming in. We're putting you in the bubble because that's our instincts as moms, we just want to put them in the bubble. So what's coming up for you now?

Anna: Well, it just makes me think that, and I think for kids like ours especially, we do have to help them learn how to navigate this world and be safe. I mean, whether it's fire drills, tornado drills, crossing the street safely. I mean that used to be a huge issue for us. just teaching them how to cross the street safely and hold our hands. Staying close to us when we're out in public in crowded places. I think those are things that we just we constantly have to do, that's part of our job.

As they grow up and get older and they have new experiences, teaching them how to navigate this world and stay safe and we can't shelter them from that. That would be a disservice.

Lisa: And it's so interesting too, because I have a lot of friends of kids who are teenagers and the thing that they want to protect their children from, their iPhone, the Snapchat. Whatever is going on in that world of just kids interacting. And the things that can happen from there. And so the landscape is always changing. But you're resourceful, we know this. And you can always adapt, you can always course correct. You can always make the decision. Hey, you know what? This is an intolerable fear or risk for me and therefore I'm going to take them in.

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But the fact that you're not and you like your reasons for that, that's the difference between having fear, feeling it, processing it, letting it be there versus letting it run you and run your life. So does that feel complete for today's coaching or do you want to go a little bit more?

Anna: Well, I think that's really helpful. And I think it's given me a lot of things to reflect on and think about. And to just remind myself, I think it all starts with when that anxiety starts creeping in, no matter what the fear is. And that I can feel those physical manifestations that I'm starting to tense up. Then just remembering to let that be a signal to me to push pause, relax for a second, slow my mind down and try to tap into those rational thoughts and start processing it instead of just spiraling.

Lisa: Yeah, absolutely. Because it's a pattern and so it's going to happen so quickly because you practice it. You've done it before. And so if you know your tells, because [inaudible], where it's like when I'm thinking this thought or when I can feel my shoulders up against my ears. This is my cue to slow it down.

For me, I always know whenever I'm having a thought, something like nobody else gets it or with my son, he's doing this on purpose. Okay, chill out, it's time to back it up a little bit. You're a little too far over the line and nothing good could happen from here. With our kids, we know when they've hit the point of no return. It's like that, it's like, yeah, we've got to wrap this one up.

Anna: Yeah, exactly.

Lisa: Alright, well, Anna, thank you so much for your bravery in sharing this experience and also being willing to process out loud. I hope that this is a great example to anyone listening. Talking about processing emotions sounds very clinical, but when you're actually doing it, it's so deeply personal. So if this is something that you are interested in, if this is work that you want to do, I highly encourage you to schedule a consultation for me and for my one-on-one program.

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I work with my clients on these issues every day and we don't just come at it from one angle. It's not just cognitive. It's not just somatic. It's the whole picture because we are human beings with brains and nervous systems. And we face very difficult challenges with our children with Autism and those circumstances. So our ability to be able to regulate ourselves in any given moment is so helpful in our ability to respond to whatever our children are doing, or whatever the world brings us. So with that, again, thank you, Anna and I will talk to you next week.

Anna: Thanks, Lisa.

Thanks for listening to The Autism Mom Coach. If you are ready to apply the principles you are learning in these episodes to your life, it is time to schedule a consultation call with me. Podcasts are great but the ahas are fleeting. Real change comes from application and implementation and this is exactly what we do in my one-on-one coaching program. To schedule your consultation, go to my website, [theautismmomcoach.com](http://theautismmomcoach.com), Work With Me and take the first step to taking better care of yourself so that you can show up as the parent you want to be for your child with Autism.