

Ep #113: Parental PTSD (Part 2)



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With Your Host

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You are listening to episode 113 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Parental PTSD (Part 2).

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. In this podcast, I am going to share with you the tools and strategies you need so you can fight like hell for your child without burning out. Let's get to it.

Hello, everyone and welcome to the podcast. I am so glad you are here and I hope you are doing well. If you have not already, take a listen to episode 112 of the podcast, that is part one of a two part series on parental PTSD. In part one I talk about what parental PTSD is and how it shows up. And in this episode I am going to share with you my own experience, my own perspective, and the things that I find helpful for me in managing my experience of trauma and PTSD as a mother of a child with Autism.

To be clear, what I am sharing is not prescriptive, this is my experience. It's what's been helpful for me. It's been what's been helpful for a lot of my clients. So while I do have a very positive experience with what I'm going to share with you and I've seen my clients have really positive experiences as well. I'm not a doctor, so I'm not telling you what to do, but I am sharing with you what's been really helpful.

Okay, number one. At the height of my anxiety, at the height of the most difficult situations that I was navigating with my son, I felt like I was having a panic attack all of the time. There were points where I felt like my heart was being squeezed, I couldn't breathe. I was just in a really high state of anxiety. So when that was going on, I sat with a psychiatrist who prescribed an SSRI to me. And that was helpful for me on lowering the volume. I was no longer feeling like I was having panic attacks, although I was still very stressed and very anxious, it wasn't as intense and that was really helpful.

I also for a time did see a therapist and to be really honest, the reason I saw a therapist was because everyone around me was saying, "You should see a therapist. You should go to therapy." And I did and it was nice to be

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able to dump out what was going on to somebody else. And at some point it actually became a stressor for me because things with my son were pretty intense and they were evolving so quickly. And I would spend a portion of my time with a therapist catching him up on what was going on and answering his questions.

And that to me was really triggering because of what was going on with my son. I was talking about our situation, what was happening and the blow by blow with multiple professionals a week to get them up to speed in order to get insurance coverage and filling out different applications for different placements. And so to have another person who was asking me questions and I was explaining things to and I was catching up on, that to me wasn't helpful.

And I was really honest with my therapist about it. I told him, "This isn't helpful for me." And I was very clear on what would be helpful. And so I highly recommend that for you too, if you're in therapy, as the clients we get to tell them what we need, we get to tell them what they want. And so when I did that, I did find being able to just spill out to somebody, very helpful.

I always say the thing about therapy and coaching is that when you're able to unload on somebody else, your friends get to be your friends because you're not relying on them so much for that outlet. Not that you can't do that with your friends. But sometimes when you're in these chronic situations where it's day after day, it can feel exhausting to do that with a friend. And then there's also the fear of possible judgment or that you're wiping them out and that maybe they'll even avoid you. Not that any of this is true.

But I will tell you, when I was in that intense state of stress and anxiety, that's where my brain went. I'm not going to have any friends. Nobody's going to understand. They're going to think I'm weird. So to have a totally neutral person to just unload on, very helpful. So medication, I think that helped me get to a better baseline to do the real work that has been the most life changing for me. And that all centers around nervous system regulation. At its core post-traumatic stress disorder is a disorder of the nervous system.

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When we experience trauma, our brain and our body gets stuck in a state of hyperarousal. So we're constantly scanning for threats. We're living with our heads on a swivel. And we're reacting as if the danger is still present and that makes it really difficult to have any calm. This was how I was experiencing it. And so I was trying to look at this from the perspective of, if I can't change anything in my environment in terms of my son and what was going on with him, what could I change in my internal environment to create the safety?

And so that is where nervous system regulation comes in. So what I did is pretty much what I do with everything is I did my own research. I bought a couple of books. I took a couple of courses. I got certified of course. And I hired my own nervous system coach which have really teach me how to identify the triggers in my body, how they came up, to identify the experience of stress and being in fight and flight. And to be able to have that experience and create safety around it so I could lower the temperature and be less reactive.

So imagine being in a situation where whatever is going on with your child is still happening. But you're able to show up in a different way because of the work that you're doing on your internal landscape to create safety for yourself. One of the things that really helped me with my nervous system regulation and creating safety are routine and predictability, routine, habit, predictability, those are all signals that we are in control. We know what to do. We know how to do it.

And I needed that desperately in my life because I felt very out of control and pretty helpless to do anything about it when it came to my son. And so my ability to create routines and create boundaries was really helpful for me in feeling like I was more in control. And when I felt more in control, I was a lot calmer. When I was a lot calmer, I was able to respond and show up much differently than when I was feeling completely out of control, and like life was just happening to me and there was nothing I could do about it.

So one of the routines that for me was really helpful was waking up before my son because one of my big triggers is noise. So being awoken to yelling

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or screaming or slamming, that was enough to jolt my nervous system into overdrive and impact my entire day. And so just the simple routine of waking up before him, of being out of bed, of having my coffee, of being able to mentally and physically and emotionally prepare for him waking up, for him possibly being dysregulated. When I was already awake when I was already prepared it was a really different experience and I was able to handle it so differently.

Just that simple routine made such a difference in how my day went. And the thing was, when he did wake up and he was dysregulated or protesting going to school, because I was already awake, because I was already regulated, I wasn't responding to him in the same way. I was able to stay calm. I was able to redirect myself. I was able to stay out of the worst case scenario thoughts.

Whereas before I might have gone down that rabbit hole of, oh my God, he's not going to go to school. If he doesn't get on the van, then I'm going to have to drive him. But maybe he won't get out of the car. And if he doesn't go to the school, then I'm going to have to stay home. And if I have to stay home, I'm going to miss more work. You see where I'm going. And that would all be happening in my brain. That would all be happening in my body, creating more stress and more irritability for me. And then I'm reacting to him with that stress and with that irritability and then it's like a combustion.

And so just the simple act of waking up, being regulated, being prepared helped me lower the temperature on my reactivity. And in turn, I wasn't escalating when he didn't, I was staying grounded. And by doing that, he calmed down faster, or at least saw that he wasn't getting the reaction he wanted from me.

Another thing that was really helpful for me supporting my nervous system regulation was creating boundaries. Boundaries help create a sense of safety and control and predictability in the environment. And boundaries can counteract the feelings of helplessness that are often associated with trauma. For me, creating boundaries with my son was so important,

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creating that predictability, creating the expectation and the predictability of if you do X, then I will do Y. And this was particularly so when it came to self-injurious behavior, aggression or property destruction.

There have been so many times where he might have been out of hand for a period of time. And I was just handling it and trying to resolve it on my own. Things got to the point where I just really needed to be clear with myself and with him what exactly would trigger a call to 911. And so for me, the rule was, if there's aggression towards me, if there's self-injurious behavior, if there's property destruction, I will call 911. And that was so helpful for me in just creating that sense of, I know exactly what to do.

Even if he acts out in a way that I'm trying to prevent, I still know what to do. There would be no more wondering if and when, it was just very clear. And I went through the same exercise with one of my clients and her teen daughter in a very similar situation. Her daughter would be having a meltdown over a period of hours. And there was always the question of when do we call? So the ability to set a firm boundary of if this happens, then we do it, created so much more certainty and predictability for the parents.

And so then when my client's daughter started to gripe about her shower time, my client wasn't going into, oh my God, if this escalates, what do I do, I don't know what to do. She knew exactly what to do. And so just that knowledge alone helped her to stay calm and helped her to stay regulated when her daughter started to protest. So she wasn't then overreacting to her daughter, escalating her daughter, making it more likely that things were going to get to the point of having to call 911 in the first place. So all of this has a ripple effect.

They're really small changes, but they have a big impact. If nothing else, creating the safety for you enables you to stay regulated. When you are regulated, you're not reacting from your fear brain. You are responding in an intentional, purposeful way using your highest level of thinking.

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Another thing that's been really helpful is self-compassion, which is simply the practice of being nice to yourself, noticing your own pain, your own discomfort and validating yourself without judgment. Again, seems like a really small thing, but it's a big deal. You having that voice in your head that's criticizing you for what you're going through, that's beating you up, that's second guessing yourself. That is all escalating your stress response. When your stress response is escalating and you are dysregulated, you will be reacting.

And so the simple practice of having a kind voice in your head, that can validate your experience, tell you, you are safe, tell you, you are going to be okay can make a really big difference.

Next, mindfulness. Now, when I used to think of mindfulness I would think of somebody on a yoga mat. And while that can be part of mindfulness, mindfulness is so much broader than meditation or yoga or any one thing. Because at its core, mindfulness is just the skill of staying in the present moment, not in yesterday and not in tomorrow. And while yoga and meditation can help with that skill, they are helpful ways of becoming mindful. You can practice mindfulness in many other ways as well.

It's anything that you do to bring you back to the present moment. That could be noticing your catastrophizing thoughts and not indulging in them. Notice, I'm thinking worst case scenario thoughts, that noticing that is mindfulness. The decision not to engage with them, that is mindfulness. There's all things that you're doing to bring yourself back to the present moment so you are not triggering your fight, flight response.

For me the things that help the most are deep breathing activities. Those really help me just to come into my body and come into my nervous system. Anything that has to do with movement, just being able to move and just stretch my body and just to really focus on the sensations. Especially when I'm stretching to just to be really mindful of where do I feel tight, what does it feel like? What if I push a little bit harder? What if I pull back? Just becoming into that experience, it's just a way of reducing stress, lowering reactivity.

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And finally something that I find helpful is connecting with other people. Just the process of being able to talk to someone about what's going on, to normalize it, to validate it, to process it with, or even to just witness it. Even to just be there as a set of loving ears has been helpful for me. I have set this out in a variety of ways, one with my current friends, with new friends that I've made through these different experiences with my son, so other mothers of children with Autism who are dealing with aggression, hospitalization issues.

I've connected with a lot of women like this through my coaching program, which has been such a wonderful thing. And all this has just been helpful in feeling supported, to feeling like I'm not alone because it's so easy for us to feel isolated and alone on this journey. So having to be purposeful about creating community, staying connected with community, it's so easy to isolate ourselves. I don't want to go to the happy hour and hear about college tours and SATs and all the things that my son's never going to do. It's so easy to do that.

And look, that might be a loving decision for you, for me at certain points and that's totally valid. But that is also why it's important to build connections with other people who do get it. Instead of focusing on the people who don't, find people who do. Or for the people who don't get it, telling them what you need, what you want, how they can best support you. Because I have found that the people in my life, the people who love you too, they want to support you, they just probably don't know how.

And so I know it sounds counterintuitive, we want people to just know and to just get it and to just figure it out on their own and they might not. And it has been helpful for me to be really clear with friends. I want to go out tonight and I don't want to talk about Autism at all, or I need to talk to you right now and I just want to yell and scream and be sad. And I don't need you to tell me that I'm a great mom or everything is going to be okay. I just want to be mad right now. Getting really clear like that has been so helpful for me and has strengthened so many of my relationships.

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Alright, so that is it for the things that I do to manage stress and to manage trauma and those types of triggers. Again, I want to point out that everything that I just talked about was my attempt to figure out what I could control 100%. I wanted to get to a place where even if my son was spiraling in an anxiety loop or was raging in an aggressive loop. That I wanted to know what I could do, how I could take care of myself, how I could create safety for myself. That was everything to me.

These are the things, the continued practice that is sustaining me, that keeps me going, that keeps me showing up, that keeps me at the table making the hard decisions, having the hard conversations, all of that. Everything that's coming up with my son, he's 16½. We're coming up on so many life transitions. All of those things that I want to manage at my highest level, all of those things that are emotionally and mentally really heavy things, I know that I will handle.

And the cumulative impact of doing these small things, to making them part of who you are, they change who you are. I went from a person who was always in a worst case scenario loop to somebody who notices those loops and redirects myself. That is just not where I need to be spending my time. I'm sure I thought that was useful, that worry was a way of preparing myself and being on top of things. And now I know that's totally just not true.

Same thing with self-compassion, definitely a person before who probably looked at self-compassion as feeling sorry for yourself or being indulgent. Now I really do see the value of not being an asshole to yourself, that really does help. And these aren't big things. These are small things in terms of time and energy and difficulty in doing them, they're small, but they're a big deal. The cumulative impact of all of these things is how we rewire patterns, is how we create new patterns. It's how we take control of the things that we can take control of.

And as an Autism parent, that is my north star. It's the serenity prayer. Knowing the difference between what you can control and what you can't, having the courage to take action and to change the things that you can and the wisdom to know the difference. Everything that I have just talked to

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you about really does line up with that thinking. And for me this is all about what can I control, what is mine, what can I own And if I can own it, how do I want to own it to the best of my ability.

Instead of focusing exclusively on trying to control my son, trying to control Autism, trying to control the environment and the situation. What if I spent just 10% of that time on the things I absolutely can control. For me, it's been a game changer. It's been a game changer for my clients.

If this is resonating with you, if you've listened to the last two episodes and you're having similar experiences, I can help you with this. I do it with myself and I do it with my clients every day by teaching them these strategies, these tools and customizing them to their specific situations. To what will work for them, to the things that they will actually do to move the needle. And having that support and that accountability really enables you to make huge shifts in small periods of time.

I've had clients who during their first session have felt helpless and hopeless and teetering on depression to two sessions later, feeling like a different person, completely empowered. Having a different way of looking at things. Having a different way of responding to things. Seeing things not through the lens of what they can't control, but seeing things through the lens of what they can.

And this is what I want for all of us because I know first-hand how much time we spend thinking about all the things that we should be doing or wondering if we're doing enough or we're doing the right things. What I've really learned for myself is the time that I spend getting myself right, regulating myself, regulating my mind, regulating my body. Being able to understand how to do that for me has helped me in so many ways with my son both in my interactions with him but also just in the role of being the CEO of a large team.

He's got a lot of people on his team and there's a lot of moving parts. And my ability to navigate all of that has improved so much because of these skills. So again, I encourage you, schedule your consultation call with me.

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You can use the link in the show notes or go to my website theautismmomcoach.com. And let's talk.

Let's see how we can work together so I can support you so that when you are going into this year's summer break, you have a completely new and sustainable way of understanding and managing your stress and your anxiety. So that you're not burning out and you're able to enjoy your life and you're able to enjoy your child. Alright, that is it for this week's episode. I will talk to you next week. Have a great week.

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, 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.