

Ep #125: Stress Buster for Autism Moms



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With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 125 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Stress Buster for Autism Moms.

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. For the next three episodes of the podcast, I am going to teach you some simple and practical strategies that you can use to manage stress, tame anxiety and prevent burnout. We are going to start with stress and I'm going to start by teaching you what we're going to call the Autism Mom Ice Water Challenge. But instead of pouring a bucket of ice over your head, you are going to submerge your face in a bowl of ice water.

But before I get to the details, let me tell you why. Like we talked about before, when our bodies are in a stress response, the stress can quickly take over, our breathing gets shallow, our chest gets tight, the blood flow is diverted from our major organs to our extremities so we can run or we can fight. And on top of that, stress hormones are being released into our system, intensifying everything.

Now, for Autism moms, we regularly experience intense bouts of stress that feel like they come out of nowhere. And that's why it's really helpful for us to have a technique that counterbalances the intensity of the stress that we're feeling. And what I'm going to teach you now is my favorite technique. I learned it while my son and I were in DBT counseling, dialectical behavioral therapy. And the technique that I'm going to teach you is part of distress tolerance skills taught in DBT that focuses around temperature.

And my favorite part of this is that it's backed by hard science. So why does shocking your face with cold water work? This all comes down to what is

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called the mammalian dive reflex. This is an evolutionary adaptation found in all mammals, including humans. So, what happens is, when you suddenly expose your face to cold, your body thinks you're diving underwater and it triggers a cascade of physiological changes.

Interestingly, all of the changes that it triggers are the counterbalance to what's happening in our body when we are in a stress state. For example, your heart rate slows down, which is the opposite of what happens when you're in a stress state, your heart rate quickens. Your blood vessels and your extremities constrict, redirecting the blood flow to your vital organs. So again, when you're in that stress response, your blood flow is being redirected to your extremities so that you can fight or flight.

This is all counteracted by the dive response, because when you're putting your face in the cold water and your blood vessels and your extremities are constricting. All that blood is being redirected to your vital organs like your heart and your brain. And most importantly for us, it activates our parasympathetic nervous system. This is our rest and digest mode, which counteracts the fight, flight response that we're experiencing in these stressful moments.

Alright, so let's talk about how you can actually use this. The classic method is to submerge your face in a bowl of ice water for about 30 seconds. You can do this in the heat of the moment while shit is going down, or you can do it proactively. I actually love to do it in the morning. It's a great way of waking yourself up and feeling refreshed. And it also helps reduce inflammation and swelling in your face, which is great for those of us with under eye circles.

So, here's how you do it. You fill up a bowl of water, I use a salad bowl, and you put ice in it, that simple. You bend over the bowl, you submerge your face for 15 to 30 seconds, however long you can comfortably hold your breath and then rinse and repeat. I like to do this on and off for one and a half to two minutes just to get the full impact.

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Now, of course, there are going to be plenty of times where we're not able to dunk our face in a bowl of ice water, but there are other ways that you can use this cold temperature technique that don't require a full face. For example, you can open up your freezer and just stick your face in the freezer and just feel the cold wafting on your face. You can grab an ice cube in your hand and feel the cold and watch the ice cube melt. You can do this with a cold pack, you can put a cold pack behind your neck, on your face, on your cheeks.

Also, with the ice cube and the cold pack, you can run them along your wrist and your temples. It's really, really relaxing. You could also do this with a cold drink, which is totally discreet. You can get a cold glass of water or iced tea and you can put it up against your face. And if you're in your bathroom, you can also splash some very cold water in your face as a way of triggering that cold water temperature response.

Now, while the full face immersion is the most effective for triggering the dive reflex, all of these cold temperature techniques will work to some extent, but just not as full on as the full face immersion. In fact, a 2018 study in the Journal of Physiology found that even brief cold exposure to the face led to an immediate decrease in heart rate and an increase in heart rate variability, both indicators of reduced stress.

And here is what I love about the distress tolerance skills such as cold temperature. This isn't about positive thinking or trying to make ourselves feel calm. This is a biological hack that we are using to physiologically turn down the temperature on our stress response. So, in these instances, it's not about taking the time to thought work your way out of a stressful situation and tell yourself all the reasons it's not as bad as you think or all the reasons that you should feel calm even though you don't. This is a quick technique to create calm in your body immediately.

And I will tell you, I have utilized this so many times and it's been so helpful. When I hear my son yelling or screaming in the other room because he's upset about something, putting my face in the freezer or dunking it in ice has just helped me turn down the temperature inside of my body of how

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stressed I actually feel. And the cool thing about this is the more you do it, the more benefit that you get from it. For me, the more I did it, the more tolerant I became of having my face in the cold water, to the point where I actually began to enjoy it.

Alright, that is it for this week's stress buster. I encourage all of you to do the Autism Mom Ice Water Challenge by dunking your face into some ice water and letting your dive reflex take over so that you can feel calmer more quickly.

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.