

Ep #126: Anxiety Buster for Autism Moms



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With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 126 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Anxiety 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 this week's episode of the podcast. I am so glad you are here and I hope you are doing well. In this week's episode I am going to teach you one of my favorite anxiety busting tools. I learned this with my son and I've used it with my son, I've used it with myself and now I use it with my clients. The tool I'm going to teach you, I adapted from a training that I did with my son years ago about anxiety.

And this training or this program, it was teaching children about their anxiety and what is happening in their brain using cartoon characters and it was so well done. It was really cute. And it was really informative and it was so helpful for me because I can so much better understand things and integrate things when I understand what's happening behind the scenes or why something works the way that it works, it just really, really helps me.

And the other cool part of understanding what is happening behind the scenes, what is happening in your brain is it takes you out of your specific situation and puts you at a 10,000 foot view of being able to see what is going on more globally. And when you're able to do that, that's when you're able to make changes because when we're in it and we're in that fight, flight response, it's really hard to get perspective. In fact, that's one of the first things that goes out the window when we are in fight, flight. Our perspective narrows and our thinking becomes all or nothing and always, never.

So, this technique is what I call the four C's. Before I get to the tool that I'm going to teach you, I want to talk a little bit about what is happening inside your brain, because in order to understand anxiety, we need to understand

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what is happening in the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex of our brains.

The limbic system, which includes our amygdala, is one of the oldest parts of the brain in evolutionary terms. Its primary role is to detect threats and to keep us safe. So, when it perceives danger, it triggers the flight, flight or freeze response, flooding the body with stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline.

In contrast, the prefrontal cortex, which is the newer part of our brain and often referred to as our human brain, is where all of our higher functioning resides, our executive functioning, planning, decision making and emotional regulation. So, this is the part of our brain that enables us to think rationally, consider consequences, strategize and control our impulses.

So, here's what happens, when we're stuck in a cycle of anxious thinking, our limbic system is in overdrive. It's constantly scanning for threats and sounding the alarm even when the danger is just a thought or a possibility. How many times does this happen as an Autism mom, when you get yourself lost in your thoughts and you feel yourself so charged up and so stressed out, not because something is actually happening, but because you're thinking about it?

In fact, I think most of our anxiety comes from exactly this, not what is actually happening in the moment, but our thoughts about it. I find this especially so when our child is struggling, especially in a public environment, and you're not just focused on the behavior, but you're focused on what other people think. And if it's like this when they're five, what will it be like when they're 15? And you can get yourself really jacked up on stress, but not from exactly what is happening, but from everything you're thinking about.

So that's what's happening when your fight, flight is in overdrive and it becomes a vicious cycle. That's why it is so important for us to be aware of when this is happening and to be able to interrupt it. That is the only way of

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slowing this process down, of interrupting this pattern to create a new one. So, this is how it works using my technique that I call the four C's.

The first C is to catch. The first step always is to be aware of the thoughts that you're having. Now, this might sound obvious, but we are thinking machines. We are always thinking thoughts and on top of the thoughts that we're even aware that we're thinking, we have the subconscious thoughts that are sort of running in the background. So, it is really important to be able to pause and understand when you're feeling the anxiety that you're feeling, what am I thinking?

The thought could be something like this isn't fair. This shouldn't be happening. Nobody understands this. I don't know what to do. Any of those thoughts are anxiety producing thoughts and you need to first become aware of them before you can do anything about them. That's why the first step is to catch it.

Second, check. Once you catch the thought you want to check in with yourself. How is this thought making you feel? Is it making you feel anxious or afraid or angry? You need to become familiar with the thoughts that you're thinking and the emotion that they're creating inside of you.

Next, you want to challenge the thought because here is what happens, especially when you're in a fight, flight response, you're believing all of the thoughts that you're having. You're believing that they are all true and you have no perspective. So that's why it is important to challenge your thoughts. So many times, our thoughts aren't even true. For instance, nobody understands, that's probably not true. Perhaps the people in front of you don't understand, or they don't understand to your liking, but it's not necessarily true that nobody understands.

So that's why I like to challenge my thoughts. Is this really true? What evidence is there that this isn't true? And when you're doing this, when you're challenging your thoughts, when you're asking yourself these questions, you are engaging your prefrontal cortex. And when you are doing that, you're automatically lowering the temperature a bit on your

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stress response and on your anxiety. But I will tell you, I don't like to get caught up too much in whether a thought is true or not, because I really don't think it matters.

The question I always ask myself when I am challenging a thought is, is this helpful? Is this a helpful thought for me right now in this moment? And I will know because I've already checked in and I know the emotion that it's creating. And I know the emotion that it's creating, if it's creating more fear and more anxiety for me, if it's making me feel less confident and more unsure of myself, it's for sure not helpful.

So then after you challenge the thought, the final step is choose. You get to choose if you want to keep thinking that thought. You get to choose if you want to engage in the thought and think of all the reasons that the thought is true. Or you can decide that you're not going to engage in it, that you're going to notice it, and then you're going to let it pass by, or that you're going to notice it and you're going to think another thought instead.

You get to decide what you want to think and you also get to decide what you do with the thoughts that arise in your brain. If they're not helpful to you, if they're not supportive to you, you get to decide not to engage with them.

Now, at first this might feel weird and awkward. That's why I really encourage my clients to get out a piece of paper and to write these things out, to see in black and white in front of them what's happening in their brain to create more awareness. And over time this will just be something that you automatically do. And the more that you do it, the more it will become a habit.

So even when you do see the thoughts coming up, you're not going to engage with them as much and they're going to lose their power. And the more that happens, the more in control you are of your emotions and your ability to respond in the way that you want.

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Alright, so to sum up the four C's, catch, check, challenge, choose. This is a really simple practice, but it's not necessarily easy. This is literally the work of rewiring your brain and pushing back against your natural instincts, your biology, your default thoughts. So, it takes a lot of purposeful thought and action to do it.

And this is just one of the reasons that doing this work with someone who can guide you, with someone who is not inside of your brain, and someone who can challenge you is one of the quickest ways of making change. So, on that point, if you are struggling with your anxiety and your anxious thoughts and you're getting caught in the spin cycle, that is creating more and more stress for you. And it's making it harder for you to manage your child's big emotions because you're having so many of your own. This is exactly what I could help you with in my one-on-one coaching program. This is the work that we do.

We create awareness about what's happening in our minds, in our bodies and how we are automatically reacting and what that's producing for us so that we can change it. You can do this work. You can repattern your brain. You can repattern the way your nervous system responds to the triggers in your life. You can repattern your thoughts, you can create new ones. And you can also interrupt your default responses when you get triggered.

And the more you're able to do this the better able you will be to model effective coping strategies to your child and to help them regulate themselves when they are feeling dysregulated. You go first. Your ability to do this work and to show up calm and grounded, it lays the groundwork for them by creating a safe environment with a parent who is in control of their emotions. So again, if this is something that you're struggling with, I can help you. To get started go to my website theautismmomcoach.com and schedule your consultation now.

Alright, that is it for this week's episode. Next week we're going to talk about a burnout buster. I'll talk to you then.

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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.