

Ep #95: Stop Catastrophizing, Start Connecting!



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host
Lisa Smith

[Real World Peaceful Parenting](#) with Lisa Smith

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Welcome to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*, a podcast for parents that are tired of yelling, threatening, and punishing their kids. Join mom and master certified parent coach Lisa Smith as she gives you actionable step-by-step strategies that'll help you transform your household from chaos to cooperation. Let's dive in.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Welcome to today's episode. Who here is a worrier? You? No? Just me? Come on. I can't be alone in this. I know I'm not. If you identify as a worrier, let me ask you. Are you a run of the mill worrier, or are you an expert worrier? Or are you the ultimate catastrophizer? What's that you ask? Lisa, what's a catastrophizer? I'm so glad you asked.

Catastrophizing is when someone assumes that the worst will happen. Often it involves believing that you're in a worse situation than you really are or exaggerating the difficulties you face. For example, someone might worry they'll fail an exam. From there, they might assume that failing the exam means that they're a bad student and bound to never pass and never get a degree or find a job. Then they conclude that this means they'll never be financially stable. This, my friends, is called catastrophizing.

Now many successful people have failed exams, and failing an exam isn't proof that you won't be able to find a job. But a person who is catastrophizing might not be able to acknowledge that and might jump from A to B to C to Z, I might fail an exam, right? You see in this example they haven't even taken the exam yet. They're catastrophizing, and they're worried that they might fail the exam.

Then from there, they go down the rabbit hole or the black hole of I might fail. I haven't studied enough. I might fail. I'm a bad student. I'm never going to pass. I'm never going to get a degree. I'm never going to find a job. I'm never going to have any money. I'm never going to own a home. I'm never going to be financially stable. That, my friends, is catastrophizing. It is

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worrying in a way that is not useful. It's assuming that the worst situation will happen and going down that black hole, spiraling down the black hole very quickly.

Now, it can be easy to dismiss catastrophizing as over exaggeration, especially if you don't identify with it. But it's not often intentional or as simple as over exaggeration. The problem is that people who catastrophize often don't realize they're doing it, and they may feel they have no control over their worries. But we do have control over our worries because worry is an emotion. What I teach you is that our emotions come from our thoughts, right. Our emotions are vibration in our body caused by a thought.

What I really want to talk about today is the problem of catastrophizing and worrying in parenting. The problem is that catastrophizing triggers us, and then we reach for control. We rely on control as the tool to overcome the catastrophizing. Good, huh? I know.

If you're identifying with this, turn up the volume a little bit and really listening to today's episode. I think you're gonna find it really useful. In today's episode, I want to make a case. I want the light bulb to go off. I want you to have an aha-moment that catastrophizing and control have no place in real world peaceful parenting.

I recently came across this old blog post that I wrote in 2017 when my son was in seventh grade. Now I've come a long way in my own real world peaceful parenting journey since then with catastrophizing and control, but I want to give you a look into what this used to look like in my world. Sound good?

All right let's set the stage. This was summer of 2017. My son, as I said, was in seventh grade. So he was about 13 years old and brand new to owning his very own smartphone, which I was already concerned about

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getting for him. The usual concerns screentime, losing the phone, the expense of the phone, strangers contacting him, social media, gaming on the phone.

Just the general run of the mill concerns about handing over a smart device to your child or kid or young adult for the first time ever. But I quickly took that worry or concern, let's call it, that run of the mill concern to a whole new level with my catastrophizing one afternoon, and it went like this.

My son got in the car with a bottle of water and his phone on the way to basketball practice. I looked over and I saw that he had the bottle of water on the phone, and I immediately started to worry. I said hey, where's your backpack? Go get your backpack, bring your backpack to practice. Malcolm said, "No, Mom, I'm good." Boom. It's like the catastrophizing just exploded all inside my brain with my thoughts. My mind immediately went to the dark place of worry. Big, dark, scary worry. Nay I say catastrophizing.

I didn't have the word, this particular word, and this deep understanding of the meaning of it and the damage it can do at the time, but I can see now looking back on it that it was full blown catastrophizing. It went like this deep inside my brain. Oh my, oh my, oh my. If he doesn't bring that backpack, surely he'll lose the phone, the brand new phone, the phone that we paid for, a lot of money for. He'll leave it behind.

This will be awful. He won't have a phone, and we'll be stuck with a bill for a gotten lost phone. I know he's going to get distracted. I know he's going to set that phone down. I know he's going to get distracted and forget it. Then he's going to come back out without the phone. Then I made a sharp right hand turn, as many of us do. I moved on from testifying about the process problem, and I started catastrophizing about his character. It went like this.

Oh, my goodness. Clearly, he doesn't value the phone. If he valued the phone, he'd listen to me and bring a backpack. He doesn't respect me. He

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doesn't value his things. He doesn't listen to anything I say. He isn't responsible. He isn't going to get ahead in life.

So I said to him, and a bit of panic and a loud voice, “If you lose that phone, I won't be buying you another one.” He looked over at me calmly and confidently and said, “Mom, I'm not going to lose it.” Again, with a bit of panic and loud voice, I said, “You might forget it. You know you're easily distracted. If you lose that phone, you'll be sorry. I'll be stuck with the bill, and I'm not buying you a new phone. I don't know why you're not bringing your backpack.”

My voice continued to get louder and louder and more frantic as I let my doubts spill out of my mouth. Again, he calmly looked over at me and he said, “Mom, I've got this. Trust me.” So almost in a defeated sigh I slumped over the steering wheel and said, “Okay.” I said it, my voice laced with doubt and little confidence.

After I dropped him off at practice and I was driving back home, I realized how fast these thoughts flew through my brain. It was like shooting stars quickly running across the sky. These catastrophizing thoughts created worry, and then extreme worry known as catastrophizing. It happened in like 10 seconds. It all happened so fast I almost missed it. I do not want you to miss when you're catastrophizing in your parenting.

You see back then this wasn't my first round with worry. If I'm totally honest with you, I come from a long line of experts at worry. I thought I had been doing a really good job of ridding worry out of my life. But apparently, catastrophizing had become my parenting copilot.

Now, maybe you're listening to this podcast episode today, and you're thinking I don't get it. What's wrong, Lisa? I get that you were concerned about his phone. He didn't have a backpack. You were worried that he was going to lose his phone and someone was going to take it. Maybe you're

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thinking are you kidding? I have the same worries. I get you. Yeah, I hear you.

But here's the problem. Worry and catastrophizing leads me to spring into the bad habit of trying to control the situation and dictate my son's actions. What I know for sure is that when I catastrophize, although my heart is in the right place and I genuinely don't want him to lose his phone, my actions of trying to control him are not helpful to me, him, or our relationship.

When I try to control his actions, I feel desperate and needy. I feel dysregulated and easily triggered. Definitely stuck in my emotional center of my brain. I'm not calm, creative, empathetic, understanding, open minded. I'm desperate and needy. I feel like he absolutely must listen to me and do it my way.

When I'm in a state of control, there's no room for connection or compromise. I fall back into dominant parenting. Here's what makes it worse. My strong willed kid, whom I call a full contact sport, resists this. I turn to command from a place of controlling him. At best, I'm gonna get compliance with attitude.

My mind justifies this with more thoughts like I know what's best. He should listen to me. He should do what I ask. I also turn to judging him and criticizing him when he doesn't do what I say, in my mind and sometimes out loud. I sometimes say things that I often later regret.

Now I've been working on real world peaceful parenting for quite a few years now. I've come a long way from where I started as dominant parent. I work on my own parenting daily, and I spend many hours helping parents heal their own past and connect with their kids on a deep level that leads to cooperation and not control.

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The truth is that day while I was driving him to practice, I had an aha-moment that this is really about catastrophizing and control and less about the phone. I was really trying to control him. I also realized that the control was coming from a place of fear. Will he be safe? Will he thrive? Will he be disappointed? Will he mess up? These worries trigger me to want to control his actions.

It led me to ask myself what do I really want in this situation? I don't like what I'm seeing. I don't like that I'm catastrophizing and controlling. So what's the other option? What do I want? What instantly came to mind is I want to let go of trying to control him or the situation. I want to be his emotional coach. I want to support him through his successes and his mistakes.

Of course, my number one job is to keep my son safe. I take that seriously. So I wouldn't let him run with scissors, go to an all-night rave, or ride in the car without a seatbelt. But as his emotional coach, I do want him to have his own experiences. I want him to learn to turn on his internal compass, and teach him to trust his self. I realize that this pivot, this new way of thinking, invites me to let go of trying to control him in this situation.

Let me show you how this dialogue would look without the catastrophizing and the control. So my son gets in the car on the way to basketball practice with a bottle of water and his phone. I notice it, and I check in with myself. I take a couple deep breaths, as I see the fear of losing the phone because he's a new phone owner. I see the fear coming up from my thoughts.

He doesn't have his backpack. He might lose the phone. I realize that my fear comes from my thoughts, and I take a moment to recognize my thoughts. Then I say, "Hey, are you not bringing your backpack to practice?" He says, "No, Mom, I'm good." Then my mind wants to go to that dark place of worry that he's going to lose his phone, but I catch my thoughts

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that are creating my worry. Instead, I think something like all's good. I don't need to try and control this. Take some deep breaths.

Then I from a calm, neutral and triggered place say to him, "Hey, I'm concerned you're gonna forget your phone without your backpack." He says, "I won't lose it." This is where I stop myself. I use some discipline. I remind myself I've stated my concern, you might forget your phone, and I offer my advice, bring the backpack. What I don't do is go to that place of catastrophizing, the triggers, the need to control.

Not getting triggered allows me to stay calm and grounded. Without worry, I can let him have his experience and make his own decisions and suffer the consequences of either decision. Enjoy the consequence of not losing the phone and suffer the consequence of losing the phone. I can choose to trust him. By choosing this path, I'm also reinforcing that he can learn to trust himself. So I say to him, "Sounds good. I know you got this." We drive the rest of the way to practice.

Hopefully what you can see is that without catastrophizing, I don't feel the need to plant a litany of negative thoughts in his brain that damages his sense of self, that plant seeds of doubts, that indicates that I don't trust him, and then invites him not to trust himself. Let me say that again because it's too important to skip over. So if your mind drifted off for a second, come back to me because I really want you to hear this.

When I'm not catastrophizing and I'm not triggered and I'm not using control then I don't feel the urge to plant a litany of negative thoughts in his brain. I don't feel the need to plant a litany of my negative thoughts, my negative thoughts about worry, in his brain that could cause him to damage his sense of self, that could plant seeds of doubt, that could indicate that I don't trust him, and that could invite him not to trust himself.

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Yeah? Ah, I hope this is really showing you a different way to release the catastrophizing and the control. By the way, he did remember his phone. Yes, he did. Will he every time? I don't know. Could it have gotten forgotten or lost or taken? Yeah, it's a possibility. If that would have happened it would have been unfortunate, and I wouldn't have been happy. But what I also know is by not catastrophizing, I can calmly see that we can navigate that lesson if and when it happens, and not trying to control it now from a place of catastrophizing.

What I realized is that when I let go of catastrophizing that leads to control, it feels like freedom to me. Freedom to be the parent I want to be. Freedom allows me to connect with my son and be present. Freedom from catastrophizing allows me to be curious and see where this is going to go. Freedom from catastrophizing invites me not to attack his character about something that might or might not happen.

Remember, he has not lost the phone. I was projecting that he might lose the phone if he doesn't do it my way. In other words, take the backpack. Freedom from catastrophizing allows him to build trust in his decisions and himself. I want that for him. I want that for every one of your kids.

It's unclear what exactly causes catastrophizing. It could be a coping mechanism learned from family or other important people in a person's life. It could be a result of an experience, or it could be related to brain chemistry.

What I know for me is it was definitely a coping mechanism learned from my family. My grandmother, God rest her soul, was an expert catastrophizer. If there was a catastrophizing Hall of Fame, she would be an all-star inductee. I can clearly see it was what was modeled for me growing up. I think my family of origin believed catastrophizing was how you showed your love. It makes me smile to say it out loud. However, what my family of origin didn't realize is that catastrophizing isn't a love

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language. It doesn't feel good to the catastrophizer, or the receiver of the worry.

If you have a strong willed kid like me, he isn't having it. Because to him, it feels like a big dose of me trying to control him. That alone makes him want to power struggle with me, and makes him want to try to control the situation on his end by refusing to bring the backpack. In this example, there was no way in H-E- double toothpick that he was going to agree to bring the backpack at that point, even if he knew it was a good idea. Because as a strong willed kid, he's resisting the control that I'm trying to exert over him. Light bulbs. Yeah, I know.

Now I've successfully worked over the years to move away from catastrophizing and control. I'm not perfect, and I can't say it never rears its ugly head. But it's not my go to parenting tool anymore. Catastrophizing is no longer my parenting copilot. Even when it happens, I can quickly recognize it. I know how to work through it. I can identify the catastrophizing, and I know control is around the corner.

So when I feel it or see it or hear it happening in real time while I'm parenting, I number one, take a moment to regulate myself. I'll take a pause. I'll take some deep breaths. If I'm not in a tight quarter, I'll move around because I know motion changes my emotion. Number two, I understand what I'm doing. I tell myself your catastrophizing. What are the thoughts that are creating it?

Number three, I pivot to new thoughts. They narrow me down and focus only on the problem at hand. I talk to myself only about losing the phone, not spiraling out into anything in the future. So in the first example of failing the test, I would narrow down to I haven't studied enough. I haven't studied enough, I'm not prepared. I wouldn't go to the next step, which is I'm going to fail the class and flunk out of school and not get a job and be in financial ruin.

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In the example with my son and the phone, I would say to myself he's a new phone owner, and I am concerned whether he'll remember it, whether it will disappear. But I'm not going to make it mean anything about anything else.

Lastly, I pivot to suggestions or choices rather than demands. I might say hey, if you want to bring the phone into practice, you need the backpack. Or you can bring the phone and we can leave it in the car. Or I might decide to give it a go and just trust him that he's got it. He loves the phone. He's gonna keep an eye on it. Just because he doesn't have the backpack, doing it my way, he can still be successful. So I pivot to suggestions or choices rather than demands, ultimatums, and trying to control the situation.

As my son enters his last year of high school, I find myself reflecting a lot on my journey as a parent. Reflecting reminds me the tools that I use and teach to walk the real world peaceful parenting path for strong willed kids, they work. The tools lead to deep connection and cooperation. It feels so good and so fulfilling as a parent. I want that for you. Yes, you, and you and you. I want it for every one of you, and I want it for your kids.

So let me ask you a question. Did what I share with you today resonate with you? As I was talking, did the hair on the back of your neck stand up? Or were you nodding your head? Or were you saying wow, Lisa really took us to church today. Or maybe you had tears in your eyes because you swear I'm in your head or in your home. Or maybe you've known for a while now that you are catastrophizer, but you don't know what to do about it. Or maybe you recognize that us control lot as your primary parenting tool, and you hate it, but you don't know how to change.

If you are yes to any of these, 1, 2, 3 or all of them, and you feel ready now, like right now, to do something different, to change, to move forward then you are in for a real treat. Because what I know is that we are about to

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head into one of the most stressful times of the year as a parent. It's fun and exciting and full of anticipation, but it's also incredibly stressful. That's the holiday season.

I want to help you create cooperation and connection in your home during the holiday season. Close your eyes for a minute and imagine what would it be like for you if this was the best holiday season you've ever had with your children? That doesn't mean it's going to be perfect. No one's ever going to lose their shiz. There's not going to be any storms. But you know exactly what to do this year during the holiday season. You know how to calm the chaos?

Well, if you feel ready for that then I want to invite you to my free three day, Keep Calm and Parent On challenge the holiday edition. This thing is 100% F-R-E-E, and it's for you. Right now, it's for you. It's 100% online, and you can participate from anywhere in the world.

Here's the great news. It requires a very minimal time commitment. I need one hour a day for three days from you, and you will be the parent you've always wanted to be. The three day Keep Calm and Parent On holiday edition is all about helping you understand where your anger comes from as a parent, where your catastrophizing comes from. It's all about helping you understand why your kids storm. It's all about helping you get a handle on your frustration and control. It's all about helping you learn tips, tools, and ideas to move from chaos to cooperation. Sounds amazing, right?

All right, let me give you some details here. Here's how the challenge works. You're gonna go to thepeacefulparent.com. No spaces, thepeacefulparent.com/challenge, and you're gonna get signed up. You're gonna get yourself registered. There's also a link in the show notes. So you can go down to the show notes and click on the link, and that will also take you to thepeacefulparent.com/challenge. You can also go to my Instagram

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page the_peaceful_parent, and click on the link in the bio and get signed up that way.

I don't care how you do it. Just run, don't walk, run to your phone or your iPad or your computer and get yourself signed up. Do not miss this opportunity, this free opportunity. Because during this three day challenge, I am going to give you everything I have. I'm going to give you all my energy, tips, tools, and support to teach you exactly how to have this be your best holiday season ever with connection and cooperation in your home.

Each day we're going to address a different topic. Day one will be Monday, November 7th. We're going to cover why did my kids storm? Why Lisa? Why? I don't understand it. I don't know what to do with it. I want it to stop. That's going to happen on Monday, November 7th. Day two, Wednesday, November 9th, we're going to dig into how you can create connection right now in your home no matter what the circumstances are. Then Friday, November 11th, day three, we're going to work on creating maximum cooperation in your home.

Now I will go live each day of the challenge inside our pop up Facebook group, Keep Calm and Parent On and also at Zoom. So if you don't have Facebook, it's not a problem at all. I'll meet you over on Zoom. Don't worry. If you sign up and can't make the live calls, the recordings will be available in the group for a limited time. You do not want to miss this. So either click on the link in the show notes or head on over to thepeacefulparent.com/challenge.

I cannot wait to work with you. I'm so excited. I will see you inside the challenge. If you have another parent or a bestie or someone you want to go through this challenge with, feel free to invite them. If you know a parent or grandparent or a teacher or a nanny or a guardian that would benefit from this three day challenge, please invite them. The more the merrier.

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We have space for everybody. Again, I absolutely cannot wait to work with you. Until we meet again, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

Thanks for listening to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*. If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit thepeacefulparent.com. See you soon.