



## How to Get Help When You're the Designated Translator

Louise has always helped her mom translate important documents and handle formal transactions. Recently, she helped her file for unemployment insurance during the COVID-19 pandemic — and it caused friction between them. An expert shares techniques and resources that Louise and other first-gens with this responsibility can use to alleviate the pressure and extra work that result when we want to support

our parents but need help in the process.

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Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything, and welcome new listeners! I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. As some of you already know, I've been talking to adult children of immigrant parents and key experts about ways we can grow closer to them and better understand one another across the generational gap. In this episode, Louise shares a story that I think a lot of first gens can relate to. It's about being a translator for your parents and all the frustration, confusion, and pressure that can sometimes involve. Let's get into it.

Louise To: My name is Louise To. I'm from Honolulu, Hawaii. I identify as Chinese-Vietnamese American, and in my family we call our parents mom and dad. So, growing up, my relationship with my parents was very distant. They worked a lot and I guess a lot of the things that we ended up interacting with our parents had to do with family occasions, and then also that we would kind of serve as their translators and their administrators, because they needed people who knew English to read these documents that were coming in, basically go with them to the doctor, particularly when it came to when my father was sick. He needed oncology resources, and that just wasn't... It just wasn't as easy to find oncologists that spoke our language.

So, we basically had to step up, especially my brother in this instance. My brother was telling me about that moment when he told my dad how he has cancer, and he described it as he told him, and then my dad just stopped, like he stopped reacting to the world. It's like he froze, and then he just looked off into the distance and stopped listening altogether. Anyway, I guess I had originally called in because I was so frustrated at my mom, because recently she got furloughed from her job because of the pandemic, and we needed to apply for unemployment insurance for her, so we did.

I mean, it was a whole frustrating process of first of all, the unemployment office was not ready for the unprecedented amount of applications for unemployment. And you know, it leaves a lot of people in the dark, especially people like my mom, who doesn't know how to use computers, doesn't know English, so they rely on other people to help them out with these situations. So, basically I kind of was attacking this unemployment portal as often as possible to try to get her application in, to get her payments, and it took a long time. It took like two months before she got anything.

She basically kept messaging me, so I'm far away. I'm on the East Coast, and I'm trying to do these things from a distance, trying to apply through the system that's based in Hawaii time, and she basically just became... First, she started off trying to be patient, because she understood how many people were trying to get help. She got it. But then as the weeks went on, she became very anxious, and very nervous, and then she started to... To me, it felt like she was accusing me that I didn't do a good job, that I messed up, that I didn't read the instructions correctly, and then she was basically saying, like basically, "You need to read every single line of these letters and these instructions."

And I'm like, "Mom, I have. I promise. I did. I don't know what to tell you. This is really out of my hands. I can't push it anymore. I've sent like 15 emails." And she just... Oh, she couldn't understand that at some point, you just... There's nothing you can do. Like you know, these are the feelings that children of immigrants feel, like it's so unfair, like I shouldn't have to be doing this for my parents who are adults, and the world tells me that adults should be able to take care of these things. I don't think that me and my brother will ever be completely free of helping her, and we don't want to be. We want to be there for her when she needs it, but I think if she can be more self-sufficient, it would help us, me and my brother, kind of move on to other parts of our lives that we feel like we haven't really been able to pursue.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, I definitely get why Louise and her brother might feel frustrated at times, so how do we take that frustration and turn it into a solution? Are there resources? Can we get help? Is there tech? So, you know what I did. I called in an expert.

Saritha Farris: My name is Saritha Farris. I'm a licensed clinical social worker in Las Vegas, Nevada. I have a private practice in outpatient mental health, where I specialize in trauma.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, what do you hear when you listen to Louise's story?

Farris: I hear frustration regarding the cultural perspective. In regards to being an Asian American, where Asian culture is very collective, and American culture is very individualistic, so serving as a translator can oftentimes be very frustrating,

because as she mentioned, that there was some cultural differences where people from the outside are telling her, “Why are you translating for your mom?” And making her feel like her parents should be more independent. Whereas Asian culture is very family based, and very family oriented, so this actually takes place more often than people would actually think.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, is this something you see a lot in your practice?

Farris: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. If there is a person that immigrates from this country and doesn't speak English fluently, it's very much expected for the child to help out wherever they can.

Lantigua-Williams:

And so, what are some of the results of the responsibility that the child has to take on, in what you've seen, in your practice?

Farris: What I've seen personally is that it results in parentified behavior, so meaning that the child takes on the responsibility of becoming a parent almost, and that can shift the family dynamics. So, if it's children or multiple children in one family, then one child specifically will sort of align themselves with the parents, because the parents will sort of use that child the most, and say take that child to the doctor, or to wherever it is that they're going, because their English might be more proficient than the others.

And then, so that type of shift in family dynamics can sometimes actually cause problems within the sibling relationship, where one seems to be favored over the others, and you can also find that the child that is being parentified will often act in a parental role over their siblings.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, in Louise's case, her brother also had to play some really important roles in translating, specifically having to do with their father's health. I mean, the story of him having to translate the cancer diagnosis gave me chills.

Farris: Yeah. It's definitely tough. I think specifically with Louise's brother having to develop, to translate, excuse me, very sensitive personal information was a hard one, and one that probably should have shifted to the service provider to either get a language line, or to have somebody in person to translate. So, in that particular case, whoever the child is translating can actually advocate for themselves by asking the service provider to do a language line or something like that, because sometimes there isn't a direct translation for medical terminology specifically, so cancer is kind of a word that's pretty universal, so I'm sure the parents understood that. However, if there's other medical terminology or something else that the parents need to know in regards to the diagnosis, particularly finding service providers or kind of the what's next, that should actually

be taken care of by somebody that is proficient in the language and proficient in whatever profession that they're talking about, whether it be mental health or medical.

And sometimes you'll find that siblings also translate languages just determined on who's available. So, if there's multiple children in the household, you might have child A that's very proficient and sort of the go-to person, but if child A is busy for whatever reason, then they'll use whomever they have available.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, this is an interesting point that you're making about the child being in a position to advocate. My mother would have seen that as absolute disrespect and an unwillingness from my end to help her. So, I would have been really caught in between the need for help, because maybe I didn't understand all the medical terminology, but then my mother's perception of me seeking help meaning that I didn't want to help her. How do we navigate that?

Farris:

That is a tough thing to navigate. Specifically, in the Asian and Hispanic communities, respect is everything, specifically respect for your elders. So, there is a lot of pushback from older generations of, "Didn't I ask you for help? So, you should be more than willing to help me." And if you're not, like you said, you're seen as a very disrespectful child. I think as part of self-advocacy, you have to set boundaries. And the way to set boundaries is to really just be assertive with your communication style. "Mom, I understand," or, "Mom or dad, I understand that you were looking for me to help you with this situation. This is how I'm gonna help you." And sort of phrase it to where it's more beneficial to them. "I don't really want to mess this up, or I want you to have as much information as you can. I want you to have the best case scenario. I want you to really fully understand what the doctor is saying. So, I think this is the best route to go. I'll be right here with you and translating everything in a way that you understand it if I don't feel like the translator is doing a good job."

But in terms of self-advocacy, you have to stick to your boundaries, and you have to be assertive when you communicate with your parents.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, in the case of a medical situation, it would mean making those arrangements ahead of time, obviously, because someone would have to show up at the appointment to be that interpreter. What about in cases where there's documentation involved, and mail, and forms that have to be filled out? How do you suggest that an adult first-gen child navigate those waters?

Farris:

Speaking to whoever is in the intake process, that's where it really begins. So, whatever you're doing medical, mental health wise, basically any of the larger professions, or something more significant will have an intake process, and right then and there you need to be able to communicate that my parent speaks in this

language and any forms that mailed out, we request that it be sent in this language. As well as asking if the insurance companies employ any social workers, so that way the person that is English speaking can maybe talk to the social worker to help identify resources in the parent's language. Also, looking for specific groups or organizations that can provide case management. They should be able to help you find a resource for people that don't fluently speak English.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, sometimes it becomes also about privacy, in that the parent may not be willing to allow a stranger to come into essentially what's a circle where very intimate information is being discussed, so how can an adult child help a parent overcome that barrier, the fear of having something that they deem so private be shared with a perfect stranger?

Farris:

I would say align yourself with the service provider. I've had this many times in my practice. Particularly in mental health, it's a very stigmatized field and a very stigmatized area, so especially in the minority population, if you have somebody coming from Asian, Hispanic, African American descent, they don't really want to talk, sort of air their dirty laundry. So, I align myself with the child, or the adult child, whoever it is in the room, and saying, "Hey, this is kind of sensitive information. Is it okay that they share X, Y and Z?" Or I'm, "This is sensitive information. I'm gonna ask your child to step out."

And then I'm gonna use the language line, and then I explain what the benefits are in terms of the benefits to treatment. So, if the parent or the service provider is not really... is pretty reluctant in sort of aligning themselves with the child and kind of like, "Hey, this is a family issue. I'm gonna step out of it." The thing that Louise can do or other child, or either children or adult children can do, is to just discuss the benefits of using translation services, and saying, "Hey, I know this is private information, but this is what we're here for. We're here to talk to the doctor about XYZ treatment, and I really need you to get this information."

Lantigua-Williams:

So, in Louise's case, one of the things that she said was basically a barrier to her mom being more independent about these things was her low technological literacy. She's not great on computers. She's not great on her smartphone. And so, even though a lot of the things could be handled on a computer or on a smartphone, her mom just didn't have the wherewithal to do that. And that sounded really familiar to me. What, in your experience, are ways for an adult child to help parents out when the tech literacy might not be where it needs to be?

Farris:

There are family resource centers, and they kind of vary by community, so some can be run by nonprofit organizations, some can be government organizations, but Googling family resource centers, or even typing in something about finding cultural centers that specifically deal with members of a specific population, so maybe like Filipino American Association, or Chinese or Vietnamese Association,

or Asian Pacific Islander Association, so you'll be able to find different resources that the community center offers, typically within that person's language.

The other thing that can be looked up is vocational rehabilitation centers, and they often offer computer classes, resume classes, interviewing skills, those kinds of things, anything to help them get a job, or to kind of just help them become more sort of tech savvy.

Lantigua-Williams:

But those would have to be paid for?

Farris: Sometimes. Sometimes not. It really just depends on the organization. Typically, you'll find mostly it'll be donation based, so whatever the person can donate, and that can even include volunteer time.

Lantigua-Williams:

Since they've been doing this for quite a few years, Louise and her brother have come up with a system whereby because he's local, he kinds of handles their mom's more immediate needs, he'll go places with her, he'll do the mail, translation, those kinds of things, and then Louise handles things that can be handled over computer. And so, they seem to have a good system. Do you suggest that when there's more than one adult child, that they sort of split the responsibilities or the areas of responsibility if they intend to continue supporting their parents in these ways?

Farris: You have to develop what your level of involvement is going to be early. So, not only develop that, but determine what that's going to be, and be able to communicate that. So, if you're in a sibling group, "Hey, this is what I'm gonna do. Brother, you can do this. Sister, you can do this." That kind of thing, so that way there's a conversation that takes place, and everybody agrees to it, versus why do I always get stuck doing this? Because I live here, that's not fair. So, if you're having a fair and open and honest communication, and say, "Hey, would this be helpful? Since you live there geographically, it makes better sense if you check the mail and I handle sort of the email kind of things or calling the insurance company." In terms of splitting the responsibilities, it's very helpful.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, are there any absolute do not ever do this in these types of situations?

Farris: I would say absolutely do not go into the situation with your parents, in terms of appointments or something, and sort of surprise them with translation services, because of the expectation is you've been doing this for your whole life, why would that change now? That would probably be very jarring to them, and you're not gonna get the result that you want. So, these conversations need to take place preferably when everyone's calm, maybe over a good meal, and just saying like, "Hey, while you're eating that, just want to kind of bring something up." So, when

everyone's kind of calm, cool, and collected, and maybe the siblings have talked on the side, and then they can present the information to mom and say, "Mom, Dad, we want you to be more self-sufficient. We think this would be very beneficial for you." That kind of thing.

Absolutely also do not make this a, "This is a burden on me," kind of thing, because they also will not be responsive to that. The parents will be very defensive, and so you want to sort of stray away from any language that puts that parent on the defensive.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Saritha. Advocate for your parents. Ask organizations if they can provide translation services, especially when it comes to medical or government-related issues. Many offices are equipped to provide translation services for free. Plan ahead. Be involved from the instant a translation-related issue arises, and start asking for help from providers, insurance companies, and outside organizations as soon as you can. Encourage your parents to be comfortable and open minded about receiving that type of help from someone else. Be assertive in your communication. Set boundaries with your parents and find ways to get them the help they need without becoming the only person taking on translation duties. Spend a little money if you can. There are online services that can translate documents professionally, and that frees you from having to do the translation and ensures that your parents will have a professional, top quality translation of their documents. Be patient. It's okay to be frustrated, but don't let it turn into anger or damage your relationship with your parents. They're probably frustrated, too. And remember, share the work. If you have siblings, cousins, or other caring adults, split translation duties. Approaching the situation as a team will make it more collaborative and keep anyone from burning out.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you so much for listening. How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything is an original production of Lantigua Williams & Co. Micaela Rodriguez produced this episode. Kojin Tashiro mixed it. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. We'd love to hear your stories, so email us at [hello@talktomamipapi.com](mailto:hello@talktomamipapi.com). Even if you don't want to be on the show, send us your story. It might inspire a different episode. You can also connect with us on Instagram and Twitter @TalktoMamiPapi. Remember to please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts, and leave a review. We read those and take them into consideration as we're working on the show. Bye, everybody! Same place next week.

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