



When Mamí Grieves Different Than You

Erika’s mom has always been a huge support for Erika and her sisters. But when Erika’s grandmother passed away in the Dominican Republic amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Erika wanted to support *her* during this difficult time. Figuring out what her mom needed—and didn’t—turned into a delicate dance of giving and receiving, for both of them. And a grief counselor implodes some myths about grief while offering

practical advice on how to best help loved ones.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamí and Papí] About Anything. Hi, new listeners! I’m Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. This week, we’re talking about something many of us have experienced, especially recently thanks to COVID-19. Grief. As first gens, how we grieve may look different from the way our parents grieve, and supporting them can be complicated, because we tend to support people how we’d like to be supported. In this episode, Erika shares how she figured out how to best support her mom after her grandmother passed away. Let’s get into it.

Erika:

I’m Erika. I’m from Los Angeles, California, and in my house, we call our parents mom and dad. So, my mom and my dad are both immigrants from the Dominican Republic. We, as in my sisters and I, were born in New York, and my little sister was born in Florida. I grew up in the United States, mostly in Los Angeles. I think I have a really good relationship with my parents. To be honest, until this point when my grandmother passed away, there wasn’t anything that was so sad that we had to deal with as a family. Of course, there were moments where if a difficult decision has to be made or something like that, but we never really had to deal with anything this painful, so this was difficult, because not only are we losing a loved one, someone that was really close to us. My grandma lived with us all throughout my childhood. On top of that, being in quarantine and dealing with COVID-19, none of us were able to go see my family in the Dominican Republic, and we were never able to have a proper funeral for my grandmother, so not feeling like we could properly say goodbye just made it even harder.

When my grandmother passed away, she had already been dealing with growing older and some general illnesses, but the catalyst for everything kind of happened when she fell one morning in her bathroom and she broke her femur. She had to

get surgery for it, and things were okay for a couple of weeks, but then basically her body just started giving up. It was a lot of things together. My mom, because she's always trying to be the strongest one for all of us, she is typically the type of person that doesn't really address her emotions and how she's feeling, or if she's going through any difficulties. Although she did allow herself to be sadder than she has in the past, she has a hard time really opening herself up and to ask us for support, because I know she really wants to be the supportive figure towards us, so I really wish that I could support her more in that way.

I've told her multiple times, "If you ever need someone to talk to, I know you have your family members, and your cousins, and your sister, but just because you are my mom doesn't mean that I can't support you in the same way that you've supported me." Although she's trying her best to be there for us, I know she's hurting deep down, and as I've gotten older, it's become more clear to me that my parents aren't Superman and Superwoman, like they have emotions, as well, and they deal with hardships on their own, and I think that's something that's definitely come with growing up and dealing with stuff on my own as an adult, as well. I've tried my best to not be very emotional about the whole situation around my mother, because I know that if I were to break down and cry in front of her, it would just make her really sad, as well.

So, I've kind of leaned on other people for support in that way, so that I could be more supportive of my mother. To be honest, I feel like I've tried on my part to be more positive about the whole situation and celebrating my grandmother's life. The day that my mother told me that she passed away, we, as in my boyfriend and I, went to go visit her. It was really tough for me, but instead of wallowing in that grief, we actually had a really fun time and talked about really funny stories of things my grandmother did, and just how great of a person she was, and how much she touched people's lives, and how much everyone loved her. So, I've tried to keep up that energy.

I do think I've had my own time to grieve. In a weird way, being in quarantine actually contributes to that. I have my own support system, as well, and I can lean on my sisters. I can lean on my boyfriend, on my dad, in a way that I can support them, and they can support me, but at the same time, we can really be there for my mom. It's something that's new for me, but I'm more than ready to step into that role and to be that person for everyone as much as they are for me.

Lantigua-Williams:

Erika's story mirrors how my own grandmother in Dominican Republic passed away a few years ago. She'd been ill for months and my mother was with her throughout, and when Mamá U passed, my mother became very matter of fact about everything, choosing to focus on every detail of those final days instead of on her own pain. I didn't know what to do besides call in to check on her. So, today we're asking how can we better understand what loved ones need while

they grieve? How can we be helpful during such intense times of distress and loss? As usual, I called in an expert.

Alica Forneret: My name is [Alica Forneret. I am a grief guide, writer, and facilitator](#), and I got into the grief space after my mom died in 2016, so now I create a lot of digital and tangible products and grief writings, and then also host events and workshops around grief support.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, so you heard Erika's testimony story. What do you hear?

Forneret: What I heard is someone who has a lot of passion for supporting someone that needs support, but who wants to be incredibly careful about ensuring that the support that they give is useful and applicable to her mom's life, and so I heard caution fueled by empathy. You know, I've had to say before, you need to remind yourself that the support that you're giving needs to be about them and not about you. If they want to be supported by you, if you're the right person, great. If you're not, you need to be okay with that. And I was hearing little threads of that in Erika's testimony, just about recognizing that there are things that she can do, but that there's also that challenge of really understanding what it is that her mom needs.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, in your experience, what are some of the standard, or typical, or more acceptable ways that people grieve?

Forneret: Oh, it's all over the map. I think one of the things about grief is that we can't really anticipate what it's going to be like. We can assume based on what we've heard about stages, or what we've heard about other people's experiences, but it is a complete roller coaster and having to navigate new feelings and ways of moving through grief that really we can't anticipate. So, I think even for me, some days I'm really sad. Some days, I'm really happy when I have great memories of my mom, and I never expected even just a couple years after she died that I could have days where I am just so joyous to know that there were moments that I got to live in my life with her, and every day in my grief journey and a lot of people's grief journeys is very different.

Lantigua-Williams:

I love the way that you answered that question, because it brings me to what I really want to know, which is how does someone like Erika, who loves and wants to support someone like her mom, how do we read them? What are the things that we should pay attention to, so that then we can tailor the way that we support them to what they want and what they need?

Forneret: Yeah. I think that's a great question and a hugely important part of this process of grief support is really being able to pump the brakes, step back, and pause, and

work with the person, and also like you said, read the person to understand what it is that they might need. You know, what's important in these moments is, and what's helpful in these moments, is to be able to take that break and really assess the situation. Because what I was hearing in a lot of what she was saying is, "I'm noticing this..." Not hardness, but this block between her mom being able to open up, and sob, and be completely emotionally vulnerable, and it's important to recognize that, because that can lead Erika to a point where she can say, "Okay. What can I offer that will fit within this container of how my mom is normally able to process emotions or process these situations?"

Lantigua-Williams:

So, what are some of the concrete things that someone in Erika's position can do to one, support the person, but also not become burdensome in their earnestness to try to help?

Fornaret: One of the first things that I thought of when hearing this, she's already doing it, and that's supporting the people that are in the network around her mom. And I think that being able to support people like her dad, and her siblings, and her other extended family members, means that a little bit of that burden is maybe taken off of her mom. And also, it shows, it models for her mom that Erika is respecting the fact that what her mom needs to be able to do is just take care of herself, and her family, but that she does have other people in her life that are willing to support them with her.

And then the other would be just having conversations with her mom about what kind of support she needs, but not pushing. So, having conversations to better understand what it is that her mom needs, what her mom has capacity for, whether or not her mom wants to get emotional, which sometimes it sounds like maybe she does a little bit, but not a ton. And to really understand what that specific support is that Erika can give without overstepping any boundaries with her mom.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, as we're paying attention to the person, we're also grieving with them, right? And so, what are some techniques that you would recommend for ensuring that if we are also grieving, that we also take care of ourselves, so that we can be there for other people who we want to support?

Fornaret: Oh, 100%. The main thing is to identify what you have capacity for. I wish that I had the capacity to just be on the phone all day, every day, with people who have lost someone, like my dad, or my sister, but I know that for me to be able to take a step back and have my own grieving process about my mom, I had to notice, "Okay, I can do this many phone calls a week." Or I can come and see you physically in person this much. In addition to that, really advocating for yourself, I think it can be really hard, and grief especially, when you have a large family like Erika is talking about, you sometimes can get lost in the cycle of, "I'm just gonna

ignore my own problems or my own grief and take care of other people, because I know that they need it.” But understanding that you need it as well, and advocating for yourself, and figuring out the big things you can do, like taking time off from work, or taking time away is huge, but also the little things that you can do. Like for me, that literally just means going for a walk sometimes, letting myself cry when I need to.

Lantigua-Williams:

Are there signs that we should pay attention to that might indicate that the person might need more than just space? You know, where it might be bordering on depression, or it might be bordering on something else? What are some of the signs that we should just pay attention to?

Fornaret: Yeah. Again, this answer is so hard to give repeatedly, all the time with this work, but it really depends on the person. For me, when I work myself like 18 hour days over and over and over, my husband knows, “You’re ignoring something. You’re trying to distract yourself from something.” And it usually happens around Mother’s Day, or around my mom’s birthday. And that usually means and is a signal to him or to other people in my life something’s going on here where you’re trying to remove yourself from reality by putting yourself in other situations where you have to work all the time and exhaust yourself around that, so that you don’t have to think about your mom.

So, I think recognizing specific shifts in patterns of the person in your life, whatever that pattern is. Maybe it means they work more. Maybe it means they work less. Maybe it means they have a ton of energy, maybe it means they have no energy. I think paying attention to the specific pattern shifting and changing for your person is the best answer that I can give, because it’s different for everyone.

Lantigua-Williams:

Okay, so I want to talk a little bit more broadly about the culture around death, because over the last 20 years, it’s been changing quite a bit. And I think specifically in American culture, there’s the movement for Death with Dignity, there’s a movement for palliative care, there’s a lot now being understood about the process for the individual and for their loved ones. How do you see culturally the shift that’s happening around I would say an embracing and a deep search for better understanding of how we can deal better with death and the process of dying?

Fornaret: Even just in the time that I’ve been doing this work, I’ve seen a huge shift. I came into the space because when my mom died, I was so sick of the grief support that was doves, and rainbows, which doesn’t resonate with me personally, and I was having to dig really deep to find people that were talking honestly and openly about pieces of the grieving process like anger, like jealousy, like frustration. Years and years ago, it would have been really easy to say, “These are the steps that someone will go through. This is what you can watch out for. And if they don’t

experience this, then they're probably done with their grief or they're not experiencing any sort of complicated grief."

But I think now, people are definitely opening up to the fact that it's gonna look different for everyone. It's gonna look really painful for some people and a relief for some people to have someone die. Whether that's someone who was experiencing some really serious health issues, or who was ready at the end of their life. And at the same time, I think the conversations and where we're having them is shifting. Like I am trying to get currently employers, and managers, and people in the workplace to have conversations openly about grief, and I think that those are sort of the shifts that I'm seeing. It's people opening up, not to whether or not we should be having the conversation, but I think the next hurdle after the shift is how, but I think that people are getting ready to have these conversations about death and grief in newer spaces right now.

Lantigua-Williams:

Do you have resources that you can recommend online or elsewhere for people who want to learn more? Not necessarily because someone has died, because they want to be more educated about the complexities of what it is to experience death or experience grief.

Fornaret: Yeah. Absolutely. One thing that I am becoming hyper aware of right now, though, is that [it's very important for people to have personalized, customized, and culturally-specific resources](#) in this moment. And I heard this in what Erika was talking about. There are so many layers of familial, the relationships in her family, the tension between living apart from her family, cultural implications, history, all of that works into how her family is processing death and grief. And so, having resources related to end of life specifically for her and from people who are within a community similar to her, who can write from an experience similar to her is incredibly important. So, I have resources, but I am also sort of a... I consider myself a guide, in that I'm sort of like a connector and a concierge trying to connect people to the specific resources that will help them, and their family, and their communities, whether that's me or not.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, we're going to [link to your site](#) in the episode notes, but are there practitioners that people can look for locally, right? Like I've heard the term death doula recently. Is that a thing? What is that? And is that something you would recommend?

Fornaret: Yeah. Yeah. [I would definitely recommend doulas](#). They are definitely there to help you navigate these kinds of questions and the complexities as you're starting to understand what end of life can look like for you, for a family member, for a community member. So, doulas are great, grief counselors, and grief-specific counselors and therapists, especially people who are trauma informed can be incredibly helpful as you start to explore. There's also grief coaches that can help

coach you after the end of someone's life as you're navigating something like that. And then honestly, there are a lot of different people, even on social media right now, that are trying to bring, again, the conversation just generally into the landscape of what people are consuming on a regular basis.

So, there's [grief bloggers](#), [instagram accounts](#) that [I can link](#) you all to, just because having that sort of front of mind all the time is just as helpful as having one off professional support.

Lantigua-Williams:

Fantastic. Oh my God. Thank you so much.

Fornet: Of course.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Alica. Be opened and don't make assumptions. Grief looks different for every single person and there's a range of emotions people can go through during their grief. Hit pause. Before jumping into the frenzy of doing, stop and try to understand what your grieving parent or relative really needs from you or from someone else. Remember, it's about them, not you. Ask, don't assume. Start a conversation and ask how they want to be supported, then listen and respect their wishes and boundaries. Support their network. This lifts the burden from a parent or relative who's used to being the supporter. Model for them that their loved ones can support one another, so that they can take care of themselves. Get help. Reach out to a mental health counselor or grieving specialist if you or your loved one need additional support. And remember, look in the mirror. Identify your own needs and advocate for yourself to ensure that you also grieve and remain whole through the process.

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. Virginia Lora produced this episode. Kojin Tashiro mixed it. Micaela Rodriguez is our audio producer. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @TalktoMamiPapi. Please remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts, and do leave a review. We love reading those. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

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