



At Home, Being an Adult Is Testing Parental Limits

Deepa is a political journalist who thought she had set clear and practical boundaries with her parents. But, now that she's living with them through the COVID-19 pandemic, she finds everyone at home falling into old patterns that disrupt her work and cross boundaries. Then, we hear from a business and leadership coach who offers pointers on how to recalibrate and refocus.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything, and bonjour new listeners! I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. This week, I want to say a special thanks to Micaela Rodríguez, our founding producer, who said yes to helping me with a zany idea for a new show, and then moved heaven and earth to launch it in three weeks. She's moving on to a very fancy gig, but will always have a place in this house that she helped build. And what a fitting tribute, accidental as it was, that Spotify has named How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything among the best podcasts of 2020 so far. Micaela, that one's for you.

This week, we hear from Deepa, a political journalist who thought she had mastered setting boundaries with her family, but COVID-19 threw her life into a spin, and while living back in her childhood home, she's realizing that falling into a familiar dynamic with her parents is seriously impacting her. Let's get into it.

Deepa Shivaram:

My name is Deepa Shivaram. I'm Indian American and I call my parents mom and dad. I am currently living in my childhood bedroom, and this comes at a really weird point in my life. I had been living... I went to school in D.C., I lived in D.C., stayed to work in D.C. for a couple years, and then a little over a year ago, so about May of 2019, I started this really crazy chapter of my life. I became a campaign embed and I was traveling all over the country, living out of my suitcase, in a different hotel room every night, and I was covering the campaign trail, and it was the best experience and the best job I've ever had. I loved it. It was totally exhausting and insane, but also just... I mean, how many people get to do that, you know? How many people get to experience the election and the country that way?

But the way that things turned out is I went from almost just the crazy whiplash of living that life to all of a sudden being literally in one place all of the time, and it was really hard. It comes down to a lot of things, but I think the thing that I've been thinking about a lot is boundaries. It wasn't so much like, "Oh, this is on my parents." It was really on me a lot of the time, because even on the campaign trail, I remember this was pretty early on, it was probably about like June of last year, and I was trying to get out of Fresno, California. My credit card didn't work, and I couldn't board the flight that I needed to get on, and because of that I was totally... I had never dealt with this before, like how do I book the next flight, why is my credit card not working, didn't know what to do, and I remember I instinctively reached for my phone in my back pocket and I was like, "Oh, I'll call my dad."

And then I just totally stopped, and I was like, "What is my dad gonna do? I am in Fresno, California. There is literally nothing. There is nothing that anyone can do to help me." And it was just like one of those moments that I think I've learned in the last year was just like, "No, you gotta figure this shit out on your own." You know, it's great that you want advice from people like your parents, and you want support, and you want their take on things, but it was one of those moments where it was like I'm almost cutting myself off in a way when I need to set those boundaries for myself.

Boundaries, when I'm in Fresno, California, are really easy to set, because you literally have 3,000 miles between, literally, and I'm in a situation where my parents actually went to work for a majority of quarantine. My mom's a doctor. My dad is a professor. So, they had spaces where they could kind of retreat during the day, but generally speaking, there's just not a lot of independent thinking space and independent physical space, and that kind of leads to those boundaries that you have created for yourself to start kind of eroding a little bit. And I think that has been the most frustrating part, is that I know I worked really hard to set those lines up, not in any negative way, shape, or form, but just as a process of growth, right? As a process of growing and becoming an adult.

And sharing this space again and living back home kind of means that some of that goes away. Space, boundary wise, just doesn't really exist, right? Because you see those videos on social media that have gone viral of like someone doing a work call and their dad just is in the back of the shot, like totally, like that's my house. Fully, 100%. I will literally be interviewing somebody and it doesn't matter, it's like, "Oh, this is everyone's shared space in the house, so let's all just take up whatever space we want," and it's just like part of it I think is frustrating because it like everyone needs physical space to themselves. Period. As human beings. That's one thing.

I think the other side of it that sometimes is frustrating is like it's hard to explain working from home when your job was completely on the road, and so I think sometimes the seriousness of what I do, the seriousness of the role that I play in my job and things like that, sometimes doesn't translate super well. There definitely have been points where I have really just had a moment where I've like...

I don't know if I can keep doing this, like I need to get out of here. I need to leave. I need space. I need all of that. It sucks. It sucks. Because if this had happened, if a conversation had happened over the phone that was really upsetting, I could leave. I could end the phone call. I could leave my apartment. I could take a walk. I could do all of the things that I need to do.

And now it's just like, "Okay, I'm really upset, and now I have to look at you in the face for the rest of the day because we live in the same house." And that is really frustrating, because a lot of the times that space, at least for me, is what I need to process, is what I need to think things clearly. A lot of that for me happens by myself, and that's not something that I have right now.

Hold on, give me one sec, Juleyka. One second. I'll be right back. I just want to make sure I actually have space to myself. People. In the house. All the time. There's never any space. I don't have my own space to go back to because I gave up my apartment when I started this new job a year ago, because I knew I would be traveling so much that there would literally be very little reason to pay rent, but the interesting side story on all of this is that as I don't have a place currently, I'm actually looking to buy a place, and that has been an interesting process because of course it's been like a joint conversation with my parents, and so this is obviously a really big life decision, a very big financial decision, and there's little boundaries in that process, too. Like it's everything is always tied. It is my... It's under my name, I pay off the mortgage and everything, but financially, yes, we're a little bit tied in this process, and it creates a kind of environment in which you give up some of the autonomy that you wish you had.

Lantigua-Williams:

I asked Deepa if she had tried to talk to her parents about any of this.

Deepa:

I don't know, to be honest with you. I just, like I don't really solve problems directly, because I'm super non-confrontational, and I definitely harbor a lot of those feelings at home, too.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, I have not lived with my mother in 20 years, but I still occasionally fall into the trap of focusing my energy on trying to get her to change her behavior, especially when it impacts me. And occasionally, when I'm self-aware enough to catch myself and shift my focus to my own attitude and my behavior, I actually notice that I reduce the impact of her actions on me, and that eventually she catches on and slows down on the stuff that makes me nutty sometimes. But that still only happens on a case by case basis for me. So, I definitely, and you probably, could benefit from a longer-term strategy to get us through these scenarios. As usual, I called in an expert.

Shweta Oza: I'm Dr. Shweta Oza. I am a business and leadership alchemist. For the last 25 years, I have been mentoring leaders in the art of soul success and helping entrepreneurs create a new level of success and sustainability in their business.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, Shweta, I'm gonna start with a question I always start with, which is you heard Deepa's tape. What do you make? What do you hear when you listen to her tape?

Oza: So, I heard a couple of things there. This idea of creating boundaries, and how she understands it, and she has been working to implement it. The boundaries of who do I count on, how much do I have my family support me, and how much do I stand up and be independent? And most of the times, we look at boundaries more as yay or a nay situation. You're in or you're not. You go full in, or you go full out.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, how would you suggest that she or someone in her situation change the way that they conceive the notion of boundaries?

Oza: So, here is what I would offer. Think of boundaries not in terms of quantity, but quality. The quality of involvement. So, in Deepa's case, it may look like, it could look something like where she shifts internally from the space of, "I am back in my parents' house as their daughter," which she is. She always is going to be. But her inner landscape, her inner orientation changes to, "I am a working adult, a professional, cohabiting with other working adults," okay, "who love me very deeply and whom I love very deeply."

Lantigua-Williams:

But that sounds like it's all internally manifested. How can then she use that realignment, the internal realignment, to express or to model the behavior that she would like to see in the other working adults in her environment?

Oza: Right. And here is where the work of realignment helps you, right? Which is she has now defined and owned her space, and so you get to go and say, "I have a call right now, and I'm gonna take it in my room, and I would like nobody to come in." Okay? It is not about you always walk into my space and you never respect my privacy, and you don't understand anything. That is of our child. That is still a child talking to a parent. There is no pushing. There is no forcing them to accept you. You don't need them to accept you, because you have accepted you. If we can take every situation and put the spotlight on ourselves, and see how we get to shift and change, and then everything around us becomes a domino effect. That is the most powerful space for us to be.

Lantigua-Williams:

Okay, so I see the subtle difference in that you are stating plainly what is true for you, and just informing people of how that is going to manifest for you.

Oza: Exactly.

Lantigua-Williams:

Okay, but let me ask you sort of like a very obvious question. This is not her space. This is her parents' house. This is also her childhood home, and they're probably providing in a similar way that they provided when they were raising her, so how can she negotiate those physical attributes to her living situation as she does the internal work to shift her understanding of her place?

Oza: The first and foremost space that it begins is through her communication. Changing the way she talks, she states, she asks, creating those boundaries through her space of assertiveness, not of complaint, clinginess, neediness, or even victimization, or you don't understand me space, right? That is the first step, because her frequency, the frequency with which she is saying it is different. It almost is like you are being served a ball in tennis with a different stroke. You cannot reply to that stroke using your old methods. So, she is changing the way she serves.

Lantigua-Williams:

Okay. I asked her about this, sort of like about being a little bit more assertive about what her needs were, and she said that she is non-confrontational, that she avoids conflict, and so she clearly perceives this as being an area of potential conflict with her parents. How can you help her and other folks in Deepa's situation to see this not as conflict, but as an issue of wavelength or frequency as you just described?

Oza: Okay, so conflict, disagreements, difference of opinions, we have thought of that as such a negative way, you know? And so, part of boundaries, part of this boundary process is figuring out what is good for you. More often than not, we want to enforce boundaries by forcing others to behave in a way that makes us comfortable. The most powerful action that you could take when you are setting up boundaries is to create them from within through your behavior. Forcing others to accept us. Forcing others to respect our space. It is a very outwardly act of pushing and forcing. It is not the same as being in a space of power and intention. It is not about having power over somebody or having power over a situation. It is really owning your power.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, I want to add a complicating factor here, which is that Deepa is right now working with her parents support, financial support, to buy a place, and that's also reminiscent of them having to meet her material needs as they were raising her. So, how can she better maneuver through that relationship in which she is trying to achieve a major life goal, but she really can't do it without them?

Oza: Right. So, another aspect of boundaries, clear, spoken conversation, commitments, understandings. So, a very practical approach here would be she's

gonna have to communicate, sit down, and first of all, before that, be very clear on what she wants in this house, and then make a mental calculation almost, being very clear in what you want, what you are receiving, and what are you willing to give in its stead? This seems like a very simple communication, and a conversation, and yet I will be the first to tell you it can feel like a landmine. If you are in that space, then when you say this and your parent come back, “What? Now we are gonna have a conversation like this? Like are you making it a whole transaction? Can we just not support you in love?” Right?

You are going to very clearly see that coming from a very parental place, not from a co-adult place. And you, instead of falling into a space of, “But you don’t see my point,” come to, “No, I understand. I understand where you are coming from. I would just like to know it better. And instead of me trying to interpret and assume, it really helps me to have everything spelled out.” This, allowing yourself to not be hijacked by emotions, by what used to be a default script of conversation, happens when you are very clear and in your power. And that’s where you start negotiating.

Lantigua-Williams:

Beautiful. Thank you so much. Oh, my goodness. Thank you so much.

Oza: This was so much fun, Juleyka.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let’s recap what we learned from Shweta. Rethink boundaries. Emotional, psychological, and social boundaries are not physical walls. You cannot treat them as absolutes. They sway, shift, and evolve as your relationships and circumstances change. Create boundaries from within. Instead of trying to force other people to respect your boundaries, make sure your own behavior respects the boundaries you’ve set for yourself. I think in The Bronx, we might say, “Check yourself before you wreck yourself.” I’m just saying, #UptownForever.

Get clear on what you want and what you need. Before trying to establish a boundary, know exactly what that boundary is there to protect. Communicate clearly and calmly. State plainly what is true for you, avoid being defensive, and don’t waste energy trying to force others to adapt your point of view. Rethink conflict. Conflict does not have to have a negative connotation. It can be a stepping stone that eventually leads to resolution. And remember, stand in your own power. Being assertive and standing up for your wants and needs is never about wielding power over other people. It is about standing in your own power.

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 Rodríguez is our founding producer and social media editor. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. On Twitter and Instagram,

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