



When Helping Leaves You Feeling Bad After

Perla, a paralegal, uses her training to help her dad navigate the federal COVID-19 relief process. But, when Perla takes charge, personalities clash and roles reverse. An old father-daughter dynamic comes back, and she's left feeling undermined. A family therapist who works with Latino clients returns to guide us in finding better ways to get through these trying moments.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything. Aloha, new listeners! I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. This week, we hear from Perla, a paralegal who tries to help her father navigate government bureaucracy to request COVID-19 relief funds for his business. During the process, she feels second guessed and undermined, and falls into a familiar father-daughter dynamic that leaves her feeling hurt. Let's get into it.

Perla X. Caballero:

My name is Perla X. Caballero. I live in the Pacific Northwest. I was born and raised in the Bay Area of California. I am Mexican American, first generation born in the United States. My parents, I like to call mamá and papá, to me are mom and dad. The relationship with my dad growing up was unique. My mother and father got a divorce at nine, and I lived with my dad until I hit puberty, and so he kind of raised me like a little boy, because he had two boys, my younger brothers. And then I started to mature into a woman and then it became this struggle of, "I've raised my daughter to be this American woman, but I still need her not to be so outspoken."

The dynamic between my father and I changed around the time I turned I'm gonna say 13. Changed because that's when my brothers and I went to go live with my mother, and then he was single for a very long time, and then he decided to get remarried, which he did. And it was this change of, "Well, this is the way it is in America, but this is the way things were in Mexico." So, it's the same way of learning who we are as a Mexican immigrant as a father, and then myself being a Mexican-American citizen, what our spaces were. I went, my mother passed away, my dad and I really together had to heal.

So, during the pandemic, my father's business had to close due to the rules that the governor set forth, and pretty much the entire country locked down. And he

was about to lose his business that he spent 10 years working very hard. My dad asked me to assist him for the Payroll Protection Program, because originally when he did it, he didn't fill out the paperwork correctly. Now, my trade that I went to college for is to be a paralegal. I work in law firms. So, I looked over my dad's paperwork and I told him, "Hey, this is what you did wrong. You need to submit it. You have a chance. We have this window and this opportunity. Just do this." And then he's like, "Can you help me?" I'm like, "I can help you read what you need to do and I will assist you on getting this paperwork correctly."

A 15-minute conversation became a two-hour Zoom call, where I had to take possession of the computer. I had to explain to him the difference between a .JPG, a .PDF, a binder .PDF, what payroll calculations from ADP paperwork meant. I had to... And it was very frustrating. I wanted to scream at my dad, but I couldn't, because that Mexican upbringing, you respect your parents. And so, he got it. He got approved for his payroll, and he called me, and he was very happy, and he was very excited, and we were able to save his business, and he was, "Mija, I'm so proud. Look at what we did." I'm like, "Look at what we did? You mean I. Me." I wanted to take the credit, but it was his business.

But it was the struggle of a parent having to watch his child take control of the situation and be the expert of the situation, the know it all, the person with the life experience. This is what I do for a living. This is my bread and butter. This is what I went to school to be. That felt... I knew I made my dad proud.

My dad respects me now as an adult, but he also likes to second guess me, and one of the reason why I think he does that, even though I'm an expert in doing loan applications, and reading legal documents, and understanding how a lawyer speaks, is because he still sees me as a little girl. He still sees me as this child. He doesn't see me as an adult. I think also it's the fear that my dad doesn't want to surrender control, so he still needs to be in control. My dad is just always gonna be the stubborn man. He is a stubborn man. Even his wife says, "Oh, he's stubborn." And you know, we get teased, like, "You know, you and your dad are exactly the same." Like, "Yeah, duh. Why do you think we don't get along? We're the same exact person." It's like two bulls living together.

What would work better is if he would just let me, just see me as an adult sometimes. Because it's challenging to be second guessed by your parent. Just give me 5% of trust.

Lantigua-Williams:

I hear you, Perla. I used to be my mother's help desk, too, and translator before that, and document filler, and letter transcriber. So many first gens play those roles in childhood and well into adulthood. And I think we have to, considering how much our parents sacrificed for us. But I also think our adult lives are really full, and complex, and it's fair to set some guidelines around how we help and support

our parents. But I wanted to know what a pro recommends, so I called in an expert.

Claudia Cuevas:

My name is Claudia Cuevas. I am a licensed marriage and family therapist. I have my own private practice in Southern California, Orange County to be exact, and I'm so happy to be here.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, you know the first question. You heard Perla's testimony. What do you hear when you listen to Perla's story?

Cuevas: Oh, so I hear a very smart, intelligent woman, who has really done a lot to be successful in her life. That's what I hear. And I hear her wanting her father to see her as an equal. To respect her intelligence and all the work that she's put into being successful in life.

Lantigua-Williams:

Do you often see this dynamic in your own work?

Cuevas: You know, I do. I think that this issue of being first generation in this country, and how our parents raise us to take advantage of everything that this country has, that there comes a time where we've put in the work, we've got the degrees, we've either got the good jobs, and then the expectation in the American culture is that you can stand on your own two feet, right? Your parents go from maybe keeping you alive, helicopter parents, to then going into coaching, and then consulting, and then somewhere, they're equals to us.

That is not the case for Latinos or Mexicans, right? We just... We're never gonna be equals to our parents. Ever.

Lantigua-Williams:

Let's accept that, or let's try to accept that.

Cuevas: Let's try to accept it. Yes.

Lantigua-Williams:

How do we... Right, let's try to accept it. How then can we maneuver around something that seems unchangeable, like the perception that we will always be kids to our parents?

Cuevas: Well, and for me, it's gonna be... I think she said, "I just want my dad to at least accept 5% that I'm a grown up now." And so, I think one of the things that we... and that I want my dad to trust me, or to trust his children, trust his wife, trust me. And so, part of that is really open up that conversation of what does that mean, to trust you? I'm gonna tell you something. For me, it's gonna be really about Perla

defining that word, trust. What does that mean to her? Because I think there's a miscommunication. And also with the world controlling, because I'm gonna go out on a limb, because I don't know Perla, that she's also controlling.

Lantigua-Williams:

Oh, she says it! She says that they're exactly the same person.

Cuevas: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I'm gonna say, "Oh, you're also controlling, because you're a paralegal." You can't be in that type of industry without being detail oriented, a great editor, great gatherer of information, so what does that mean? Is there a negative connotation about that, right? Is there a different way to describe dad and not call him controlling, but someone that is caring for his family and wants to show his knowledge, and wants to be respected for everything he's accomplished also in life. And so, really coming from that kind of point of view. Again, we're not gonna change our parents, so how do I change my perspective about how I'm going about it? Because I really think she's self-reflecting with her dad, and there's a negative to the controlling. That's maybe something she doesn't like about herself, so it's always coming back in a negative way.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, she sees that in her dad and recognizes it's also part of who she is.

Cuevas: Well, I mean everybody tells her they're the same, you know? So it's like, "Oh, this must be a negative thing."

Lantigua-Williams:

Right, right. So, but Perla, rightfully so, also wants recognition for the fact that she possesses highly-specialized knowledge that in this case was instrumental in saving her dad's business. So, how can she, and someone like her, who is an expert by all means and by all measures, get their parent to acknowledge that, one, and then to give them the sufficient space to be able to exert that knowledge when they're called upon by their parent to do so?

Cuevas: I'm gonna tell you the truth. I don't... I didn't see that her dad didn't acknowledge it-

Lantigua-Williams:

Ooh. Okay.

Cuevas: Because he picked up the phone and called her for help. Do you know how hard that is for someone who's prideful, and who that's their business, it's their baby. I have to call somebody for help. He could have called another man, another person, another expert, but he called his daughter. Which to me shows he does believe that she knows what she's doing, especially if you have a dad who's very

prideful, and if he's an entrepreneur, and he's always done things on his own. That just must be something so out of character for them, right?

And so, being able to be a daughter, I mean I helped my mom with her bills that she has to do and everything, and part of that's like, "Okay, I'm gonna sit down, and yeah, you got this, and you understand," and really reassuring the, "Oh, you've been doing this for so many years. It's just this is really hard." That's the conversation. That's the reassurance that she gives of like, "No, you're not going crazy. It's not because you can't do this. It's just really hard to maneuver this." But I went to school for that, so good thing I can help with this one situation.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, so I'm gonna take you through the next phase, which is she gets it done for him, it's a great outcome, but she's still feeling some kind of way, right? She's in her feelings about it. What is the type of self-reflection that someone like Perla might take herself through, so that she recognizes these feelings before they leave her just feeling sour and bothered? You know, like what do you encourage her to think about just after this whole interaction with her dad or with another family member, where she just felt put upon and not appreciated?

Cuevas: For me, it would be for her to reflect, to really kind of meditate on what is it that is missing from this interaction? Because it's gonna be really reflective on, in any part of her life, or even her job, did this interaction remind her of a client she had? Did this interaction remind her of a boss that she had in the past and she really had a hard time getting the acknowledgement or getting the recognition that she needs? Really reflecting, like what is it about this that doesn't feel like I'm getting any of my needs met from my dad, and where is that coming from?

Because it's really easy to be like, "Well, he doesn't respect me. He doesn't..." But I think it has to do more with the amount of effort that she puts in in other aspects of her life that kind of reflected this back to her.

Lantigua-Williams:

Okay. Okay. And then of course it's happening in the context of a pandemic.

Cuevas: Right.

Lantigua-Williams:

Right? So, we cannot undermine the effect of that.

Cuevas: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, everybody's under a lot of pressure. Everything's highly stressful. Everybody's trying to figure out paperwork and unemployment.

Lantigua-Williams:

Yeah. Agreed. Agreed. Okay. In these situations, where part of the goal is to help, but also part of the goal is to not escalate, because you... It's more expeditious to

just be done. What are your absolute dos and don'ts as you are in the situation in the moment?

Cuevas: Don't assume. Don't assume that they know what is easily known to you. Ask the questions. Be very open about what your role is going to be during what this task that you've been asked to participate in. And then really recognize if you need to start setting some boundaries about that.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right. You are the best. Expect to be called back.

Cuevas: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

Lantigua-Williams:

Oh my God, thank you so much.

All right, let's recap what we learned from Claudia. Know your definitions. If what you need is trust, respect, control, think about what that means to you. Think about how you define trust, respect, and control, and the role that that plays in your own life. Read between the lines. Someone may not be saying the exact words you expect, but they're likely communicating loudly with their actions. Acknowledge the other person. Take a moment to recognize the other person for the positive things they bring to the table, to the situation, to the moment. This will set a more productive and reassuring tone.

Reflect on your own feelings afterwards. If you're left feeling a certain way after an interaction, reflect on why that might be and draw wisdom from that to apply next time. Avoid making assumptions. Do not assume you're on the same page about how to solve a problem. Instead, ask lots of questions. Pull from the person's knowledge and their skills. And remember, set boundaries. Be very open and clear about what you want your role to be, what kind of support you can and cannot offer, and how much time you can dedicate to helping.

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, we're @TalktoMamiPapi. Remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

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