



Lost and Isolated Moving Up the Career Ladder

To close out National Mental Health Awareness Month, we speak with Gina, an engineer who, after landing a dream job, begins to feel anxious, unhappy, and unmotivated, which puzzles her working-class Mexican parents. And Carmen Cusido, a writer and mental health advocate, speaks with Juleyka about how to support our wellbeing by cultivating a sense of belonging and connection in the workplace.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi everybody. To wrap up National Mental Health Awareness Month, which is May, we're continuing with our focus on speaking with our loved ones about mental health issues. Today, we welcome Gina. Gina has achieved all the educational and professional milestones her parents dreamed of for her, but her new job began making her feel like an outsider with her peers and her family. This disconnect took a big toll on her mental health, and explaining it to her parents turned out to be extremely challenging. Let's get into it.

Gina:

My name is Gina Moreno, I'm a first-generation Mexican American from the border town of El Paso next to Juárez, Chihuahua. I'm a content creator, and growing up, I called my mom Mamí and my dad Pa. I do have an engineering background, so as I've navigated my career and lived in Seattle, for example, and Missouri, I've come to realize that not only am I a minority when it comes to being out in the streets, but when it comes to my work, I've been 2% of the Latinas in engineering and in tech. As time went on, then I started my full-time job, my mental health started declining just because of the disconnect I felt. I just felt like I had really high expectations for my job based on my parents' beliefs. Their whole dream was for me to go to school and have a good job, and I was very unhappy with it.

I was working in a company that was very competitive, and I think it was the time where I felt so much imposter syndrome and doubt in myself because of the way my friends talked about their experiences. I became really close to this person that was working with me. He would share how he was the person who grew up with less money out of his circle, and I was like, "Oh, okay." And so then he ended up showing me the house where he grew up and I mean, for me it was like a mansion. And I was like, "Boy, don't talk to me about that."

Coming from a low-income background and having a new salary and a new circle of people that had grown up way more privileged than me, it was understanding,

"Okay, well, I guess I don't precisely belong to my low-income community anymore, and I don't precisely hold all the values that my Mexican immigrant parents have, for sure. But I also don't hold all the privileges or even the lifestyle that some of my new friends had, and I don't necessarily completely relate to that." Yeah, I think it was a time of feeling really lost, just not really understanding who I was and what I stood for. And I would joke around because it was like, "Oh, my midlife crisis or quarter-life crisis," and it translated to pretty much losing interest in everything that I once was passionate about. I started therapy right around the same timeframe, so it was not because I had reached this point of really poor mental health, it was actually even before I reached that point. So when talking to my parents, I would kind of just say, "I feel like I'm not happy with some areas of my life." I think that's as far as I would go.

I felt guilty because it always goes back to like, "Well, they did all of this for me to speak the language, to be in this country and you're not happy?" I don't think they would get it. I think my worst fear of talking to my mom about it was her telling me what my inner critic was already saying, that I was being ungrateful, that these experiences were not as extensive and dramatic as I was making them seem, that it was no big deal. And I was really afraid of that because it's like I just love my mom so much and I've always gotten her support that I was just afraid of her and not seeing it and making me feel completely alone. As I was living through this, in my effort for her to understand what I was going through, not just in the negatives, but also in the positives, in the new lifestyle that I had acquired with meeting these important people, traveling, going to nice restaurants, I would try to push her to do different things.

I would invite her to nice dinner places, I would want her to travel with me. And sometimes, I was faced, or not sometimes, but most of the time, I was faced with a lot of disappointment because it was like she didn't quite understand. She's like, "What are you doing with your money?" I just felt like this need for her validation and 100% understanding, and that's the biggest point, I think, of our growth of that codependency, of having to share all of your thoughts and all of your opinions and everything that you wish the other person was and the way that they live their life. I strongly relate my personal journey to mental health and healing as a person. It has also been a journey of self-discovery, of understanding who I am and what my values are outside of my upbringing. Yes, we obviously love each other and see each other as mother and daughter, but we also see each other as humans and as different powerful women.

Lantigua: So much of what Gina describes deeply resonates with me. I also often feel like I'm straddling two different worlds, two cultures, two sets of values. After a lifetime of this and lots and lots of therapy, I've come to see it differently, more like a

badge of honor. Most of the time, I now feel at home in the in between, but Gina's story reminds me of how mentally and emotionally taxing navigating these feelings can be. Her story made me wonder what we as first gens can do to ease some of the pressure we face as we enter spaces and situations our families have never been in before. If I'm being real, this work of making ourselves at home, of making myself at home in my own skin, in my own life, is ongoing. So how do we integrate it into our day-to-day? To help us figure it out, I called in an expert.

Carmen Cusido: My name is Carmen Cusido and I'm a mental health advocate, Cuban American, and I'm based in Northern New Jersey.

Lantigua: All right, easy question. What did you hear in Gina's story?

Cusido: The story that definitely resonated the most was when she said about her friend who was not as wealthy as his other friends, and yet he was still fabulously wealthy. Your parents do the really hard work of leaving their country, which is traumatic in and of itself, and then you're born here. And then I guess in on some level, the parents' generation is like, "Hey, we did all the hard work, congrats. Now it's up to you to carry the bucket all the way to the finish line." But the thing is, we are still individuals. We still struggle with our own version of what fitting in might be, our own version of what making it might be, that might be different from our parents' generation.

Lantigua: So it's interesting because a lot of our identity formation happens early on, and a lot of that has to do with our immediate family. But she is very clearly moving away from her parents and whatever identity they imprinted on her, the more economically successful that she feels. And she talks about wanting to take her mom to nice restaurants and the guilt that she feels about her mom asking her, "Well, why are you spending your money like this?" How do we bridge that gap? Because our parents want us to succeed, but we feel all this guilt after succeeding.

Cusido: We all want to belong somewhere, and it's difficult when you feel that you are left out. But I think one of the ways to bridge that gap honestly is gratitude. Basically, three things you're grateful for, daily. I tend to be very cynical about things, and at first I thought, "Well, how silly is this? Why is this so important?" But it actually is. Because I think sometimes the feeling of not belonging or the feeling of being apart from your roots or anything might in part be focusing on what the problem is or what the issue is, not what the ties that bind still are. One of the ways to really bridge those gaps is really just saying, "Okay, what am I grateful for in this situation? I'm grateful for my parents for this, or I'm grateful to be able to take my mom to a restaurant because now I can do this for her." And if you shift the way that you think about it, that then shifts everything else.

Lantigua: I like that. I like that very much because the gratitude is also a way to remind yourself, "You've earned this." And Gina earned everything that she worked for and that she has. And I think that that's, for immigrant parents, that's a really important value, that you earn the thing that you want in your life. And I think across the board, I can stereotype by saying that very much, it doesn't matter your ethnic group, your racial group, your country of origin, that is an ethos that a lot of our immigrant parents want to imprint on us; work hard, earn everything so that no one can ever say, "You owe me anything." But that also can be a little bit of a trap. And it's interesting because she is, in many ways, a unicorn. She's a Latina in engineering who's a first gen, she's got all these things going for her. So let's talk about the isolation that she mentions. How do we get help? How do we identify that so that we can get help?

Cusido: Well, I mean, I think she does a pretty good job of identifying it. She mentioned that she is going to therapy, which I think is very important. I think sometimes instead of just focusing always inward is trying to push it outward and say, "What can I do with these feelings and who can I potentially help?" And so when I felt alone, sometimes what I do is I try to mentor others, mentor other people who are either looking to have the same career that I have or whatever the case might be. And it just helps the idea of, "Hey," to a high school student, "you're not alone. I was in your place 10, 15, 20 years ago." And I think sometimes stepping outside of yourself helps.

Lantigua: That's one of my go-tos. One of my secret weapons is the fact that I mentor, and it is so important to me to be surrounded by people whom I can be in service to. I want to feel useful, and it absolutely helps with my sense of worth for myself. So I'm so happy that you mentioned that because yes, therapy is great and many of us do really benefit from therapy, but there are other things that we can do that can also help to alleviate some of those pressures. So let's talk a little bit about the fact that sometimes, as first gens, we have to translate for our parents what our successes mean. You're nodding, okay, so just explain the nodding.

Cusido: It's actually really funny. If I would win an award, I would have to break down to, I mean, my mother was college educated, but my dad only had a sixth-grade education, so I would have to be like, "Papi, this is what this means." And I would have to give an elaborate explanation of this is what this award is, this is why I won it. What broke my heart, and I'm sure maybe there are other immigrant families that feel the same way, my parents would come, they both had accents, my dad barely spoke English, and because they were shy, humble people, bringing them to places like Columbia University or every other place that I brought them, they were like, "We're proud of you, but do we belong here?" And I'm like, "Of course you belong here because if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here."

Lantigua: Yes.

Cusido: So...

Lantigua: I went through that with my mom. My mom is the hardest working person I've known in my entire life. And she would often come to campus and be constantly checking what she looked like or she wouldn't eat too much food or she would try not to take too much space. That was the case for four years until I ended up being selected as a Fulbright Scholar, one of two people, and the president of the university had a private reception for the families. So my mother was there in the president's conference room with 20 people max, saying, "They organized this for you?" And I said, "For me, and for this other student." She was so overwhelmed by the thought that the president of a university would honor her daughter. It's that sense of belonging. It's interesting because as first gens, we feel like, "I am prepared to walk into any space and put in the work, but I belong in any space." And for many of our parents, just getting into those spaces, just knowing that those spaces exist.

And it goes back to gratitude. So it's about us extending some of these privileges to our parents, allowing them to partake, allowing them to be present for these things as a way to thank them. Anyways, let's go back to Gina. Okay, Carmen, for first gens like Gina is the work of fitting in, with big ass air quotes, ever done?

Cusido: I think the more you get comfortable with yourself and the more you get comfortable with your experiences, the more you don't feel like an outsider as much, or anymore.

Lantigua: So it's about acceptance?

Cusido: Yeah. And I'll bring it back to gratitude also because Gina did the work, her parents did the work, but she's also making them proud with everything she's done. And that's something to be proud of. That's ultimately, not to sound cheesy, but that's the story of America, that's our story, of people working really hard and then your children honoring the work that you did by also working hard and also doing amazing things with their lives and their careers.

Lantigua: So I want to make sure that we don't confuse gratitude with acceptance of what we're offered. I think that in some instances, some immigrant parents want us to be satisfied with a good level of success, but there are lots of people who want to push beyond that, beyond the comfort of a managerial job, beyond the comfort of a good salary, whatever that might look like. And so I want to make sure that we understand that gratitude does not mean just settling into what's comfortable, that we also should demand more, should aspire to more.

Cusido: I agree. I think gratitude is just one of the stepping points to get there, but each of us has to determine what it is that we want out of life and what it is that we want to achieve.

Lantigua: Yeah, 100%. All right. Any other advice to first gens like Gina about coming to that self-awareness and self-acceptance on how to navigate the inevitable mental challenges that are going to come when we are trying to do things that have never been done before by people around us?

Cusido: Try to see, "Okay, I might be the only Latina doing this, but what are the benefits of that?" Trying to shift the way you think about something. So when I was one of a few, or really the only Latina, say, in a newsroom, I used to think, "Okay, what can I do being the only Latina? What kind of stories can I cover or do I know about that other people may not necessarily know about because they don't have this background?" So I know she's an engineer, so that's a little bit different, but even I'm sure in her career and what she does, there are things that she could say, "Okay, what problem can I solve because I'm unique in this position?" And I think when you start thinking in ways like that, instead of feeling so much as, "I feel powerless," it gives you more agency. And I feel that once that happens, there is less of a sense of, "Where do I belong? Where can I fit myself?"

Lantigua: That's a really great piece of advice. Thank you so much for that. All right, Carmen, please, please come back, I love talking to you.

Cusido: Thank you, likewise.

Lantigua: All right. Here's what Carmen taught us today.

Make a gratitude list, seriously. Doing so gets you in the habit of acknowledging what's present and working in your life and relationships. Recognizing what you have going for you instead of only focusing on what you're missing helps foster a sense of belonging.

Focus outwardly. When feeling isolated, look around you and find intentional ways to be of service. Taking the initiative, reaching out and offering help is a great antidote to feeling disconnected.

And remember, accept and embrace your uniqueness. Your differences are not flaws or deficits. What you cannot change about yourself is also what gives you an edge. Embrace it as a superpower.

Thank you for listening and for sharing us. How to Talk to [Mamá & Papá] About Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. I'm the creator and host, Juleyka

Lantigua. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @TalkToMamiPapi. Bye everybody, talk to you soon.

How to Talk to [Mamá & Papí] about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. I'm the creator and host, Juleyka Lantigua. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @talktomamipapi. Bye everybody. Talk to you soon.

CITATION:

Lantigua, Juleyka, host. "Lost and Isolated Moving Up the Career Ladder" *How to Talk to [Mamá & Papí] about Anything*, LWC Studios., May 22, 2023. TalkToMamiPapi.com.

Produced by:



ERASING THE MARGINS