



Talking about Being Queer Makes Mamí Uncomfortable

Emilio's Dominican mother was supportive and encouraging when he came out to her, but when he decides to speak openly with a younger relative about being gay, tensions arise between them. And Laurin Mayeno, a consultant and coach specializing in gender inclusion and justice, speaks with Juleyka about why prioritizing our needs helps us engage more productively during triggering conversations, and offers advice on how to avoid projecting our discomfort onto others.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi, everybody. Today we have Emilio with us. Emilio and his Dominican mom have a deeply loving and supportive relationship, but Emilio decides to speak openly about his LGBTQ identity with a younger family member. This creates tension between him and his mom, and he realizes they're not exactly on the same page about this important issue. Let's get into it.

Emilio:

My name is Emilio Mesa. I was born in the Dominican Republic and I was brought to the United States, specifically the Bronx when I was six years old. I'm an events producer and planner, a writer as well, working on my first book. I was raised by two mothers, so my grandmother, my mother's mother, I called her mama, and my mother, I always call her mamí. I speak to my mother one to two times a week, and we text constantly, and I have the relationship as an adult with my mother that I never thought I could ever have when I was a teenager. My mother has always been the type of person that was very ahead of her time. My mother pushed me to come out to her because we've been through so much together, but we see things in a different way. I was like 20, 21 years old.

I had graduated college. I had a beautiful apartment in downtown on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Being a concierge at the time, I had a lot of connections at great restaurants and hotels, and I booked this beautiful Italian restaurant because I know she loves Italian food and I know she loves octopus, grilled octopus. So we went there and she just said to me, she goes, "You've been cutting me out of your life. You don't have to hide. I love you no matter what. I know who you are, but I want to hear it from you." And I told her, I said, "I'm gay." And she says, "I love you. You're my son, and I will fight for you against everybody because you came from here." And she took my hands and she put it on her womb. It meant everything to me because I finally felt heard.

At this point in our lifetime, my mother and I are very, very clear, and she knows where I am. I know where she is, but we're both very strong personalities.

My brother passed away, so my mother and I take care of his children and we take care of his education, their well-being, and their overall situation.

During COVID, like obviously COVID hit every single one of us, especially the younger kids, they were relegated to being in front of their screens. And so my younger nephew, he just turned 15. He started going on chat rooms and stuff, and he started developing a relationship with someone online, and we started getting worried because he was after this girl. But there were a couple of things that were suspect red flags. Okay, there's a picture, but why doesn't she want to see you on FaceTime or do a Zoom? This person is not being forthcoming with their information and everything. So this could just basically be like a catfish situation.

When this happened, mamá called me and she goes, "It sounds very ominous. It doesn't sound very secure, and everything..." She goes, "You should speak to him." To my nephew, I said, "There's something to be said about transparency. If you say who you are, you have no reason to deny or hide. So if this person is not doing this, you need to ask yourself, what is this person hiding?" So I said like, "I'm gay. I always tell people who I am. I'm not trying to hide anything, and if you don't accept me, we won't deal with each other because this is who I am." I said that to him and I said that to mamá, and then mamá goes, she goes, "Oh, you shouldn't have said that to him." And I was like, "Pero ¿por qué?" "But why?" And she's like, "No, because he's young and everything." I said, "Mamá," I said, "This is where you and I differ."

As progressive as my mother is, she subscribes to that old Latinx Caribbean Hispanic mentality, "lo que se ve no se dice." what you can see, you don't have to tell. That's an immigrant mentality. And then here I come, the blabbermouth because I have to talk about everything, and I was just like, "No, we have to talk about these things," because silence equals death and you have to say things the way that they are, because it's not something to be swept under a rug. And the more that you try to hide it, the more of a thing it becomes. We ultimately agree to disagree and said, "By the way, he knows. I'm 42 years old. I'm not married, I don't have any kids. I live alone. He understands that." And when I said that to him, I said, "What do you think about that?" And the only thing he said to me, he goes, "I don't care." He goes, "You're my tío and I love you." You're my uncle and I love you. And that's it.

Lantigua: I really, really love the relationship that Emilio has with his mom. I also have two boys, and I hope that we can always be close and loving with one another, but it broke my heart to think about the disappointment that he must have felt when he

heard her reaction to him talking to his nephew. As a mom who always thinks about age appropriate ways to talk with my kids about sensitive topics, I know the tension. I know the questions that come up. I know the need to be open and transparent and honest, but in ways that are approachable, in ways that are helpful. Emilio's story made me think about lots of things that have to do with communicating around sensitive issues. And of course, because it's our show, I thought about how can first gens who choose to speak openly about their queer identities, effectively communicate with their loved ones and get them to understand why it is so important to do so.

To help us figure all of this out, I called in an expert.

Laurin Mayeno:

My name is Laurin Mayeno and I am a consultant and I'm an author and I do coaching and I do a lot of conversations with people of all different ages about gender. I'm also the parent of a queer, non-binary child, and the process of learning to understand my child and connecting with other families, I ended up becoming very active and learning a lot and decided to try to bring that into the work that I do.

Lantigua: As you listen to Emilio's story, what did you hear?

Mayeno: Well, first of all, I heard a beautiful relationship between mother and child, and then I also heard that there was some lack of satisfaction with how the conversation went, although there was an agreement to disagree. And one of the things that I didn't hear really expressed was like, how did Emilio really feel when mamá said those things? And that was something that I wanted to sort of encourage some reflection about.

Lantigua: Yes, and we will definitely get into that. For me, I felt like there were two generational conversations happening, and I found that dynamic fascinating.

Mayeno: Well, I think that mom had asked Emilio to have a conversation with a nephew. So Emilio had that conversation based on what Emilio felt was important to say to the nephew. And then mamá comes in and says, "Oh, you shouldn't have said that." Right? And so I think that it really was about some tension between the two older generations about what should be communicated and why.

Lantigua: Do you find that in your work, that depending on the generational that you are in, you have varying levels of comfort in terms of revealing, oversharing, the tension between what is private and what is for public consumption?

Mayeno: That's definitely a big thing in lots of different communities that I've worked with where there is a lot of shame talking about sexual orientation, gender, those kinds

of things. And sometimes it's like, "It's okay in the family, but don't take it outside." There's so many things to unpack there, but I think there might be more going on there than what was said.

Lantigua: So how do you help your clients navigate those concerns?

Mayeno: I think the first thing is really being clear what you want out of the conversation. A lot of times we enter into conversations with this expectation of agreement. What if we just went into the conversation with the hope of, "I really want to understand where you're coming from. I don't have to agree, and I really want you to understand where I'm coming from and you don't have to agree." We don't always start there because we have certain investment in our point of view, and we also can get very triggered. I don't know how Emilio is feeling, but I'm guessing that maybe it was triggering. Emilio is sharing something very core to who Emilio is, and so saying, "You shouldn't have said that," can land as if, "Well, it's not okay for you to be open about who you are," and to have somebody that's that important in your life say something like that can hurt.

And so whatever Emilio was experiencing, it's really important to connect with, "What was I feeling and what do I need?" Feelings are messengers, they tell us what we need. So if we're feeling hurt, some kind of boundary has been crossed, something is done that's making us feel bad, and we need something to make us feel better. Just knowing what that is and being able to be empathetic with ourselves is a really good starting point. And then we have to believe that what we need is important.

Lantigua: Okay. How do we do that? Asking for a friend.

Mayeno: Well, that takes a lot of work, but what happens sometimes is a substitution. A lot of times when we don't want to say that we're hurt and we need comfort, we might substitute for anger or something else, and there's some gender socialization around that too, because there's certain feelings that we have permission to have depending on our gender and other things. Believing that our needs matter, it's a practice of connecting to, "What do I actually need in this moment? I don't know because I'm so conditioned to not think that my needs are important."

Lantigua: So that was my next question. Do I communicate that need or do I just hope that in the process of having the conversation that need is met?

Mayeno: You can communicate the need and not be attached to getting met by that other person. They may be willing to meet your need, but they may not be. But you know that your need is important, and if you don't know your need is important, you're not even going to express it because it would be a completely different

conversation if he were to say, "I feel that honesty is really important and it's really important for this, this, and this reason."

Lantigua: So you've basically handicapped yourself in the process of having the conversation if you don't first acknowledge the need that you're seeking to have met is important.

Mayeno: Exactly.

Lantigua: Let's talk about something that he touches on that a lot of our listeners will be really familiar with, which is the concept of, "if it's obvious, you don't have to talk about it." We have all kinds of these open secrets in our families, and it is completely taboo to talk about them.

Mayeno: I think the first thing to understand is, why is it important for some people to talk about this? One of the things that happens on National Coming Out Day is there's a lot of like, "Yes, it's great that so many people came out!" And if you're not coming out, that's okay too. It's your choice. I think the point that Emilio was making about silence equals death, there is some truth to that right now in particular, but always. All the gains that the LGBTQ community has made have been because people have been open about who they are and have advocated for their rights. And I also understand that it's a very personal choice. It's also important to know that there's a double standard here. Straight people are not expected to come out. Heteronormativity is a big word, but it's a word that talks about the fact that if you're heterosexual, you're considered normal, you're considered the default. That's the assumption.

Lantigua: Actually, that brings me to one of the questions that I had for you because there are definitely age-appropriate ways to talk about different things, and as a parent, it's something I deal with on a daily basis. And so what is your advice when we're talking about queerness, LGBTQ identity, gender, non-conforming folks, how do we assess what is age appropriate? What is some of the language that we can use?

Mayeno: Even before we figure out what words to use, it's important to understand why these conversations need to happen. Kids are absorbing information from all around them, from their peers, from television, from social media, and if families don't provide information, they're going to get it somewhere else. And so a lot of the information that's out there is very negative. It's very transphobic, it's very homophobic. It reinforces the worst gender stereotypes and what it means to be any particular gender. And so to help our children be able to navigate all that and be who they are, they need positive messages, they need positive information.

The second thing is to realize that a lot of the fears that parents and other adults have about talking about these issues comes from our own hangups. Kids don't have those hangups, or at least not really young kids. I go into schools and I talk to kids about gender stereotypes, and my book is about my child who was presumably a boy and wanted to dress up as a princess, and most kids don't even bat an eye. They're like, "Oh, okay."

Lantigua: So what?"

Mayeno: But sometimes they ask questions, they're curious, they're open, and so it's not just about what words you use too. It's about allowing the conversation to happen, allowing for curiosity, allowing for openness, and also not having to have all the answers. Maybe, I don't know how to tell you what transgender means, but I can look it up and come back to you with an answer and I can learn with you. My suggestion to parents or any of adults who are talking to kids is don't worry so much about using the right words. It's more about being open to the conversation and working with your own discomfort and not projecting that onto the kids.

Lantigua: Thank you for that. That's very comforting. All right. Is there anything I didn't ask you because I didn't know to ask you that you think our listeners would benefit from knowing, would benefit from considering as they're thinking about these conversations?

Mayeno: Recognizing when we're being defensive or when we're being triggered, when somebody says something that's hurtful, our fight or flight responses often kick in. Then we go into this reactive mode, and it's really hard to have a productive conversation when we're reactive, and so this may sound a little corny, but the whole idea of being the change. Like it's not about doing, it's about being, it's about who you're being. "Who am I going to be in this conversation?" "I'm going to be peaceful and I'm going to be generous in my listening," or whatever it is that you want to be. "I'm going to be fully self express," whatever it is, set an intention about that and do some work with yourself to get yourself to that point so you can be really responsive, able to respond as opposed to reacting.

Lantigua: Laurin, you're a gem. Thank you so much.

Mayeno: Thank you.

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

Recognize your own needs. During a difficult conversation, connecting with your feelings and emotions will help you identify your needs. Having your needs met is key to staying open, untriggered, and willing to listen.

Don't stress the vocab. When discussing issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation, focus on your goal of just having the conversation instead of worrying so much about using the correct words or having all the correct answers. And remember, don't project your discomfort. Instead of assuming others share your uneasiness about a topic or even your point of view, stay curious about their perspective and your own. This curiosity will help you keep the conversation going.

We've linked to some of the resources Laurin recommends in our episode notes, so check them out.

Thank you for listening and for sharing us. *How to Talk to [Mamá and 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, Juleyka Lanitgua. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @TalktoMamiPapi. Bye, everybody. Talk to you soon.

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