**Mom Decided to Go to Therapy**

Elizabeth is surprised and relieved to learn her Filipino mom is finally ready to see a therapist, but she's unsure of how to support her. And Roanne de Guia-Samuels, a psychotherapist who works with Filipino women, speaks with Juleyka about reading nonverbal cues and tuning in to communication nuances when speaking with loved ones about their mental health.

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Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi, everybody. Today we have Elizabeth with us. Elizabeth's Filipino mom worries constantly about her health and her family's well being. Her loved ones have tried to get her to go to therapy, but she has always refused. When Elizabeth finds out she's actually going to therapy she is shocked. And she also feels uncertain about how to support her mom during her healing journey. Let's get into it.

Elizabeth: I am Elizabeth, I am from Virginia, in the US, my mom is from the Philippines and my dad is from the US, from Texas. And I call my mom and dad, mom and dad.

My mom worries a lot about her health. We would get books as a kid, but my mom would always inscribe, "From your mother," and write the date, and she would say, "I'm giving this to you to remember me by in case I die." That's a little bit kind of not as serious, but a little bit more serious.

I would get a call that my mom... She called me saying, "Oh, I went to the emergency room, I wasn't feeling well. I got discharged, but they're running tests," right? In the beginning when I would hear about her going I wouldn't think anything of it. But then finally she called me when she was deciding whether to call 911 or not.

And so she told me, "I'm going to go to the emergency room." I left work and I drove to the emergency room. I was there with her. She didn't look well, she looked upset and they kept her overnight, I stayed there overnight. And they ran tests, but everything was fine. The doctors didn't find anything.

I didn't put everything together then, but it started planting a seed in my mind of what about those other visits that she's had? She's had other times that she's called 911 and it's very similar. Tight chest, she'd have the MRI, she'd have see a cardiologist, and I think only later I started to put together that, "Hey, I think there's something else going on here. I think these are panic attacks she's having."

Elizabeth: Since that time that I kind of clicked in my mind and myself got better educated of what might be happening with my mom, I asked my mom and she said that she talked to her general practitioner. And she said, "Oh yeah, I have anxiety."

A part of me was like, "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't we talk about this?" But I can understand, at least from my mom's personality, that she is very prideful. She has also said before that she feels that she doesn't want to take medication because she thinks it's weak, and that she's stronger than her anxiety. Which to me is not the right way to think about it.

Recently my mom has decided to go to therapy, and I'm really surprised. My husband actually said something to my mom and mentioned that she needs to make sure she takes care of herself so that she can be in the best possible health for being with our son, who was born recently, in February.

Elizabeth: How did I find out my mom was going to therapy? I found out through a group chat, like a group text. So we just moved to a new house, and so she's been insisting, "You need a security system. You need a security system."

And my husband said, "Okay, we'll get one if you go to therapy." Between my brother and I, we've been kind of burnt out trying to talk to my mom about going to therapy and taking care of herself, but my husband's kind of come in with a renewed energy, and I think there's something to be said about not being an outsider, but just a different voice to the mix.

And so in our group chat, she said, "You'll understand one day. I'll never stop worrying." And my husband said, "You know what could help with that is therapy." And then my dad chimed in and kind of outed my mom in the group chat, saying, "She actually has an appointment." And she chimed in, "Oh, I'm going to see a therapist." I hope that she goes, and that's something to be seen, but, yeah, I'm glad that she has an appointment coming up.

If I were to have a conversation with my mom, I would tell her to really be open. Just know she has nothing to lose, and I would also tell her to stick with it. And for her to know that we're all here for her and cheering her on. I want her to enjoy the time that she has fully, to kind of soak up the moments that she'll have with my son, that she has with us, especially now that she's getting older, enjoy her time and her family.

Lantigua: Man, trying to get a parent to go to therapy comes up a lot on our show. And hearing Elizabeth's story about being at this turning point, where a parent has declared their intentions about therapy, and an actual appointment has been made, filled me with hope. I'm not going to lie, it also made me nervous.

As first gens, of course we want to make this experience as positive as possible for our parents. We want them to see it through so they can get the benefits of therapy.

But what if our parents don't feel comfortable discussing their healing process with us? What can we still do to support them? To be there, if and when they actually decide to see a therapist? To help us figure it out, I called in an expert.

Roanne de Guia-Samuels:

I'm Roanne de Guia-Samuels, I'm a licensed marriage, family therapist in California. I am the blogger behind kalamansjuice.com. I specialize in seeing self-identified Filipinos and interracial couples. I often do consultations with other therapists and interns.

Lantigua: So really simple question, what did you hear as you listened to Elizabeth's story?

de Guia-Samuels:

What struck me is Elizabeth's care and how attuned she is with her mother's wellbeing.

I also heard that... We all have our own emotional longing. We all want to be heard, seen, and felt, but the language that we use may be very different. Here in the West, because we separate the mind and the body, we say, "Oh, I feel sad. I'm down." But her mother speaks a different language, because the mind and the body is not really separate.

In our Filipino language, we would say, "My heart is heavy," or "Masama ang loob", Masama is like bad, and ang loob is your inside. Or we would say "masikip ang dibdib ko." Masikip is tight, dibdibis chest.

So I'm hearing that they have a different way of communicating.

Lantigua: I love this so much because there is definitely, I think in many cultures outside of western cultures, no separation. And so your mind and your body are not experiencing things from two different vantage points. They're experiencing them at the same time. So what other cultural affectations or nuances do you hear in this story, especially in the relationship between mom and daughter?

de Guia-Samuels:

It almost seemed like she has a question, do I matter? And she would even call 911. Do I matter? If I disappear would I matter? So it almost seemed like, just my gut feeling, that she feels like she's not remembered, or she's forgotten. We see this culturally, where I call this a rehearsal, where back home, in the motherland, in the Philippines, parents would ask their children, "If I die..." And the child is practice rehearsed to say, "Oh no, when you die... No, I don't want you to die." And so they get this emotional exchange validation that they need.

So one of the nuances of being in America, in the western culture, is that the rehearsal could not go back and forth. One of the reasons is that we don't have cultural whispers.

We call this in our language tagapamagitan, which is the middle person, and the middle person is usually the uncle, the auntie. And if mom is acting weird, someone in the middle will say, "You know what you actually want is this." But people are busy here, and we are taught, even as children, "Use your words," which is great. But sometimes we fail to also understand or comprehend nonverbal cues.

In a very collective culture, if you're in a group, you have to be able to read nonverbal cues. To me, what I am hearing is that they have a different language.

Lantigua: Elizabeth is one of these 200-percenters. She is a hundred percent American and a hundred percent Filipina. How can she attune herself more to her mom's cultural ways of using language, and her mom's cultural ways of seeking emotional connection?

de Guia-Samuels:

I think it goes both ways that someone is learning how to attune watching nonverbal cues, but someone also needs to articulate a little bit more. You want to ask the same question a little bit more than twice.

The reason you leg up for that, there are certain cultures, especially Filipino, who are taught to be very polite. So for instance, if you're eating and you're not really expecting someone to come in, you are still asked to invite the person, "Come eat," even though you weren't prepared.

Now, someone who can read the nuance would say, "Oh, no, no, no. No, thank you." And there's usually an insistence and a persistence. So if you keep asking a few times, the other person reads it's beyond politeness, that you're actually sincere.

So in the case of Elizabeth, is to ask mom not just one time and taking her word, because she's also testing, is she just asking because she's doing her dutiful daughter role, yeah. But if she keeps asking, oh, she's really interested and she's sincere. So it's both a mutual reading of cultural nuances.

Lantigua: It's really interesting because parents going to therapy is something that comes up a lot on our show. It really comes up a lot. And it's usually in the context of they refuse to go. And here we have a great situation in which mom is willing to try it. So what can a first gen like Elizabeth do to be encouraging without making a big deal out of it, so that mom feels comfortable in sharing how it's going, that she's going, those kinds of things?

de Guia-Samuels:

The nature of her getting this information is not directly from mom.

Lantigua: I know, it was dad.

de Guia-Samuels:

So for me, I would wonder if the persona of mom receiving therapy... Something she's more comfortable to show within the chat group, and something that she's not comfortable showcasing with her daughter, because it's a different role.

I would allow her to save face. She could still be encouraging, but I would take it as if she's just seeing another regular doctor. I will be very particular in using mom's language. If she calls her therapist, then I'll borrow that. But other than that, if she calls her doctor, I won't correct her. I just got to keep rolling with mom.

And I would ask very general question as if... It sounds like mom uses psychosomatic or bodily symptom, I would use that. So I would ask if mom complains about headaches, I'd be like, "How's the headache today?"

So I'd use her language. I would kind of go around the bush until I know that she feels safer to express. Because I'm on that receiving end, Juleyka, I have the moms in my caseload. I sense their pressure. They feel a little pressure because of the daughters, because they're very proactive. We're changing this trajectory of what mental health means, and I love that.

So twofold. Use mom's language to see if she's really open to showing that part of her persona directly to her daughter. If not, here's another way to circumnavigate that that's very cultural. If there's a person in the group chat that's a credible person, like an auntie that Elizabeth likes, pretty neutral, mom likes, a credible person for both Elizabeth and mom, I'll use that person to check on mom more directly.

But the other part, I would use a collective pronouns rather than, "This is good for you," which is really, it's good for her. But it has to work for her psyche, "This is good for us," you know, "so you and Junior," the grandson, "we could hang out longer, and your headaches, that won't bother you anymore." I think that's more motivating. So I'll kind of come from a place where it's also helpful for Elizabeth, because guess what? Mom likes that, that she's helping Elizabeth. So she'll probably, from that perspective, might share a little bit more.

Lantigua: Yeah. I was actually going to ask you about both Elizabeth and her husband saying to mom, "Listen, take care of yourself because we want you around. We want to be able to hang out with this kid." Is that okay to do? To sort of dangle your grandchild in front of you?

de Guia-Samuels:

You know, I'm a therapist who is like, "Whatever works." That's where I would go, you know? Because mom loves the grandson. As long as you feel good about it, it's not like you're falsifying information. It's really true, you're just kind of making it so that it makes sense to mom. Because if it makes sense to you, you already bought into therapy, and so let's dangle what the-

Lantigua: Like, what's important to her. Yeah.

de Guia-Samuels:

Yeah, exactly.

Lantigua: Yeah, I've actually done that with my mother before. I'm like you, I'm more of a guerrilla warfare kind of person, like, what do I have in front of me that I can use? Right?

de Guia-Samuels:

Yeah. So for me, whatever works, you know? But at the say I'll be careful. Like for me, I want to give mom agency as if she's doing it. The key is that she's not thinking she's doing it for someone.

Lantigua: Right? So it's not an ultimatum.

de Guia-Samuels:

Yeah. That's all.

Lantigua: I hear you. I mean, there is a fine line. I think that there's definitely a fine line. But the most important thing is for your actions and the things that you follow up with, to really align with what you ultimately want, which is for the person to get support.

de Guia-Samuels:

Mm-hmm.

Lantigua: All right. My final question always is what didn't I ask you? What is some other advice? Or, "Please don't do this ever," cautions, that you might share with us? Because this is really delicate.

de Guia-Samuels:

It is. Healing, we have different journey when it comes to that. Even though I'm a therapist, this therapy or something else, that's fine. I always say it's like climbing a mountain. Some people climb straight up, some zigzag, but when we get to the top we all see the same sight, and that's all right. That's all right. Yeah. Yeah. That's my final word.

Lantigua: I like that. I'm definitely a zigzagger. You're wonderful. Thank you so much.

de Guia-Samuels:

Thank you, Juleyka.

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

Ask again. Posing the same question in different ways can help a parent know you're not asking out of politeness. It can reassure them that you're sincere and really want to know what's going on with them.

Beat around the bush. If you sense a parent is uncomfortable talking about therapy, mirror their wording. Use broad, open-ended questions, and recruit a safe middleman to inch your way into the topic, slowly but steadily.

And remember, attune to their language. Paying attention to nonverbal cues and to how a loved one experiences emotions in their body, can help you understand what they're trying to say. Use their communication style to listen, connect, and get your message across.

Thank you for listening and thank you for sharing us. *How to Talk to [Mami & Papi] 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 at talk to mami papi. Bye everybody. Talk to you soon.

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