**After Childhood Trauma, He’s Reluctant to Ask for Help** 

Brad does not feel comfortable speaking with his Costa Rican mom about the childhood sexual abuse he experienced. But a recent family tragedy is making him rethink the need for these difficult conversations. And Luis Resendez, a therapist who specializes in men’s mental health, speaks with Juleyka about how to be a better listener in times of crisis, and shares strategies to help us open up.

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Juleyka Lantigua:

Hi, everybody. Today we have Brad with us. Brad has a very difficult time talking to his parents about the trauma he experienced as a child. Growing up, opening up about his internal struggles, especially to his Costa Rican mom, never got him the support he expected. Now as an adult, similar fears about asking for help continue to haunt him. Let's get into it.

Brad: My name is Brad. I am 22 years old. I currently live in upstate New York, and I am from Costa Rica. My pronouns are he/him, and I called my parents mommy and dad growing up. I used to live with my mom in Costa Rica. My mom met my stepdad, who I call dad, and he moved us to Connecticut when I was around the age of five. I knew that I was different, especially with my sexuality, and it's something that I knew, and later on I came out to my parents. I wasn't afraid to come out to them. I knew that they would be supportive and loving, but there was still that aspect of not being able to open up to them completely. I never knew where to go to just because I knew that even though they were supportive with my sexuality, when I talked to them about my mental illness, they never were very supportive. They just shook it off. I think around the age of 12, I started to self-harm and I hid it very well.

I was at that age where I was starting to process things that happened to me when I was younger. I was sexually abused when I was a child by someone that was relatively close to our family, and it's something I've never been able to talk to my parents about to this day. In college, my early college years, I still was processing what I've gone through and the trauma I'd been through when I was a child that I started to self-medicate, definitely with alcohol and other substances, and I never sought out for help. I struggled with that for a while, and I feel like I am still struggling with that. At this point, I just don't know how to ask for help still. My parents, trying to talk to them about how I felt and about self-harm was very difficult. When I was younger, I used to have these manic episodes, very high highs and very low lows. They just thought I was a brat.

Obviously, I was a little bit of a brat, but with that, it's deeper than that. They made fun of me Growing up. My mom, she just wasn't very mature about it. At the dinner table, she would look at me and pretend to cut herself. It was taunting. She never really understood the pain that I was going through. I never felt comfortable talking to them about anything deep. I didn't want them to have a negative image of me. Now as an adult, I feel like I still can't seek that help from them just because I don't want to be judged. My relationship with my parents is still very, it's very distant. I actually just got out of a very abusive relationship, and for two years, I never really talked to my parents about it.

When I finally did, I had the same reaction that my mom gave me about how it really wasn't that serious or it was my fault. Last year, I was at home relaxing, and I received a call from my mom. She said that my uncle passed away. She told me that he killed himself. We found out that he had addiction, and it was taking over his life. He never asked for help. My family did not know about what was really going on until it was too late. I felt like it was a turning point with my family. They were able to just take a step back and evaluate how they react to mental illness. My parents and extended family members have really just taken how people feel more seriously ever since that. I still don't know what to do or how to talk to my family about it and to talk about my childhood trauma, how I self-medicate. I quite honestly don't know if I ever will be able to discuss it with them, and that's just the current position that I'm in now.

Lantigua: As I listened to Brad's story, my heart went out to him. Histories of trauma, sexual abuse and self-harm are incredibly hard to face personally, let alone opening up about them to others. Brad's story made me think about how for many men, especially men of color or from immigrant backgrounds, asking for help in these situations can be particularly difficult, nearly impossible. Brad's story also made me think about the consequences of never doing so. How can families create environments where everyone feels safe opening up? For those of us first-gens who struggle asking for help, what can we do to overcome this reluctance to reach out when we need it most? To help us figure it out, I called in an expert.

Luis Resendez:

My name is Luis Resendez. I'm a licensed marriage and family therapist. I'm the founder of Vida Emotional Wellness. We're a psychotherapy practice based in Riverside, California. We specialize in men's mental health issues, and I'm proud to say that we are one of the only, we may be the only group practice that emphasizes men's mental wellness. I've been a practicing clinician therapist for 14 years. I am also an adjunct professor. I teach part-time at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, and I recently published my first book this past February entitled What About Dad?: Understanding and Addressing Postpartum Depression in Men.

Lantigua: It's so good to have you back on the show. I think that you're the perfect person for this particular episode, so let's get going. When you listened to Brad's story, what stood out to you?

Resendez: I think the fact that he doesn't feel as supported as he wishes he could be with his mental health struggles by those closest to him, I just heard a message of help, but the message just isn't being received the way he would need it to be received. I know this transcends Latino, Latinx cultures as to where historically, families, Latino, Latinx families didn't really discuss these things, and to this very day, that's still an ongoing issue. It's like airing out our dirty laundry, but it's also conveying a sense of weakness and that with a lot of Latino males, and that just getting this image, hearing this message that you need to be strong again and again, not being passed through mostly male family members. So when that time comes, it's just like, "Well, I'm not going to communicate my feelings because again, I'm being the opposite of what I'm told I need to be. I'm being weak." But with the shifting narratives and the changing landscape, we as mental health providers, we are actually helping write a narrative that ‘no, coming forward and being vulnerable that's actually a strength.’

Lantigua: So in Brad's case, there is an event that complicates this, which is that he was sexually abused by someone who was close to the family, and that is a life-changing event. So how does someone like Brad or people who know someone like Brad, how do we support them? How do we help them to get the help from us and from other people that they need?

Resendez: I think it starts with what's known as psychoeducation. When he thinks of this experience, the feelings, emotions, and the responses, behaviors and things like that, those are all normal things in not so many words. Those are normal human responses. So even if it's having nightmares about an event, normalizing, for lack of better words, in that just when we go through these really profound negative events in our lives, whether it's abuse or being in a car crash or fleeing war or whatever it is that we respond these ways, but again, that's us being people. Really reemphasizing the importance again, that when we come forward and disclose these things, it's going to benefit us and, possibly, benefit those around us in that, they see a better version of ourselves and maybe even be a source of inspiration as well.

Lantigua: So what can a family do to create an environment that would feel comfortable and safe if something like this were to happen to one of the members of the family, and they would know from the environment and the actions and behaviors and words that they would be safe to talk about it? What can we do?

Resendez: Listen, listen, listen, listen, listen. When things are being told to us, it's somewhat in our nature that we already feel like we have to interject our thoughts, our opinions, our feelings, and so forth, and that can be a little off-putting to the person who's communicating these things to us. But if we can put that to the side and simultaneously remember that it's not about us, yeah, of course, we're going to have our emotions attached to it or whatnot, but let's put off this whole need to again, give our *consejos* or whatever it is as feedback, because also what that does too, it conveys a respect and love. As you're sharing this difficulty with me or as you're sharing your pain with me, I am willing and ready to listen, and I will continue to do so as long as you need me to.

Lantigua: I feel like for many of us, there would be an impetus to want to do something. So there's the listening part, which is obviously vital, but then a lot of us want to move into action, "What do we do? How do we fix this? Who needs to get involved?" Is that an appropriate response? What is the next step?

Resendez: Yeah, I think it starts with just encouraging them to pretty much take the lead on that as well, promoting their own autonomy and that you send a message to them that you can do it. There's resources available, there's help out there. Conveying that belief in them, and that, again, reaching out for help, that's a strength right there. So I think with even our family circles, doing whatever we need to do to destigmatize these things and normalizing that when we're in pain, we reach out for help.

When I talk to a lot of my clients, especially those who are having their first experiences with therapy and have that uneasiness attached to it, I explain to them simply that, think of this as when you have a toothache. You're not just going to suck it up, especially if the pain is really overwhelming. You go see your dentist. It's the same thing. When we deal with trauma, depression and anxiety, we seek out professional help to deal with these things, but it's no different than a doctor visit. I remember he had mentioned in his story about self-medicating, but the more we can normalize seeking out professional help, we start steering people away from using maladaptive coping skills, alcohol, substances, feeding addictions and things like that to more healthy positive outlets that are going to help lead to that profound positive change one way or another.

Lantigua: Okay. I'm going to ask you a question that I think doesn't have an easy answer, which is, are Latinos and our Black and Brown men predisposed to being really reticent about asking for and getting help, and what is the cost? What is the root cost of that hesitancy?

Resendez: With BIPOC men, survival plays a major role in things. Just with the racism, all of these things that they've dealt with that go through the generations and each day, I think for many BIPOC men is a day of survival is that, "Okay, well, I made it to work today. I earned my pay. Now tomorrow, the same thing," but it comes at a cost. I think one of the barriers is there's no time to feel. There's no time for emotions and things like that, "I got to keep going and going and going."

Even though the emotional toll is being taken, increased depression, anxiety, isolation, trauma that may be exacerbated, and unfortunately, again, with men in BIPOC communities, often turning to alcohol abuse, substance abuse and things like that to cope with these things that even being somewhat more normalized too. Then you factor in things like machismo, which being told those things too, that, "Yeah, a real man doesn't seek help. He just drinks his problems away. He smokes them away," or whatnot. So you have also these contributing factors working against BIPOC men and seeking out the help that they need.

Lantigua: So in Brad's family, they had an extreme and painful awakening when his uncle committed suicide, and that's unimaginable, right? What are some of the signs that loved ones can keep an eye out for when there is tremendous hesitation on the part of a male relative or any relative to talk about what's going on with them, to talk about the difficulties that they're facing, to talk about their declining mental state? What are some of the signs that we can look for to reach out and just ask, "Hey, what's going on? How are you doing? How can I support you?"

Resendez: Three I can think of right off the top of my head. Number one, increased isolation or withdrawal from family and friends, so even think about family get-togethers, not seeing that uncle, that cousin as much as you used to. The second one is irritability. Irritability with men in particular and depression goes hand-in-hand, and anxiety as well. Being discouraged from expressing an opening up about their emotions, that causes a lot of internal frustration. It's like this volcano or power keg that when someone does ask them, it just blows up. So there's that, and then drinking more. There may be stories of that. Yeah, he's been smoking a lot of marijuana. He's been gambling a lot, and all of these things that, yeah, they're pretty much turning to, again, those maladaptive coping skills.

Lantigua: All right. Final question is, what resources do you recommend for folks who want to learn a little bit more about what the signs are for themselves and for family members, understanding what the options are for getting help and support, what are some of your go-to resources?

Resendez: Starting with the primary care doctor, I think, is a good first point because with the primary care doctor, again, it's often a referral to a provider. A lot of clinics will even have brochures, pamphlets about, what is depression? What is anxiety? How do you recognize the signs and symptoms? Even folks looking at their local community clinics, outreach places where they not only focus on providing social services, but also linkage to mental health services, sometimes they have providers right there.

But I think too, whatever information is out there, when it also offers glimmers of hope, when you start to work through your depression, anxiety, and trauma, this is how life changes. You are able to concentrate more at work. Your relationships with those around you, they improve. Your relationship with yourself improves. When you start giving people those little glimmers of hope, then it really encourages them to become that catalyst for change in their lives and seeking out that support.

Lantigua: Luis, you're a gem. Thank you so much for coming back on the show.

Resendez: Thank you very much for having me.

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

Listen. When a loved one is opening up about a painful experience, avoid immediately giving advice or going into problem solving mode. Instead, take a pause and continue to listen with intent. Doing so communicates love and respect, and creates space for people to feel supported and heard.

Flip the narrative. Normalize asking for help by pointing out how doing so is a strength to be proud of, not a weakness. Remind yourself and your loved ones that when we struggle mentally or emotionally, asking for help is logical, expected, and as normal as doing so when we're in physical pain.

And remember: Don't miss the signs. Increased isolation, irritability, and alcohol or substance use can all signal that someone is struggling. When you recognize the signs in a loved one but don't see them asking for support, reach out proactively.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides free and confidential and emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. It's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. That's 988lifeline.org.

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 @talktomamipapi. Bye everybody. Talk to you soon.

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