



Your Passions, and What to Say When Parents Ask “Why Are You Doing This?”

Sisters Taranjit and Bhavneet have lots of interests outside of their work in science, including their podcast, Drive with Us. But their Indian parents seem to always ask "Why are you doing this?" in ways that discourage and alienate them. Today, we're looking at what happens when more traditional ideas about work and purpose clash with a desire to venture out and try new things. A marriage and family therapist who specializes in transitions shares ways to connect.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mami and Papi] About Anything. What's up, new listeners? I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Today I'm speaking to Bhavneet and Taranjit, our first sibling guests! The two sisters struggle with talking to their Indian parents about their feelings, ideas, goals, and side projects. They also feel their parents' old-fashioned ideas are imposed on them and make it harder to share things they want to explore or pursue. They're definitely coming up against cultural norms that clash with their Americanized sense of themselves. Let's get into it.

Taranjit: My name is Taranjit and I work in the sciences.

Bhavneet: I'm Bhavneet. I also am in the science field.

Taranjit: My sister and I, we live with our parents, so in I guess Indian culture, a lot of children live with their parents until marriage, so you stay under your... in your parents' house until you get to that point.

Bhavneet: Our parents' mentality, they came here over, around 30 years ago. Our dad a little bit more. But I feel like it's still very ingrained in them, the old school Indian mentality of, "You're a girl. You're a boy. These are the things you can do." And they have become modern, I guess, in the sense that they're like, "You can choose your career path, what you want to do," but it's kind of implied in that that you choose a career that's kind of societally acceptable, so a STEM career, pretty much. They just don't have that level of appreciation for a creative arts field type job as much as they do as if you're a doctor, or a lawyer, that kind of thing.

They did say like, you know, “Go for what you want to do.” But we still ended up in the sciences.

Taranjit: Actually, when I was in elementary school, I did express interest in a field outside of science. Well, not as a career point, but I wanted to play the trumpet in elementary school and my parents were highly... They weren't highly against it, they just were like, “Why? Why do you want to do that?” And it took a lot of convincing and a lot of saying I want to do this, I'm really interested in this, and then I only was allowed to do it for like two or three days and then I had to stop.

Bhavneet: They don't directly say it. It's more like a lot more questions. It's like you're doing something, like for example, we started this podcast, Drive with Us Podcast, that we're really invested in, and a lot of the questions we get when we're recording with other people is like, “Why? Why are you doing that?” Like, “You have a job. Why?”

Taranjit: We haven't had a way to actually tell them outright, “Yes, we're doing a podcast.” I know that my mom has an idea that we're doing something. I don't think she knows what it is exactly. And we, with previous instances where we tried to share with them things that we wanted to do, it's always been with a lot of pushback from them, and them giving us a lot of reasons as to why not to do it. So, with this, we were like, “Okay, let's get this up and running and make it successful and then share it with them.”

In a way, I feel like they would be more accepting of us doing it over if nothing becomes of it, then they might be like, “Why are you wasting your time on this, then?”

I have a brother.

Bhavneet: The only boy, also. So, they tell us, “You guys are all equal to us.” But I don't think they realize it, but I feel like it's so ingrained within them that they're way more open about whatever he wants to do, versus what we want to do. For our mom, we always have to be in front of her eyes at all times, like she needs to know what we're doing 24/7. But he can do whatever and they don't question it. I feel like our mom is excessively paranoid because, partially because she came here, so she came to this foreign country and she was a housewife for many, many years, and she never really went out into America, into the world, so she doesn't really know how the world is, so she's always scared of like what might happen.

And she's like, “You're a girl, so something might happen.”

Taranjit: Up through college, I was always like, “Okay, my parents want me to do this? Okay, I'll do it.” Because that's what they've asked, that's what they want, make them happy. And once I got to college, I actually got that opportunity to have a little bit more freedom and be myself more as opposed to being what my parents want me to be. Obviously, I don't want to do anything like bad or negative, and that's what I always bring to them, like, “Okay, I want to go to this club event that's

happening on campus.” You should trust us, like we’re not gonna go do these bad things. But then they still push back on that.

We are always told, even though we’re born in America, that we’re Indian and just because you’re here in America doesn’t mean you are to act like the Americans. You’re Indian and you’re raised with Indian culture. You’re gonna marry into an Indian family, so you have to act like an Indian.

Bhavneet: If they were listening in on this call, I would want them to at least try and listen to what we have to say. Try and understand. Because we want to be able to share not just our successes, but like our struggles with them, and I do have Taranjit, so like we can talk to each other, but you want to be able to share that stuff with your parents, too.

Taranjit: I agree with what Bhavneet said. When we were little mom was like, “Oh, we’re raising you like you’re my kids because you’re younger, but then once you get to this college level age, we’re gonna be like friends.” And I wish we could get to that stage where we could talk like friends.

Lantigua-Williams:

What was so clear from talking to Taranjit and Bhavneet is that they really want to connect with their parents. They want to talk about their passions and their aspirations. And so, it made me wonder, how can we as first gens better explain to our loved ones why some things, decisions, choices, plans, are so important to us? Especially when they may seem trivial, unnecessary, and utterly unrelatable to our parents. So, I did what I always do. I called in an expert.

Sonica Thakur: My name is Sonica Thakur. I’m a dual-licensed marriage and family therapist and also a professional clinical counselor, and I work with young adults, adults, couples, and I like to see... I specialize in the area of seeing people who are going through transitions. I’m also personally somebody from India, so I like working with clients who are from different parts of the world and people I resonate with culturally, of Indian origin.

Lantigua-Williams:

You listened to Taranjit and Bhavneet’s interview. What did you hear as you listened?

Thakur: Well, I heard two sisters who are mindful of their parents’ concerns for them, and they’re also trying to create some space or understand how to approach their parents to understand their position as they’re navigating changes, making choices in their... independently. Their experiences as children of parents of Indian origin, it sounds very familiar to me. They’re trying to introduce their parents to a new world.

Lantigua-Williams:

Help us understand a little bit about some of the key differences in what the parents might be perceiving as happening with their daughters at this moment, versus what the daughters are perceiving as happening.

Thakur: From the Indian cultural perspective, the sense of exploration or the spirit of adventure can sometimes sound unsafe. It's like saying you're still finding yourself. That's a luxury. You should by a certain age have this already figured out and the privilege of making U-turns is frowned upon. But from the Indian, the parents' perspective, it's you make choices accommodating the expectations of the community.

So, it becomes for the girls to take the initiative to have the parents or prime them, that what are they... The road that they are... The trajectory that they're choosing. Why does it make sense to them? What's their conviction? For example, I would like to invest the next two years being in... Let's say in a different city, because I want to be an apprentice at a certain establishment, to learn certain skills, and that's what I want to add towards my goal of becoming let's say a better technical designer or something. So, you kind of have to frame it. Create the framework for the parents to recognize that your exploration is in service to a certain goal. Which is different. I understand that is different from the other way around, that you engage with exploration with more of an open mind, like you don't know where this exploration will lead you.

Whereas for an Indian family, it's the desire for safety. It's informed by safety. It's the choice that you're making, is it practical in terms of money? In terms of time? It's confusing. So, how you explain it to the parent, that I'm doing this because I want to be certain about my decision. So, to making it more explicit and owning your reasons.

Lantigua-Williams:

There's another part of this dynamic that they mentioned, which is that their gender seems to play into some of the more restrictive practices coming from their parents. Because they have a brother who seems to enjoy more freedoms than they do. And it is something that appears to frustrate them. Right?

Thakur: Right. Yeah.

Lantigua-Williams:

And so, how can they address that with their parents?

Thakur: Yes, and the discrepancy is obvious to them, and it is frustrating because they don't see that in the households of their so called American peers and friends. Right? So, it's sometimes to borrow examples from other community members as a point of reference. That person traveled, or somebody within the family, extended family, that a cousin went somewhere. They learned something. And priming the parents, which is certainly not a one-time conversation. It comes with persistence. Priming the parents to see that exposure, or the so called what they

considered unsafe, can be reframed. How can it be reframed? That certain opportunities which only the son would have access to have also provided this other person, this cousin, this family friend, certain opportunities to explore, gather experience, and so it's like introducing, coaching the parents to these new ideas.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, it's a process of educating the parents both in their personal ambitions and in their personal exploration, but also in this new context in which they're living. Because they're sisters, because they're close in age, because they share similar points of views, is there any strategies that they can employ as two, as sisters, to be more convincing, to be more effective?

Thakur: That's a huge advantage. To have each other to confide in, an ally, if one person is trying to persuade the parents towards a certain decision. So, the other sister can also bring in examples, or the sense of objectivity to support the sister in saying that, "Yes, I can see why she would want to do this." So, I think they have each other, since they have that understanding, they're able to have... confide in each other and also present a joint front. What could also be useful is engaging in shared activities or being curious about where the resistance is coming from. So, sometimes it's creating that narrative about how, what was life for my mother as a homemaker? What was it like for her growing up? What were the opportunities that were available to her? Or not, for various reasons.

At least when I had heard the recording, I had heard them mention the hope that they would have a friend-like relationship when they grew older. So, find opportunities where they can draw the parents into their world, to show them, you know like there's this interesting show that's going on, and why don't you come along? Or, let's see, whether it's something outside of their so-called comfort zone. To participate with the parents and introducing them to these new ideas.

Lantigua-Williams:

And ideas and experiences that are not necessarily related to what they want to be doing, right? So, for them, their passion project right now is a podcast, and they're not even sure that the parents have listened to the podcast, so maybe just start doing things with the parents that are not necessarily related to the podcast. Right? But just doing things that... where they create shared memories and shared experiences in general.

Thakur: Yes. Joining. Joining together and learning their story and also sharing a bit of how they are developing. This is their current experiences or interests this year. That they are into podcasts, and maybe a different year they were into something else, and why it matters to them, and what could be even some interesting podcasts if the parent wanted to hear. Find these resources and maybe offering that.

Lantigua-Williams:

I love it. I think that's a really great piece of advice. Sonica, thank you so, so much.

Thakur: Of course. You're most welcome.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Sonica. Reframe the conversation. Tune into your loved ones' objections. What is it that worries them? Is it safety? Security? Financial stability? Once you figure that out, make an argument that clearly speaks to those concerns. Use familiar examples. Point out that other people in their lives have also tried similar things and have succeeded. Bring backup. Find someone who can be an objective and supportive third party, who can provide additional context and reassurance for your parents. Here's a twist: ask about them. Be curious, genuinely so, about where their objections are coming from. And take disagreement as an opportunity to learn more about your parents and their past experiences.

Do things together. Spend quality time with your parents and invite them to participate in your world in things that are fun and important to you. This helps them to get to know you and introduces them to your ideas in a casual, non-confrontational way. It normalizes the things that interest you. And remember, be persistent. Introducing new ideas and getting your parents to embrace them is a long game, not a one-time conversation. Keep engaging them slowly and steadily.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you again for listening. We hit 20,000 downloads last week and that is a really big milestone for us, and we could not have done it without you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. 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. And please remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

CITATION:

Lantigua-Williams, Juleyka, host. "Your Passions, and What to Say When Parents Ask 'Why Are You Doing This?'" *How to Talk to [Mamá & Papá] About Anything*, Lantigua Williams & Co., September 7, 2020. TalkToMamiPapi.com.

Produced by:

