



When Mamí and Papí Fight

As a child, Rose witnessed an instance of domestic violence between her parents that has stayed with her over the years. And a certified traumatologist and psychotherapist who works with immigrant women talks to Juleyka about how those of us in similar circumstances can move forward and heal.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back. This is How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything. I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Today, I'm speaking with Rose. She grew up feeling very loved by both her parents, but she also knew early on that the relationship between them was not great. As a child, she witnessed an instance of domestic violence that has stayed with her. As an adult, she has broached the subject with her parents as she tries to make sense of it all. Let's get into it.

Rose: Hi, my name is Rose. I'm 30 years old. I live in New York and in my family we call mom mamá and dad papá. My relationship with my parents was really loving in that we loved each other very much, but my parents didn't love each other, and that was pretty clear from a very early age. So, they surrounded me with a lot of love, but I didn't witness that between them. The first time that it became very clear was actually a very traumatic event where I witnessed my father physically abusing my mom, and it didn't happen again, but it happened when I was four years old and it was traumatic enough that the anticipation of it happening again really altered the way that I saw them, their relationship, and how I felt about our family unit.

I would say that I developed anxiety. I probably was constantly on edge and anticipating their next fight, and they did fight again. They argued very often, and I always feared that it would become violent again. My parents got divorced when I was in high school and I was so relieved. A part of me was very much like I've been saying this all along, like this is what you both should have done. I remember when my dad moved out, I felt just like I could breathe again, and it helped that he wasn't really moving very far, so he still lived close by, so I didn't feel like I was losing him.

With my mom, we've always had a very loving relationship. She's always been very loving and supporting and nurturing, and I think that experiencing the divorce together strengthened our bond and I noticed how strong she was and had been. With my dad, I wasn't as fearful anymore. I enjoyed getting to know him separate from him being in the house, but there was a turning point, and I think that turning

point came when I began to be a little more vocal about how I felt about their relationship and in particular with my dad on how he discussed and treated my mother even after they'd been divorced. I have talked with my mom and my dad, actually, on that event, that incident that happened when I was young, and the interesting thing about that was that their response about it was so nonchalant. It was almost like maybe they didn't even really remember that it happened, or that in their minds it wasn't a big deal, and of course who knows how they really see it in their minds, but the reaction indicated that. So, it was a bit of a tricky moment for me, because I remember it so vividly and it was so traumatic, and to think that maybe for them it wasn't that was really confusing. But it informed my entire childhood, so I know what happened for the four-year-old me.

Whether from a bird's eye view it wasn't that bad, I don't know, but it really did change everything for me. My dad and I, we stopped talking about three years ago and I should actually preface this with saying it wasn't the first time. There were a few times in my early twenties where he stopped talking to me for up to about a year or so, and usually that was a result of an argument that we had where I decided to raise my voice, and kind of fight back, and argue about the various situations in our family.

This particular time about three years ago, he had reached out again for some support. At times, I would financially support my dad. It wasn't always consistent. It wasn't like I was paying his rent for a period of time, and it wasn't that I didn't want to help, I just really couldn't in that moment, and essentially I haven't heard from him since. I've tried to reach out a few times and yeah, I think the past few years for me, I've just been trying to wrap my head around all of it. There were so many good times, I think it would be easier to completely overcome this if he was a villain, you know? I definitely think that my relationship with my father has affected a lot of my relationships. I think there is a part of me that does feel afraid, does feel guarded, feels maybe misunderstood.

If I could describe myself the way I'd want others to see me and how I see myself, I think I am caring, I'm a good listener, I'm understanding, I'm compassionate, I'm generally optimistic, which one might not think after some of the things I've seen, but I am optimistic and hopeful, and I do want to be there for other people and I think I have been. I think what's keeping me from being that person all the way through, yeah, I think I still have my own journey to go on and just overall acceptance of the situation, and recognizing that you could be of someone and they could be of you, and they could be family, but their path is just not aligned with yours, whether for now or permanently.

Lantigua-Williams:

Rose's story really touched me. I was moved by her self-awareness and courage in trying to understand her parents' complex relationship, and she so clearly has so much love and empathy for them even now, when she's not in touch with her father. I wanted to better understand how family trauma impacts us and our

relationships and what we can do to move forward and heal, so I called in an expert.

Martha Vallejo:

My name is Martha Vallejo. I'm a licensed clinical social worker and certified traumatologist. I'm a psychotherapist. I have worked around 15 years with immigrants that have suffered different adversities. I have worked with children, with women, victims of domestic violence from different countries, and I'm right now the chair of the Immigration Justice Task Force at the National Association of Social Workers Florida Chapter.

Lantigua-Williams:

You heard Rose's story. What did you hear when you listened?

Vallejo: I heard that Rose, she's very bonded to her mother. They have a loving relationship. She will need a more deep assessment, but I hear that she's struggling with her memories of domestic violence.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, when children witness these instances, what is the potential impact on them as they grow into adulthood?

Vallejo: The impact, it can be very profound. There is a study in the United States called the Adverse Childhood Experiences, and in that study, 10 different experiences as children are identified. Abuse, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, domestic violence, and family separation, mental health illness in the family, incarceration, or a substance abuse. So, what the study says is that while the child is growing, the brain is growing, and under constant stress, it's not only at many times children don't remember the details of a relationship, because their brain was under fear. So, being under fear as a child, it has been identified as changing the architecture of the brain forever, or having long-lasting effects, and those long-lasting effects affect the health and mental health of the individual.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, the other question that came up when we were talking was that when, as an adult, Rose brought this up to both of her parents, they were really dismissive of it. They thought it was no big deal. One of them appears not to remember the incident at all. Is that common?

Vallejo: Yeah. It is common. There are several reasons why they think that they don't remember, or they really don't remember. One, maybe they have normalized it. We find this a lot. When you ask a couple how are they doing with the relationship, "Oh, it's okay. You know, we have the normal fights." And you never know if you don't go deep what are the normal fights. The other thing is that maybe they were under big stress while they were fighting, and when you are under big stress, not

all normal, logical things are remembered by the brain. Or they are ashamed of mentioning this and they are just avoiding things. People avoid things as part of their own stress consequences throughout life. But maybe they do this unconsciously.

Lantigua-Williams:

Can you talk a little bit about how the immigrant experience adds to these domestic dynamics and the different versions of an incident that can occur?

Vallejo: First of all, I will say that if we talk, the immigration population that I think I know very well, even though each case is individual and unique, each individual is unique, but domestic violence is very prevalent, let's say, in Central America. And abuse to children is very prevalent also in Central America and some places of South America, too. And immigrants from Latin... Even though they love very much their children, they have... There is something called intergenerational domestic violence or intergenerational trauma, because it's about the power differential. It's the power differential between man and woman that is... It goes with the patriarchal society.

So, it is a lot of things going on in these immigrant women, children, but also they have... Together with all the abuse and the trauma, they are also oriented for a better life, but the other part is that there is also post-traumatic growth. They have the ideas of a better life for their children, so they are immensely resilient and very unique. This population is very unique and very sub-valued in this country.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, for someone like Rose, who seems to be really aware of the impact and the lingering hurt that she carries about some of the situations that she experienced, what are some of the things that she should be on the lookout in her personality? So, one of the things that she told me was that she feels like she's really shy and that people don't see her the way that she sees herself, and that she wishes that she could come out from behind that shadow of the things that have happened. So, what are some of the signs for someone where they should either get help, or they should be aware of their own situation, how their personality's being impacted? How can someone tell if they are carrying around some trauma like this that may be impacting how they live their lives as adults?

Vallejo: I think that Rose is very aware that she's affected by her childhood experiences. I am truly trained and focused on the strength. Not to invalidate the difficult part. As a therapist, if I would be her therapist, I will start, and I will recommend all therapists to do this, and I will recommend all women and people going through this process to focus on all the wonderful things that they have inside, the love she has for her mother, the bond she has for the mother, and then from there, what are the things that she has achieved until now? And from there, go through that past and see what are things that have affected, but being aware of her greatness,

because if you feel strong, if you feel good, you are more willing to transit or go through the difficult moments or through a difficult part.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, which I recommend to everyone having children and everyone going through a domestic violence relationship, she's the surgeon general in California. She has a book. She has a TED Talk how adverse experiences affect through the life of adults who suffered these adversities as children. She also has a book called The Deepest Well. And the six things in order to point out, the six things that she recommends are good sleep. Try to rest. Try to eat healthy. Exercise. Mindfulness. If you like to meditate, if you want to pray, being aware of the beauty of nature around you. Breathing deeply. Avoid being in more conflictual relationships. Be aware of the type of relationships that you have. And number six, go to therapy, to someone that will really help you to process.

So, for Rose, it is also to have good friends, to enjoy music, to enjoy whatever she wants. I would find out what she enjoys, what brings her peace in order to see the beauty around us, because even if we are in a pandemic and having a lot of situations that are very damaging, we have the opportunity to focus on beauty and look for help. The goal is that you were born with the birthright to be happy and to continue growing step by step, and when I say about enjoying the present, being in touch with your body and enjoying all your senses in daily life brings you to your birthright to be happy moment by moment while you continue growing as a healthy human being, achieving your goals and dreams.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you, Martha. Thank you so much. This was wonderful.

Vallejo: Thank you for this opportunity and I hope it gets to the hearts and souls of a lot of people that are needing a little bit of encouragement.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Martha. Be kind to yourself. Trauma and stress impact our bodies and our brains in ways that are not always evident to us. Be gentle, patient, and loving with yourself. Focus on your strengths, your resilience, your achievements, the love you share with others. It's your assets, not your flaws, that help you heal and thrive. And remember, connect with your whole body. Use your senses to stay in the present moment. Seek out joy and truly understand that you have a right to be happy.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you so much for listening and for sharing us. How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything is an original production of Lantigua Williams & Co. Virginia Lora produced this episode. Ronald Young Jr. mixed it. Micaela Rodríguez is our founding producer and social media editor. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, the show's creator. On Twitter and Instagram, we're

@TalktoMamiPapi. Remember to please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, Spotify, and anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

CITATION:

Lantigua-Williams, Juleyka, host. "When Mamí and Papí fight" *How to Talk to [Mamá & Papí] About Anything*, Lantigua Williams & Co., October 5, 2020. TalkToMamiPapi.com.

Produced by:

