



My Divorce, My Parents, and Me

Gaby grew up with parents whose marriage was almost a fairytale: they fell in love young, got married, and stayed together happily ever after. So when her own marriage ended, she felt shame and found it really hard to talk to her parents about it. And, a marriage and family therapist offers strategies for discussing changing relationships with relatives.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papí] About Anything. And hi, new listeners. I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Today, I'm speaking with Gabby. Her parents met at her mom's quinceañera and they've been together ever since. In many ways, Gabby learned about love and relationships from them, so when she decided to get a divorce, she felt that she had failed at marriage, which of course made it really hard to talk to her parents about what she was going through. Let's get into it.

Gabby:

My name is Gabby. I live in Miami. I grew up in Dominican Republic. I am a bruja, an activist, a jefa, and I am in this planet to help women become who they really are so they can be free. When I was younger, I called my parents mamá and papí, and I just turned 40, and I still call my parents mamá and papí.

So, it was really funny. When my mother was gonna have her quinceañera, she wanted a tall person, a tall handsome guy, to be her partner. And her cousin says, "There's this guy that I know that's kind of cute and he's pretty tall." That was my father. And that was I think 45 years ago. I think that it was all very innocent, pure, and young. The notions of romantic love that I learned from my parents were very much around you find your life partner when you're a teenager and you fall in love, and you're magically together forever. It was all very, very pure, and very innocent, and very wholesome, and also very settled and defined.

I thought I had hit the jackpot and was gonna model what they were doing, because I met my ex-husband when I was 19 years old. He was 20. We were pretty young and we got married really young, as well. I was 23 years old. I was the first of my friends to get married. I was also the first to get divorced.

Well, my grandmother got divorced in the early '50s in Santo Domingo, which I never got the full story of how that went down, but that seemed pretty badass to begin with, for that to happen in that moment in time. But it was this thing that took place, like many moons ago, and nobody ever talked about it again, so since then there had not been another divorce in my family. So, it was a very rare occurrence

and there was just so... There were so many questions around it. So, there was like a lot of confusion, and wanting to be supportive amidst a lot of doubt, and kind of turmoil.

I feel like my parents have this sort of like puppy-eyed view of the world in that regard, and so it was very shocking to them to hear that our marriage was falling apart. Because I think in their frame of mind and in their world view, that wasn't a possibility. Divorce is just not an option. And so, understanding that their daughter was going through something that they couldn't understand, I think was the part that was a little hard for them to wrap their heads around.

When the divorce news came out, I remember that my mother confessed to me that she thought that I was calling her to tell her that I was pregnant again when I called her to actually tell her that we were getting separated. And there was a lot of shock on the other end, because for a long time we weren't really letting people into the fact that we were having problems. I feel like there was a lot of shame for both of us and a lot of feeling of failure in the fact that we were getting divorced, and we didn't want to really burden anyone else with this until we knew 100% what was happening. So, she was really shocked, but they were incredibly supportive. And also being there for me with zero judgment around the divorce, with zero shaming me, like they just wanted to love me in that moment, and I really deeply appreciated.

I remember my mom asking me several times just like what happened, what was it that broke down, and I didn't have a clear answer for her. I mean, with us, I really feel like we got married so young, and we were a match when we were 23 years old, but we definitely weren't a match when we were 30 years old, and so we had grown apart, but how, why, and when that had all gone down, I didn't have clear cut answers for that then, and it's been nine years. I still don't have clear cut answers for it, you know? Sometimes these things are just messy and there comes a moment in your life where you make a decision for your own self preservation and you decide to move on.

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Lantigua-Williams:

Talking about divorce to your parents, to your relatives, in general, can be really hard. Even when people who love you are supportive and also want to help. Gabby's story reminded me just how hard it is to explain the emotional levels in a

relationship, especially one that is not going well. To help us find better ways to talk about it, you know what I did. I called in an expert.

Genesis Games:

My name is Genesis Games, and I am a licensed mental health counselor. I am Latinx and I practice in Miami. That's where my private practice is located, Healing Connections, but I practice totally virtually, so I am able to see clients throughout Florida and also in New Jersey.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, you heard Gabby's story. What did you hear as you listened?

Games: The first thing that came up for me was how uncomplicated, or at least Gabby's perception of her parents' marriage and how uncomplicated it seemed. You know, you meet someone when you're a teenager, you fall in love, it's this pure, innocent, puppy love, you marry them, you settle down, you find a job, you raise kids, and that's it. Divorce is not even a term that is known. In contrast to relationships today, where there's a lot of other moving factors that play a role in the success of a relationship, play a role in how compatible we are not just when we meet, but as we go through life together.

Lantigua-Williams:

I love that you just said that, because I wanted to ask you if her feelings of shame and failure had something to do with how she perceived marriage, how it was supposed to be because of the relationship she perceived her parents as having.

Games: Absolutely. I remember she mentioned about I think a grandmother having a divorce and thinking that was really badass, because that was a while ago and that was probably this just huge thing not just in the family, but in their community. But no one else in her family ever going through a divorce, so really not seeing that firsthand, what it is like to go through a divorce, what the process feels like, and how... Even the language you use to communicate about it. I think language is so important and our language a lot of times can carry shame the same way that it can carry empowerment.

But not having a role model to kind of show us what language to use can really feed that shame.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, let's get into that actually. Can you give me some examples of the type of language that is most useful when you have to have these difficult conversations with your parents or other people who are close to you about what you're going through?

Games: Yeah, so I think it's really trying to explain your experience, and it's not judging your experience, right? Well, you know, a divorce is a failure. Not necessarily. I

think a divorce can be sometimes the best choice that one can make for your own emotional well being, the emotional well being of the other person, and definitely when there's children involved. And so, really being able to explain what your experience was, like we weren't happy, we weren't connecting, we just grew up to be different people with different values. Or you know, there was infidelity and I didn't feel comfortable trusting that person again, or whatever the case is, right?

I think sticking to the facts, sticking to what you're feeling without placing judgment. Whether there was infidelity, whether you grew apart, whether... Whatever the case it may have been, it's not necessarily a failure. It's not a negative thing. It's not a punishment. It's not a generational curse. It's not really indicative of anything that is wrong with us or that has to be fixed within us. It's just something that happened and both parties had something to do with it.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, one of the things that struck me is that her parents as she was going through this transition seemed to have taken on the role of the non-judgmental. So, let's talk about what I think might be a more common occurrence, which is that the parents are really disappointed that their adult child is getting a divorce, that they want her to try and try and try, or they want him to try and try and try, and figure out, because they don't believe in it. Because no one's ever gotten divorced in their family. Because, because, because.

What is your advice for someone who has to encounter that reaction from their loved ones?

Games:

So, I would say two main things. Number one is try to seek support, not understanding. It's okay if people don't understand what we're going through. Again, I think life has changed a lot in the past couple of decades, and so the way life was when a lot of our parents got married and had us is very different from what it is like today. So, experiences are completely different and it's gonna maybe be hard for them to understand some of the nuances of the things that we go through.

So, they don't necessarily need to understand 100%, but what we do want is support, and we can let them know, and we can spell it out for them the kind of support that we would like. Maybe that support means I want you to check on me and just kind of call me maybe in the evenings when I put the kids to bed, like that's when I feel kind of sad and I feel kind of lonely. Let's have some time to talk, or let's do some... Whatever that support is gonna look like for you. Everybody's different. But definitely let them know, give them a little recipe of the kind of support that you would like. What's gonna be helpful.

I think a lot of times, again, when parents say, "Well, you should try harder. You should do this. Or you should do that." In their minds, they're trying to be supportive, right? Like they're trying to give us solutions to the problem, but that's not the kind of support that we might need, so just letting them know how to best

support us. And then I think number two is setting boundaries. So, you're probably gonna have an initial conversation with them where you're gonna kind of drop the bomb. You might have some follow-up conversations, right? After they've kind of processed the information. They might have some questions and there might be some follow-up conversations, and that's okay.

But we're not gonna talk about this like 24/7 for the next five years, right? At some point, this is it. At some point, it's mamá, papí, this is the decision. We've talked about it. I've explained to you how we've come to this decision. It is what it is. I understand that you may not understand our decision, but I do ask that you support. And if you can't support, we're gonna have to set some boundaries, because every time we get together for lunch, this cannot be the main topic of conversation.

Lantigua-Williams:

Right. I'm much more than my divorce.

Games: Yes. Absolutely. There's other things going on in your life.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right. My final question to you is about the self healing that has to happen, right? And how to protect that process for yourself from your parents, your extended family, your siblings, and anyone else who might intrude on that healing that has to happen. And you've touched on boundaries, but I want you to go a little bit deeper and talk about how to give yourself that space and give yourself the time and the permission to really go through all of the things that you need to go through in order to really heal.

Games: The healing process is a tricky one, and it's... I don't want to say it's lengthy, because I think the length varies from person to person, but it's definitely not something that happens the day that I sign the divorce papers, like that's it, we're done. I have no feelings. There's no emotional attachment. I think that that's a moment in our life where there's a lot of mixed emotions. Even if you're the one that chose to get the divorce, I think sometimes we think, "Well, if I chose to get the divorce then it should be easier on me." Not really. That doesn't mean that you didn't have feelings for this person, that you may still have feelings for this person. This does not mean that you don't care about them. This does not mean that you didn't have hopes and dreams for that relationship.

You were still invested, so you still have a right to go through this process. I think it's really important, again, that we seek support, but that we seek support from the right people. And the right people are the people that are not trying to impose their opinions or just coming from their own personal experience, but like, "I did this, and you have to do this, because this worked for me." No, but people that are again, willing to be supportive in the way that we may need them to be supportive. So, maybe I want your advice, like maybe I know you went through a divorce and I

think you handled it beautifully and I really do want your advice, and I really do want to know step by step what you did.

But maybe that's not the case. Maybe I don't want your advice. I just want to vent and I just want to have someone that I know is going to listen to me without any judgment. I may want someone that just keeps me accountable in completing other goals that I have in my life. That can be part of my healing, as well. So, I think it's really getting clear with the kind of support that we need and then bringing people into our lives that can help us provide that support.

And I think again it's important to normalize that this is gonna take some time, and that there's a lot that we are letting go of, right? We're letting go of a friend. We're letting go of a companion. We're letting go maybe of the idea of having a family or being a family that's together. We're letting go of goals that we had for the future. There's a lot of things that we're letting go of, and so there is going to be anger. There's going to be grief. There's going to be sadness. There's gonna be a sense of helplessness at times. There's also going to maybe be happiness, and relief, and kind of a sense of liberation, and freedom, so these contrasting feelings can all coexist and they will most likely all just pop up at different points throughout your healing process.

You're not going "crazy." You're a human being going through a complex situation and experiencing natural feelings that match the complexity of the situation.

Lantigua-Williams:

Genesis, that was amazing. Thank you!

Games: Thank you so much for having me.

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Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Genesis. Stick to the facts. Use language that explains what happened without passing judgment. Describe the facts and the feelings, but don't label them right or wrong. They just are. Ask for what you need. Even people who know us and love us need a little guidance on exactly how they can help. Do you want advice? Do you want a shoulder to cry

on? Do you want a babysitter once a week? Someone to bring over some pizza? Verbalize what you need and what you don't.

And remember, seek support, not understanding. People who love you and care about you can absolutely be there for you without completely getting everything about what you're going through.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you for listening this week. Again, How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything is an original production of Lantigua Williams & Co. Virginia Lora produced this episode. Michael Castañeda mixed it. Micaela Rodríguez is our founding producer and social media editor. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. I'm the show's creator, Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @TalktoMamiPapi. Please subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, Spotify, and anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

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