



Coming Out to My Family

Rafe grew up feeling very loved, but also feeling very different. In his teen years, he began to understand he was gay, but it took a while to open up, and to talk about a traumatic experience. A licensed clinical social worker who specializes in supporting QTBIPOC clients speaks with Juleyka about how we can all show up for our loved ones.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. Thanks for coming back. This is How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything. Hey, new listeners. I see you! I'm Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Before we get started today, I need you to know that this episode is going to discuss sexual violence. Some listeners may find it difficult to hear, so please skip it or listen with someone if you need to.

Today, I'm speaking with Rafe. He grew up in a Catholic immigrant family, and even though he felt very loved, he always felt different. As a child, he didn't have the words to describe himself as gay, but in his teens he began to recognize himself more and more. But he never opened up to his family about it. Then, following a traumatic experience, he decided to come out to some of his family members. Let's get into it.

Rafe:

Hi, my name is Rafe. I am 29 years old and at home, we call my mom and dad mom and dad. I really had an amazing childhood, like I have two older brothers, Daniel and Michael, and a middle class family. Great family. And I love them. Growing up as a kid, I always knew that I was different. I realized that I was experiencing these different feelings, but I didn't have a word to put to it, so I believe it was in the fifth grade, a group of friends and I, we would end up walking home and that was I think my first experience with bullying. I remember being with this group of people who I considered to be friends and then being made fun of because I was feminine.

And I contextually started to understand what the words gay meant, faggot, slurs, those sorts of things, and that's when it started, and then it sort of just escalated. I did not share my experiences about bullying with my family. It wasn't something that I ever felt truly comfortable speaking about. So, coming out, I was in the ninth grade. I was with one of my friends, Joanne, and she ended up putting me in touch with this guy who went to our rival school at the time. She's like, "Yeah, you know, he's this really great guy. He's super cute." She was the first person that I told and at the time, I actually told her that I was bisexual. I didn't tell her that I was gay.

Meanwhile, I haven't even had an experience with a guy or a girl. I think I've kissed a girl before, and that was it, like in the fifth or sixth grade, something like that. I'm super innocent, but here I am making these grown ass decisions, right? So, he friends me on Myspace, and we decide finally that we're gonna meet. I remember getting really cute. I had on this red polo, and I had the jewelry on, and I was smelling good, looking fresh, all of this. He was my first guy crush and it was a new place to go explore.

It was a really, really difficult night for me, because there was... I went from zero to 100 really quick, and there was a lot of pressure involved in the whole experience, and to make a long story nauseous, I was sexually assaulted that night. And so, I felt really weird, and that being my first sexual experience, I felt really weird. I then ended up sneaking back into the house. My brother is walking past and he looks at me and he's like, "You were just out having sex." I didn't know what to say. I was at a loss for words. And he's like, "Okay, so how was she?" And I then mentioned, I was like, "You know, it wasn't with a girl." He's like, "Listen, I don't want to hear about it, but I want you to be happy."

I did not tell him that I was assaulted. I didn't mention any of that. I kept that to myself for years. I want to say a few months later, I get this call from my mom. She had noticed my Myspace profile and on it, it said that I was bisexual. She was really surprised and taken aback by it. I grew up Roman Catholic, like communion, confirmation, the whole nine, and it totally goes against all of our values as a family and as a religion. And my mom, there was a lot that she didn't understand, and so she was confused, and she wasn't very accepting. We would talk about it here and there and after I'd come out to her and she started to finally accept it, she started asking me. She was like, "You know, do you want me to talk to dad about it? Do you want me to talk to Daniel?"

And I told them no. My dad's cool, but like he has some really conservative ideals, and till this day, I never formally had, or have had a conversation with Daniel or my father about me being gay. I've brought home boyfriends, like they know all of those things. Relationships are relationships are relationships, and love is love is love is love is love is love, right? So, it's interesting, and although we may not have the same ideals, and values, and principles, I definitely feel loved. At this point in my life, I can say with confidence that I am loved.

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Lantigua-Williams:

Rafe's story was really hard for me. I felt rage as a mother of two boys. I felt anguish as someone who has really close queer friends and relatives. Hearing him talk about his angst at discussing his sexual orientation with his family and his fear of telling them about being assaulted made me pause. I thought deeply about how all of us must create supportive environments, how we have to show up for our loved ones so that they can feel safe in having these conversations with us. To help us figure out how to do that, I called in an expert.

Alina Maria Tello-Cordon:

My name is Alina Maria Tello-Cordon. I am a Latinx immigrant from Guatemala. I identify as queer and fluid and use she/her they/them pronouns. I'm currently practicing therapy at a private practice called Resonant Relationships in Seattle, and I'm working on my PhD in Clinical Sexology with a focus on Transgender Health and Kink Conscious Therapy.

Lantigua-Williams:

When you hear Rafe's story, what do you hear?

Tello-Cordon: Well, his story resonated so closely with me, because it was very similar to my own coming out journey. I hear the struggle of not being exposed to the culture and community of queer, lesbian, gay, trans folks, so not even having the language to describe the feelings he was having, and having to sit in that place of confusion and isolation even within his own friendship groups, within his own family, and just struggling to find his place in the world.

Lantigua-Williams:

What did you pick up about the dynamics at play in his life that influenced the way that he experienced this important moment in his life?

Tello-Cordon: I mean, definitely the impact of culture. Toxic masculinity that exists not only in the American culture, but machismo that exists in the Latinx or Hispanic community. The idea that it was initially his femininity that brought on the bullying that he experienced and it was through that trauma of bullying that he became aware of the words that helped him realize his identity, so coming to terms with those words and those labels wasn't... It wasn't experience of joy or affirmation. It was an experience of shame and fear.

Lantigua-Williams:

For a really long time, Rafe didn't tell anyone in his family or his friends, even as he became increasingly aware of his difference and how he was becoming himself more fully. Do you see that often when you work with your clients? And what is your advice for people who might be experiencing that themselves, or who might be related to, or living with, or the mom or the dad of someone who might be experiencing similar feelings?

Tello-Cordon: Yes. I certainly see it a lot in my clients in the communities that I work with. And I think it comes from a place of fear, of rejection. For most folks, their family, their friends, those are the support networks, the folks that keep them going, that provide them with love, nurturing, sometimes even safety, housing, so there is a reluctance to share with them a part of their identity that could potentially be the reason that they lose this support network. And when I hear my clients talk about this fear, we always talk about safety first. They are the experts in their experience, so I'm not going to come in and encourage them to come out if it's going to be something that can put them in harm's way or be detrimental to their health, either physical or emotional health. So, we talk about balancing that, ways for them to connect with their identity and authenticity while simultaneously getting the feel for what their family or friends' reaction may be if they were to come out.

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Lantigua-Williams:

So, often parents, or siblings, or close aunts, or cousins might make overtones or suggestions as someone is discovering his or her gender identity, his or her sexuality. It is something that is very pervasive generationally. How can parents today, right, in 2020, avoid creating this environment where their child's identity becomes sort of like an open secret that no one talks about?

Tello-Cordon: You know, starting the conversation, I think even before identifying that kids are maybe expressing themselves in a different way, allowing for language, LGBTQ culture to exist in the household, watching movies with themes or characters of the community, introducing friends or out family members. So many of us and other folks that haven't come out yet kind of sit there and listen to their parents, or aunts and uncles, and cousins make little jokes, or little commentaries that might be demeaning of the LGBTQ community, and those are the signs to us that tell us like, "Okay, this is not a safe family member to come out to, because they're gonna judge me."

I mean, hopefully as the world and communities and families change, there won't be a need to actually come out. You just get to exist as yourself.

Lantigua-Williams:

So, let's pick up on that, because I think that that's a really important point, that in many ways, the responsibility is on the person that is "coming out," so there's a lot of educating that has to happen that they basically have to lead, especially if they are born into families that are culturally conservative, or religiously conservative. So, what are some of the recommendations for someone who is going through the self-discovery, but also who is in the position of being the person who's gonna have to lead everyone else in understanding who they're becoming and who they really are?

Tello-Cordon: Yeah, so we have so many resources online that are wonderful in terms of educating yourself on the community, on terminology, even focused on how to have conversations with family, or certain things to ask yourself before coming out to family. And if possible, I know therapy isn't always accessible, but checking in to see if there are any LGBTQ support groups or centers nearby that may offer some resources. It can be really helpful to come to terms with your own identity and who you are and affirming that before taking the challenge of bringing it to family members or other folks.

Lantigua-Williams:

What are some of your strategies and recommendations for the extended family relatives who are not siblings or parents living with the person that they can utilize to support them as they're coming or as they're beginning to really form this identity? So that they can have a sense of safety beyond their immediate family. I'm thinking, for example, of the aunts and older cousins in my family who were always much more loving and more open with the gay and queer people in my family, especially when their parents were not around, especially being able to create safe spaces for them to just be themselves.

Tello-Cordon: Yeah. No, it's really beautiful when you do have those relatives who can step up and be supportive. I would say continue to provide a safe space for that either young person, or for that adult to be able to exist openly. Ask them questions about how they're doing. Check in and say like, "You know, is there anything I can do to support you?" Sometimes a person just wants to be able to have that space where they can exist and know that they're gonna be safe. Other times, they may want that relative to advocate on behalf of them with their parents or with their siblings, but it's best to check in first to make sure that their safety is always the first priority.

Lantigua-Williams:

In Rafe's story, there is a very real instance of trauma, right? And it got sort of mixed in with his coming out to his family, with his discovering his identity, so when someone has experienced sexual trauma the way that Rafe has, what is your advice for them?

Tello-Cordon: Well, based on when he experienced that trauma, it makes sense that he wouldn't necessarily reach out to family, because by telling his family what had happened,

he would be essentially outing himself, and it sounded like he wasn't quite ready for that. There are different 1-800 numbers that can be called, hotlines that do offer crisis counseling that can provide local resources, or make suggestions as to what to do in terms of safety, or if someone is interested in reporting. Not all folks are interested in reporting. Again, because getting authorities involved could also out them.

But you know, if this is something that was still coming up for Rafe currently, I would encourage him to seek out therapeutic support groups, one-on-one therapy. It can be difficult, especially for cisgender men, or masculine folks to identify themselves as survivors of sexual assault.

Lantigua-Williams:

There are definitely extreme cases in which it isn't safe for someone to stay in their home once this information is out or once relatives learn and they start to be hostile toward that person. So, what are some of the resources, or where can someone find help and support if they don't feel safe staying at home where they are?

Tello-Cordon: Well, usually what I would guide a client before coming out is to identify a safety plan if that were to happen. Are there some relatives that are nearby that maybe could take them in? Are there friends or friends' parents? Just figuring out what their support network is in case they do have to leave home immediately. You know, that can also mean like having things packed up in a way that if they had to leave immediately, they could just get things and leave with their important documents or belongings.

There's also local shelters that could be available and if available, I would definitely encourage folks to go to the affirming centers, because some of the other shelters can sometimes have discriminatory practices.

Lantigua-Williams:

Alina, thank you so much.

Tello-Cordon: You're welcome. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to have this conversation with you.

Lantigua-Williams:

All right, let's recap what we learned from Alina. Take all the time you need. You are the expert of your own life and you get to decide when it's the right time for you to have these conversations. Have a plan. Think about the support system you have and identify loved ones and friends you can turn to if you need to. And remember, seek out support. There's an abundance of resources for uplifting and empowering LGBTQ people of color, their parents, and their families. There's information ranging from how to talk to relatives about coming out to where to find

culturally sensitive mental health resources and where to get help if it's not safe to be where you are.

We've listed some of Alina's recommendations in the episode notes. There, you'll be able to link to Trans Lifeline, The Trevor Project, It Gets Better, and the National Sexual Assault Hotline.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you for listening, thank you for sharing, thank you for being here week after week. How to Talk to [Mamá and Papí] 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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