



When Mamí Makes You Doubt Becoming a Mom, Part 1

Liz and her Mexican mom have always had a difficult mother-daughter relationship. Now that Liz is thinking of having children, she worries that because of her strict Catholic upbringing, and her emotionally-detached mother, she may not have become the type of parent she wants to be.

Juleyka Lantigua-Williams:

Hi, everybody. This is a two-part episode about difficult mother-daughter relationships. This is part one, where I talk to Liz, who shares stories from her relationship with her mom. In part two, I talk to an expert. Both parts are available right now wherever you're listening. Liz is Mexican American, and she grew up in Los Angeles, in a strict Roman Catholic family. Growing up, she was often afraid of her controlling and emotionally distant mom, who seemed to always be suspicious of Liz's behavior. As an adult, Liz has begun to question how her mom raised her, and now that she's thinking of having children, Liz worries she may not have the right instincts to be a good mom. Let's get into it.

Liz: My name is Liz. I am from Los Angeles, born and raised. I am first generation Mexican American. My parents are from Durango, Mexico. Currently, I call my mom madre and I call my dad daddy. Middle school, high school is when I started just calling them mom and dad, and then until recently, where I feel like we're getting a little closer, different era in my life now, I called my mom madre, because I... A lot of what she says to me, like, "Ay, madre mía!" And then my dad just became daddy over the times my sister and I call him daddy.

They bought a house in Lynwood, California, in 1989, the year that I was born. It was great growing up in that neighborhood, lots of kids. I have very good memories. But I also have the memories, looking back, like, "Oh, we lived in an inner city. Oh, this happened around our neighborhood that my parents really don't like talking about." I remember gunshots. I remember lots of yelling. I remember lots of sirens. And because of all that, a lot of what my upbringing was like makes sense. Very sheltered life. I now believe that the fear that my mother had, my parents collectively maybe, had about what kind of dangers there were out there, they didn't want us to fall into that and they did everything possible.

But they used fear to keep us sheltered, to keep us from getting in trouble, so my whole life, if I got in trouble or if I ever did anything wrong, I felt like I was gonna be sent away. To Mexico or to somewhere, but I lived in this fear, and I believed it.

The neighbors next door, very different family, all girls. The youngest of the five

singers was my age. A lot of them got pregnant at 16 and then got into drugs, unfortunately, and my parents are Godparents to the youngest, so we were very close to that family and I was very close to Gabby growing up. And I think because of having that firsthand witness of what is possible even in this neighborhood that they worked so hard to buy a house in, et cetera, I think that's what started a lot of it. That family and our family went on completely different paths as I got older, especially in high school. I was an honor roll, AP student, and college bound. My parents instilled education is the most important thing, so they made sure my path was as clear as possible.

They created limitations and used fear as part of their discipline, quite literally not letting us out. Not letting us socialize outside of school. If it wasn't related to school, we weren't allowed at all. Don't even ask. So, no sleepovers ever. No parties anywhere, even if parents were present. No. And then beyond that, privacy was not something that existed. My mother, for some reason, she would read my diaries, my journals. She'd go through our trash. She'd go through our drawers. Just to find something. And whenever there was nothing to be found, she would still act mad and angry with us, but it was that fear that we knew that we were never... We could never get away with anything, right? And we knew that, so we wouldn't even try.

Going into high school, this continued. Going into college, when I still lived at home, this continued. I wasn't allowed to drive by myself until I was 21, and even then, my mom would follow me to school to make sure that I was going to class at 21, 22 years old. I wasn't ever allowed to go on a date. If I had a boyfriend, they had to come and see me and we hung out on the porch, and then they had to leave by sundown. So, we hardly got to hang out during the winter months.

I have an older brother. As much as my brother tried to defend me, he was always put into his place by my mom and always told, "This doesn't concern you." Same thing with my dad and all he would do is after my mom would yell, or whatever, and I would be left in my room feeling as low as possible, he'd come in and essentially just beg me to just find some way to forgive her and to just be at peace as much as possible.

How could I believe... It wasn't even a thought in my mind. How can I believe that their behavior as parents was actually damaging me or causing me harm rather than good? Because they loved me. They wanted the best for me. They have always done everything for us. So, it's no wonder that a lot of my younger adult years, I felt like I have failed them in many ways just by me trying to be myself, by not meeting the typical expectations on going to college for a proper career. I pursued art history. They really did not understand what I was gonna do with art history.

I think once I really started surrounding myself with people that were giving me different feedback from what my parents were giving me... I meet another fellow student that is my age and lives by herself, or has five roommates or something,

but she's not at home anymore. Like, "Wait, that's possible?" Once I started seeing and talking to others, and really believing that there are other people in the world that I can learn from, then I started opening my mind and heart to other things.

I left home after a very heated fight with my mom. I had gone to a gallery opening. I was networking in a career I have chosen. My parents, again, did not understand the value of that, but I was gonna stick to my guns and I was gonna do what I knew I had to do. I got home a little later than expected. By late, I mean around 10:00, 10:30, and my mom lost it. It always surprises me when this happens because it's so... It's not normal for someone to react in this way. You know, she's yelling at the top of her lungs, like if someone was killing her. But all the while, her insinuating that I must be up to other bad things.

And it's the things that she insinuated or would hint on, or sometimes very bluntly would tell me that that's exactly what she thought I was doing, the things that are still very hurtful and I'm still working through. But that night, I decided. I packed a bag, and I left, and I couch surfed for two months. I didn't see my parents or talk to either of them. I had a blanket and a pillow, and I slept on the floor, but I was still the happiest I'd ever been in a very long time.

During that time, I was working five different jobs. I was still going through all of my thesis classes in college. I was saving up to go and study abroad, this thing I've always wanted to do, but I did it. I saved up all that money. I didn't even tell my parents that's what I wanted to do because they would have very strong opinions against it. At some point, they kind of surrendered and offered to help, which was also very surprising. They I think started seeing a different side of me that they had never seen before, a fighter.

I saw someone and I was someone, I am someone now that believed and believes that anything is possible. The great thing is I wouldn't believe that if it weren't for my parents. Because of the hard work I knew they were doing, my dad getting up at 3:00 in the morning every day for 40 years to go to the same job, for the same shift at the diner, and my mom working her butt off. I feel very fortunate and lucky for all the work I've put into my growth, going through therapy and all kinds of stuff to understand why my parents are the way they are as much as I can, but once I realized that there was no possible way for them to provide something that they were never given, once that donned on me in my early adult years, I started feeling a sense of relief and I was finally able to go forward with my life rather than feeling obligated to do things for them, to make them proud.

I am thinking about becoming a mom. I've been married now for a year and a half, almost two years, and of course I've been thinking about becoming a mom since I was probably a little girl. I realize there's still something that I want, that I need to work through. When I think about bringing up my fears around motherhood to my mom, I always imagine it in dialogue form, right? Usually, it goes with me approaching her and saying, "Ma, I feel I'm afraid of becoming a mom. I know we talk about it. We want to. But I'm afraid." And what I imagine her response to be is,

“Ay, Liz. ¿De qué le tienes miedo, si aquí estamos nosotros? We’re right here. We’re gonna help you.” It’s dismissing what I just told her, and it doesn’t matter what I have to say either way, just do it. It’s that dismissing part that has happened my entire life, of any idea that I would propose, or that I would want. It would just be dismissed.

I wasn’t really allowed to cry growing up. I was afraid of letting my mom see me cry because she would just be the tough love, and just say, “Why are you crying? A ver, dime. Why are you crying?” And then she would tell me if that would be a good reason, enough reason for me to be crying or not, which usually and always it was never a good enough reason. Because I strongly believe that a person cannot give what they’ve never received, I am afraid that I won’t be able to give what I want to give, because if I’m a mom and I have a kid, am I gonna just rely on my instinct, and is my instinct deeply rooted in the example that I had growing up? And if so, then that’s not good in my head.

I have not I guess become my mother as a wife, and that type of a person, and that type of a woman, in that role with my husband, because of how kind my husband is and how patient and understanding. But also, I’m gonna give myself credit, too. You know, everything that my mom has always told me growing up, “Todo cambia cuando te casas, pero especialmente cuando vives con un hombre” Everything changes when you live with a man. Once we started living together, one thing that I always made sure of is to be as transparent as possible about every feeling that I had, about why I thought I reacted certain ways to things. Every behavior has a root somewhere in my past and through the past years, he has learned so much about my upbringing, of course, and by doing that as well, he has learned which things trigger me, which things we can joke about, which things we can’t joke about. His family is very different from my family in the sense that his family is very huggy. His parents, both mom and dad, give me a big hug. My parents, it’s kind of like the side hug type of thing. My dad still just pats me on the back.

Having that example, as well, has allowed me to see that it’s possible to be very expressive of one’s love for each other in a family. And now I know what my mom always meant about how everything changes. It’s not as bad as she made it sound. But maybe I got lucky, you know? Maybe I got lucky.

Lantigua-Williams:

Thank you 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 is the show’s producer. Kojin Tashiro is our mixer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Jen Chien is our executive editor. I’m the creator, Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. On Twitter and Instagram, we’re @TalktoMamiPapi. Please follow us and rate us on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, Pandora, Spotify, Goodpods, or anywhere you listen to your favorite podcasts. Bye, everybody. Same place next week.

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