

4 tips for talking to your Latinx parents about mental health

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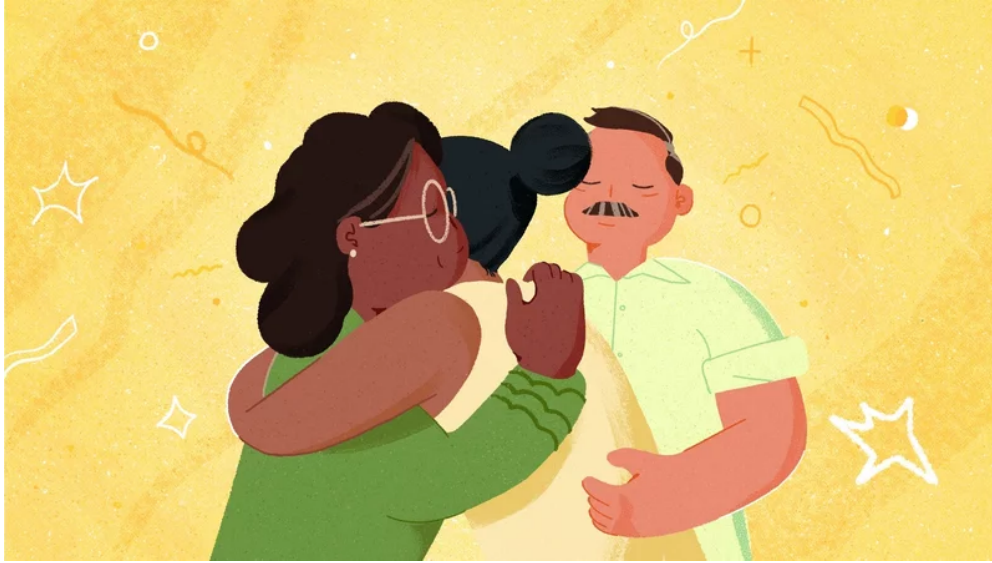
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Listen · 22:48 22:48



Erick M. Ramos for NPR

- English
- Español

If you were raised in a Latinx household, you'll know that when it comes to mental health, we don't grow up talking about it.

Personally, neither of us (Isabeth and Naydeline) talked about it with our parents until college, when we both went to therapy for the first time. It wasn't until we had the right language to discuss mental health that we felt comfortable enough to bring it up at home. So if the thought of admitting to your family that you're struggling makes you tense up, we totally get it.

You're not alone in your fear. A 2019 study found that in the U.S., Latinos access mental health care at nearly half the rate of non-Hispanic white people. Shame and stigma play a huge role in discouraging folks from seeking mental health support in our communities — not to mention talking about it with loved ones.

As hard as it can be to bring up, there's power and freedom that come from feeling safe in your mind and your body, and at home. If you want to explore having a conversation with your loved ones about mental health, we have some tips for you! You'll hear from therapists, young people who have had the conversation and, of course, us.



The authors, Isabeth Mendoza and Naydeline Mejia, pose with their mothers. Left: Hilda Mendoza and Isabeth Mendoza. Right: Naydeline Mejia and Elvira Castillo. **Isabeth Mendoza and Naydeline Mejia hide caption**

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Isabeth Mendoza and Naydeline Mejia

Work to understand your own mental health

The more aware you are of your specific mental health struggles and needs, the better you will be able to communicate those needs to others. To start, understand that mental health isn't stagnant and can change as your life changes. How you understood your mental health before might not be how you understand it now.

There are several ways you can learn how your emotions show up and interact with your body and mind. Therapy card decks, such as Ebony Butler's [My Therapy Cards](#), made specifically for people of color, can be a great tool for reflection. Journaling, meditation and following licensed mental health professionals on Instagram can also be helpful. Some of our favorite people to follow are [Josie Rosario](#), [Lisa Olivera](#), [Nedra Glover Tawwab](#) and [Whitney Goodman](#).

Here are a few book recommendations that speak to mental health-related topics such as intergenerational trauma and attachment styles:

- [*My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*](#)
- [*It Didn't Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*](#)
- [*Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find — and Keep — Love*](#)

And of course, there's therapy! Therapy can be a scary process, but having the right mental health professional on your side can help you work through things that you might not be able to on your own. Some therapist directories you can look into are [Latinx Therapy](#), [Therapy for](#)

Latinx, Psychology Today, Therapy for Black Girls and Open Path Psychotherapy Collective.

Reflect on your "why"

After you have a better understanding of your mental health, the next step is to establish why you want to talk about it with your family. You may not feel like sharing this part of your life is important, and that's OK. But for those who do, this step is essential.

For some people we spoke to, like Figgy Baby, 30, a musical artist and co-founder of Bloom Homie, a collective of "homies reimagining masculinity," they want to be able to be their full authentic selves with their family members — that's one "why."

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"I want home and family to be a space where I can be my freest self. I'll admit that it's not, but little by little it can be more and more," says Figgy. "And I feel like taking this leap of being vulnerable and shameless with my folks only allows space for deeper connections with my family."



Figgy Baby, born Andrew Figueroa, is pictured here with his family. From left to right in photo at left: Felicity Figueroa, Paul Figueroa, Eduardo Figueroa and Figgy Baby. **Left: Andrew Figueroa; Right: Allison Smartt** **hide caption**

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Left: Andrew Figueroa; Right: Allison Smartt

For others, they want to talk about mental health at home because it helps to normalize the conversation as well as break down stigmas. Have you ever heard *el dicho*, "*la ropa sucia se lava en casa*" (don't air your dirty laundry in public) or heard a family member shaming a relative with a diagnosis by calling them *loco*? These are all cultural stigmas prevalent in the Latinx community.

And while it's easy to laugh about — and maybe even bond over — these shared traumas, we can't deny the real-world implications these ideas have on our collective well-being. It's through open and honest conversations with the people around us that we can help shatter these outdated narratives.

Come prepared to have the conversation, and have an after-care plan too

After establishing your "why," then it's time to actually *have* the conversation. This type of conversation can feel emotionally and mentally daunting, so we suggest entering it with humility and love — and maybe even a plan of action.

Kayla Zapata Fory, 29, scripted out what she wanted to say to her parents before having that conversation with them. Scripting can be a helpful tool if you get nervous during difficult discussions and want to make sure you're laying it all on the table when you have the talk.

Natalie Gutierrez, a licensed marriage and family therapist who specializes in trauma and is based in New York and New Jersey, suggests starting off by saying something along the lines of:

I'm struggling to love me, and I'm struggling to know who I am, and I really want to heal.

You want to be sure to share your struggles with your loved ones in a way they'll understand, so in addition to sharing your medical diagnosis — if you have one and choose to share — it might also be helpful to share your symptoms using simple language. For example, you can say: "When I'm driving, I get really nervous that I might hit something or get into an accident," as a way to describe anxiety.

Life Kit

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You might get some pushback from your family, so be prepared to redirect the conversation when you feel your parents or loved ones reacting negatively. Remind them that your mental health journey is about *you* wanting to be your best self and might have nothing to do with them.

Daniel Olavarria, a licensed clinical social worker who serves clients in New York, California and Florida, says you can say:

No mom, no dad. It's not your fault. The world is moving quickly, things are changing and this is what people are doing now to show up as the healthiest version of themselves. I know that you didn't have time to take care of yourself, but thank you so much for what you did [for me], because now I do.

Nevertheless, we recognize that parents aren't perfect! If your family members may have negatively contributed to your mental health, you can show compassion for their errors while still honoring your reality.

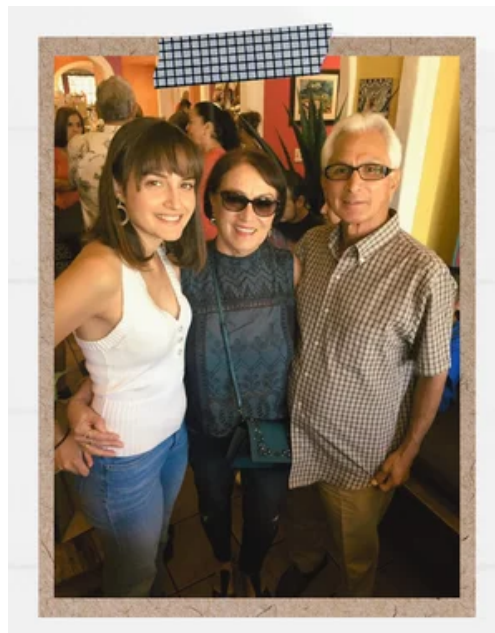
After sharing your diagnosis or struggles with your family, it's important to reflect on what support you might need from them. This is also an opportunity to share where you'd like to set boundaries to create a safer environment for yourself. (There's a whole Life Kit episode on [setting boundaries with family](#).)

After all is said and done, it can be beneficial to have a plan for how you'll take care of yourself afterward. You might want to set some time for a walk, call a friend to debrief or [journal](#) — anything that will help you decompress. This may be one of many conversations with loved ones, so it's important to have self-care tools for when things get too heavy.

Put yourself first

Through it all, remember to put yourself and your healing first!

Although family may be super-important to many of us in the Latinx community, your healing journey may or may not include them — it didn't include some family members for Reza Cristián Moreno, 26.



Reza Cristián Moreno is pictured here with her grandparents, Judy Ghaffari and John Trujillo, who have been integral supports on her mental health journey. **Judy Ghaffari hide caption**

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Judy Ghaffari

She offers this advice for people whose parents aren't as understanding and might also be going through their own healing journeys: "We grow up understanding that family values are everything. But I think the advice that I've learned from my therapist is that it's OK to put yourself first and your needs first."

Just because you are putting yourself first doesn't mean you don't care deeply about your folks. Gutierrez reminds us, "We may need to disappoint people if it means that we are healing ourselves and tending to what feels right within us." Healing starts by being vulnerable, and that's pretty brave — not selfish.

Have you talked to your Latinx loved ones about mental health or therapy? Share the tips that worked for you. Send us a note to lifekit@npr.org.

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The audio portion of this episode was produced by Sylvie Douglis, with engineering support from Gilly Moon.

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