



LEVEL UP: Your Relationships Could Use a Refresh

Psychotherapist Genesis Games gets real about why it's important to assess your relationships truthfully, so you can set healthy expectations and comfortable boundaries. Plus, how to navigate different kinds of relationships—with family, friends, and significant others.

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Alicia Menendez:

So much of who we are is who we surround ourselves with. Our family, our friends, our significant others, which is why today we're talking with psychotherapist Genesis Games about leveling up our relationships, setting expectations and boundaries, and investing in those who are ready and able to reciprocate.

So, thank you so much for doing this.

Genesis Games: I am super excited. Thank you!

Menendez: When we talk about leveling up in terms of our personal finances, in terms of our health, there are metrics. There are numbers that we can attribute to those things. It doesn't work the same way when it comes to relationships, so for someone who is entering this new year with the goal of shifting or refocusing some of their relationships, how do we even begin to take stock of the relationships that we have?

Games: I think you said it all, right? We don't really have a way of measuring relationships. Even some of our personal growth. Because I think a lot of our personal growth is also manifested in our relationships. And so, it really takes us being very reflective and brutally honest with ourselves about where we are at personally, and how we are engaging in relationships with people, and what are we getting from those relationships and what are we giving? Because it's a two-way street, right? A lot of times, I think we focus on the dissatisfaction because we're not getting certain things we would want to get from these relationships, but also what are we giving and how are we showing up in this relationship?

Menendez: What are the questions we need to be asking ourselves as we assess our friendships and our relationships? I know something that I started to realize as I got older is that a lot of the way I feel with someone after the time that I spend with someone is very physical. That sort of the body tenses around people around whom I don't feel I can be fully myself, that there are people who I leave their company and I feel so energized, and ready to just take on the world, try new things, and that for me, learning to listen to the physical response my

body has to people in my life is as telling as any thought I can sit around and think about them.

Games: I absolutely agree with you. I think our body is so wise and it holds so much information. Information that even our mind has forgotten. So, really listening and kind of tuning into those sensations that we experience, even in anticipation of meeting someone, while we are with that person, and then after we leave that person, and really kind of tuning into that and kind of figuring out what that's trying to tell us. Is this someone that leaves us feeling drained and exhausted? Is this someone that makes us feel hopeful, and optimistic, and motivates us? Is this someone that we feel an emotional connection to and we feel like they hold space for us, and they understand us, and they're reliable? All of that is really, really important.

I think it's also shifting our mindset of relationships. We have this concept, whether it's a close friend, kind of like a best friend, or it's a significant other, that they should be our end all, be all. They should be able to meet all of our needs, like they're who I go for fun, and they are who I go to when I have a problem, they are who I go to when I'm heartbroken, they are who I go to when I can't figure out my finances. Any and everything, every want, need, wish, desire that I may have, we put the burden on that one person to be able to fulfill all of that for us. And that is simply just not realistic. We are going to feel disappointed if that is the mindset in which we enter these relationships.

It can be a best friend. It can be a significant other. In either situation, we are going to feel disappointed because no one can fulfill every need, every wish, every desire that we have.

Menendez: Right. I think of it a lot as having the right players in the wrong positions.

Games: Yes.

Menendez: Which is the sportiest thing I will say in the entirety of this podcast. Part of that is about understanding what someone sort of brings, but part of that is also about understanding when your expectations of each other are matched and when they're mismatched.

Games: So, I think we first have to identify what our expectations are, right? And once we get clear on that, we have to assess if they're realistic or not. I think some of them may be realistic, but just the other person can't live up to them. And that's different, right? So, I think being seen, being heard, having that reliability, those are all realistic expectations for a best friend. However, that person in this moment in their life may not be in a place where they have the capacity to fulfill that for you.

And if that is the case, that is okay, but we have to understand that that is not our best friend in this season of our life. And we have to be okay with that. And that also means that we should not be behaving like a best friend if they're not behaving the same way, because relationships are two-way streets, and so you may have the capacity to take in an extra best friend in your life and be all there for them, but if they're not ready to do that for you for whatever reason, then we need to not do that and reserve that energy, because that does create a sense of resentment over time.

Menendez: How about when that person is someone you're interested in romantically? I know how hard it is to let go of the idea that something is not reciprocal. When you feel something so strongly.

Games: And I think a lot of times, we put the blame on ourselves, right? So, if I was kind enough, if I dedicated more time to this person, if I was just more available to them, if I loved them more, if I was more patient, like it is our fault that the other person is not ready to meet us where we want them to meet us. Whatever that milestone, whatever that may look like in someone's relationship. So, understanding again that it's a two-way street. So, I have the right to my expectations as long as they are realistic. That person may not have the capacity or even the desire to fulfill those expectations at this point in their life, and I have to make whatever decision I think is best for me with full awareness and full knowledge of that. It doesn't fall on me. It doesn't matter how patient I am or how loving I am. If they're not ready to appreciate that, or if they're not ready to give me or to fulfill my expectations, nothing that I do was going to make them any more ready for that.

Ad: *You all know I did not grow up speaking Spanish. My husband did. And it's really important to us that our girls have exposure to the language. When I interviewed Susie Jaramillo, the creator of Canticos, she gifted me a book for my girls, and they love it. Like, we read it all the time. And now the older one is using their bilingual learning app. They use the same nursery rhymes from our childhood, Burrito Sabanero, Elefantitos, and Arroz con Leche, to teach kids concepts like phonics, letters, math, and emotional intelligence through song and play.*

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Menendez: Are there prompts that you use with your clients to really tease out what their expectations are?

Games: I think a lot of our expectations are rooted in experiences that we've had in life, specifically childhood experiences. So, I like to take my clients back to the story behind that expectation. Let's say you expect your partner to do X, Y and Z. Was that something that you saw modeled at home? Was that the way that your parents interacted? Was that the dynamic that was set at home? And it may have worked very well for your parents. It may have been totally functional for your parents, but it might not be functional in your relationship because of a million reasons. First of all, your partner is not your parent, so they're just inherently somebody different.

But aside from that, there's a lot of situations, like we're living through a pandemic right now, so going back to that story, like where is this... Where was this expectation born? And was it functional in that story? Because sometimes, it's not even functional in that story, but it's what we know, so we bring it with us. Sometimes it was functional in that story, but it's just not functional today. So, being able to distinguish between the two, and then again, understanding the capacity that the other person may have to fulfill this expectation. Sometimes our expectations may be realistic and may be functional, and we might be crystal clear about them, and we might be communicating it in the most eloquent way possible, and the other person just simply does not have the capacity to fulfill that. Sometimes people do have that capacity and they just choose not to.

And so, we have to I think work accordingly. If I feel like I'm asking too much of someone, but I genuinely know that that person can't really fulfill that, then that's different. It might be a dealbreaker. But in other circumstances, it might be something that I can navigate, something that I can accept, and something that I can move past. But if I know that the person has the ability to fulfill that and just simply doesn't want to, then that's where I need to be again mindful, because that's where resentment can build.

I know you could do this for me. I know that you can behave in this way. No, I know you know how important this is for me, and yet you continuously choose not to.

Menendez: What does this look like when you're having these conversations in the context of a family member?

Games: That is a little bit more complicated. I think as complicated as romantic relationships can be and as powerful as those emotions can be, at the end of the day you can go your separate ways. With family members, it's a lot more difficult because it involves other people. You have an issue with dad, it's gonna probably involve mom, and it's gonna involve your siblings, gonna involve your grandparents. It involves more people, so it's usually not as private. You have input from other people.

I think it's important that we again get clear about our expectations. And we also analyze the history of the relationship that we have with this person. Typically, with family members, we have a long history, so we know how they react to certain situations, we know what their values are, we know maybe even certain circumstances, certain traumas that influence their reactions or their views on certain things. Taking all of that together, being mindful that we might have to bring down our expectations.

So, ideally we think of mom as someone that was always protective, always nurturing, loving, should be the person that you come to when you're heartbroken, should be the person that makes a meal to make you feel better. Now, not all moms are going to ever fit that criteria, and mom might even be working on herself. She might be making some changes. She might realize if I want to keep myself with my adult child, I am going to have to make some changes. She might be doing everything she can, and she might still never be that nurturing kind of prototype of a mom. So, I think again understanding how much can someone give and how much can someone possibly change, even when they want to change, even when they value the relationship that we have, and want to keep it, they might still not be able to fulfill our full expectation. It just means I have to have different boundaries with people. There's gonna be certain things that I share with certain people that I'm not gonna share with other people. Even if you're my parents, even if you're my significant other.

There might be some boundaries into how much time we spend together. When do I call you? Do we talk every day? Do we talk once a week? How often do we see each other? How involved are you in my life decisions? I'm gonna have to rethink some of those boundaries so that I can have some form of a relationship with this family member that is still healthy and that is still fulfilling, but that it allows me to be myself.

Ad: *We asked our producer, Paulina, to try out the new Summit Intarsia Sweater from Faherty. She is the youngest and hippest among us. Her response, "It is the most delicious, softest sweater." She says wearing it feels like she's, "Hugging a redwood tree by the Pacific Ocean while the wind whips my long hair." I can see why. The whole Faherty collection gives me watching the sunset on the beach vibes. Wearing Faherty pieces feels like the*

coziest you have ever been outdoors, telling stories around the bonfire, taking a long walk hand in hand on a moonlit night, or looking up at the stars on the porch, and that's by design. The family-owned brand is timeless, sun soaked, and sustainably minded. They partner with Lakota designers for their beautiful blankets and Faherty products are made to last a lifetime.

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Menendez: Let's talk about boundaries. There's the stepping back from the relationship and assessing where boundaries have been crossed and boundaries need to be reset, and then there is the active work of keeping up those boundaries and learning that it is a muscle that has to be built and flexed. Let's start with the first part. If you have a family member with whom you feel you have to set or reset boundaries, what are first the conversations you need to have with yourself about what those boundaries look like?

Games: So, what are the situations where I am feeling uncomfortable? I'm either feeling resentful, I'm feeling violated in some way. Think about recent situations, right? And that is going to give you information about what kind of boundaries need to be set. I always like to think about boundaries as a fence. Fence can be concrete fences that you can't really see through the other side and they're very tall, and they just kind of really keep your house very, very guarded and isolated from the rest of the neighborhood. Fences can just be the regular metal fences that you can have the little loops and you can see through, and you're still protected, but they can be as high as you want, and you're still able to see what's on the other side of the fence. So, you get to decide what kind of boundaries you set with who.

It's not gonna be the same boundary with everyone. With some people, you are gonna have to do those concrete fences, because they don't understand anything different. It has to be very strict with them. With other people, those boundaries might be more flexible, because they are understanding and they work with you, and they understand the importance of this boundary. Not just for you, but for the relationship itself. They see the value and they see the connection. So, historically analyzing our relationship with that family member, analyzing how they deal with boundaries, analyzing how they've responded to some unintentional boundaries in the past, and taking that information to help us decide what kind of boundary we need to establish.

And then, also knowing people don't like boundaries. Yeah, it's not gonna be like, "And I'm gonna tell my mom we're only gonna talk once a week, and when we talk, we're not gonna discuss X topic. And my mom is gonna be yes, sweetie. I totally get it. Don't worry. I'll call you just on Sundays and we won't talk about X." It's not. It's not gonna be like that. There's going to be a pushback. They're gonna be like, "But why? Why do I have to do this? Why do I have to abide by this? This is selfish. This doesn't make sense. This is silly." And that's okay. They have the right to feel that way.

Once they sit with that, and I think it's important to allow them to sit with that, they're gonna reflect and they're gonna think, "Well, it may seem silly to me. I may not understand why they're setting this boundary. I may not understand why I just can't talk to my

daughter whenever I want to talk to my daughter. But I understand that this is important to them, because they made a point to talk about it. So, this is important to them, therefore it is also important to the relationship. And so, it's better for me to have a good conversation once a week with my daughter than to not be able to talk to them at all, or not know when I'm gonna be able to talk to them."

So, giving people space to feel whatever feelings come up as a result of setting that boundary, but still sticking to your guns. Just because you're uncomfortable, just because you don't get it, just because you're upset, I'm not gonna go back on my word. But I am gonna give you space to sit with those feelings.

Ad: *Hey, Latina to Latina listeners. It's Juleyka, executive producer of this show. I want to invite you to listen to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything. It's my show that I host, and every week I talk to adult children of immigrant parents, like me. And you, probably. We talk about things that are difficult, especially conversations that we've been avoiding with our loved ones. Things like mental illness, being the first to go to college, politics, we get into all of it. Subscribe to How to Talk to [Mamá and Papá] About Anything wherever you listen to your favorite, Latina to Latina. Thanks!*

Menendez: And then the second piece, which is you say to your mom, "Mom, we're only gonna talk once a week." Mom says, "Why?" Let's say mom doesn't sit with it and mom's still phone banking you all week long. How do you practice the actual discipline of honoring your own boundary and committing to it?

Games: So, I think a big struggle is that people usually jump to a consequence that is dramatic, and that they're not gonna be able to follow through with.

Menendez: Have you been counseling me for years now? How do you know this so well?

Games: So, to say, "Oh, I'm not ever gonna talk to my mom again if she continues to phone bank me," is not realistic. So, it's really thinking about levels of consequences. Okay, well, if you continue to call me, I'm gonna give you a reminder of that boundary. I'm not gonna answer. I'm gonna text you a reminder of that boundary. If it happens again, then we may need to have another conversation about this. And then we would continue to create this ladder, but we would start with things that we can commit to, and that are also kind of equivalent to what's happening, to the level of violation that's happening.

Menendez: For a lot of people, it is the new year, and romantic relationships especially are being assessed in a sense of where are we. So, what are those conversations that we need to be having with ourselves and with our partners if we feel in some way that we have hit an impasse?

Games: I think it's really important that we talk about our expectation for the relationship. And so far, have our expectations been met? What do we need to feel comfortable getting to that next milestone? We don't want to feel like we're pressuring anyone to do whatever comes next, but what do we need to know so that the both of us feel comfortable with what's next if we're both on the same page about what's next. With couples that are in a more committed relationship, I think it's always important, regardless of what stage in your relationship you are in, to have a common goal, or like a common mission. That's something that I talk about a lot with my couples, and usually at the beginning of the relationship, we have that. However, after we're more settled, we tend to lose that sense of mission because it's been fulfilled already, so we have to look for a new one.

It's having a conversation of what would be meaningful for us at this stage in our life. What can we do together? What can we work towards?

Menendez: I love that. I also know if I called my husband in here right now and was like, "We have a goal." He's like, "Our goal is to survive this pandemic, Alicia."

Games: And that is a very valid goal in 2020. This reminds me of research that came up not that long ago. It's related to COVID, relationships and sex. Most couples were saying they were having less sex because of COVID, which is really funny. I think at the beginning, people were like, "Oh, we're gonna have a baby boom after COVID because everyone's at home and there's nothing else to do," but absolutely not. However, the couples that said that they were having either the same amount of sex that they were having before COVID, or even more sex, was because they were doing something different. Now, a lot of people would think, "Well, they started playing around with kinky stuff and they started doing something wild." No, it was more about them communicating and connecting, so they were spending more time together being affectionate. They were spending more time talking to each other and almost getting to know each other again. All of that helped them feel more connected and then that transferred into the bedroom.

So, that reminded me of what you said, because I think leveling up, we just have to redefine it. When we're doing well and we're not thinking about survival, then we can definitely set up these very nice and glamorous goals for ourselves. When we are really trying to survive, whether it's because our basic needs are not being met, or are in jeopardy, or it's because our relationships have really suffered through this year, then we need to focus on the smaller things. We need to focus on how can I bring this relationship from being almost on the edge, about to fall off the cliff, to being in land. It might not even be a great relationship, but just steady enough that we can work from there. We can have some sense of safety, some sense of security, and then we can up level from there.

So, really redefining. I think there's always a place where we can grow and there's always goals that we can set for ourselves, but they're just going to look differently this year, and that's totally okay.

Menendez: Genesis, thank you so much.

Games: Thank you so much for having me! It really has been a pleasure.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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