



How Olympic Gymnast Laurie Hernandez Regained Her Strength After Emotional Abuse

The gold medal athlete opens up about how she dealt with emotional and verbal abuse at the hands of coaches, the key role her mother played in advocating for her, and why leaving her beloved sport for a while was exactly what she needed.

Alicia Menendez:

Laurie Hernandez was 16 years old when she won Olympic gold and catapulted her way into our hearts. Her incredible talent, her, “You got this,” pep talk, and her contagious smile were suddenly everywhere. Then Laurie decided to step away from gymnastics. She needed to know who she was without the sport. She wrote a book, she dazzled on Dancing with the Stars, and she hosted American Ninja Warrior Junior. But all that pales in comparison to the work that Laurie was doing away from the public eye to learn about herself, about the emotional trauma she’d experienced at the hands of people she once trusted, and to push the sport she loves to do better.

Laurie, take me back to the moment where you fell in love with gymnastics.

Laurie Hernandez:

Ooh. I mean, before I even started I was at home and I originally did ballet when I was three, but I think if you can’t tell, I’m not really a kid who can sit still really. So, at three, to do something as serious as ballet was a little tough, but they told me that they would give me sugar cookies if I paid attention, so I stayed for two more years. And then when I was five, I was kind of coming home from a practice or a rehearsal and I saw two gymnasts on the TV. I thought they looked so cool. I didn’t know what they were doing was possible and I kind of just looked at my mom and I was like, “I want to be just like them.”

My mom was like, “Oh. Okay.” And she put me in and I just... I loved doing it. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I loved doing it, and there was a lot of energy that was happening, and it was a good place to put it.

Menendez: We all watched you and cheered for you, and we see the triumph, and the glory. What is it we don’t see?

Hernandez: You guys didn’t see a lot of things. Because what’s interesting to me is that a lot of people, most people, know me from the Olympics, but in being 16 and in doing that kind of five to six-week event, I had so many other years of doing other things and most of those things was just training, but that was such a short time period. It was a huge peak in my career and in my life, but it was such a short time period, so sometimes I kind of forget that that’s like the main part of my life, really.

But behind the scenes of that, I'd say there were a lot of times I wanted to quit, which is very common in any sport. Just kind of tired, and at the time I wasn't really sharing what was happening in practice. I'm sure a lot of people have seen the Instagram posts and a lot that's been happening in the gymnastics community within the last couple months, but they didn't know. They just saw this little kid who had really high dreams and they wanted to make sure that I didn't give up too soon, because it was hard.

And they were pushing, and I kind of realized, "Okay, this actually makes sense. I see why they're doing this." So, there were a lot of those moments. A lot of different moments also I think in my particular situation, trying to gauge what do I need to make sure I get there, like even just mental wise. How do I look at this? Because physically I think I can do it, but up here is the real challenge. Your brain is the part that if you're... You could be 100% physically for all your routines and whatnot, but if your brain's not there, then it's not gonna work. Whereas let's say physically you're at 70, 80%, but if your brain is strong enough, it's gonna pull through and you can really get it done. That's not the goal, but...

So, the mental really matters, and I think a lot of that was kind of a battle of like, "I'm not sure how to look at the next couple years to make sure I can hang in there and be okay."

Menendez: I do want to ask you about what you did to get your head right, mostly because I want to learn it and process it and then do it myself, but you brought this up, so I want to talk about it, which is there's a reckoning going on in gymnastics, and a lot of the emphasis and attention has been put on the way that gymnasts were physically violated, in some cases sexually violated, pushed really hard. The abuse you suffered was different, though. It was emotional abuse. What did it look like for you?

Hernandez: Even just bringing it up to someone was terrifying, because a lot of... Especially now, Gen Z is kind of looked at as like snowflakes, like, "Oh, they're not tough. They need to build thicker skin. These kids, they're just so sensitive." And I'm like, "Oh, man. Maybe I just am really sensitive." And if you ever meet my parents, they are literally the sweetest human beings possible, so I was like, "Maybe I'm just a really sensitive kid. Maybe this just stings a little more. Maybe it's me who needs to toughen up."

I was very wrong. That wasn't the case at all. The hardest part, I think, was knowing that that culture is so common in gymnastics, that even I couldn't really identify it as wrong until after the fact, that adults were brought into it, because I was still a minor. And my mom had kind of overheard a phone call of me and my friend talking, and we had brought up a situation that for us, we laughed about, but for my mom, was a huge red flag that she didn't know about.

Menendez: It was a coach pulling a girl's hair, which as a mom, if I overheard, I would flip.

Hernandez: Yeah. Yeah. She flipped all right. She kind of sat me down and was like, "I didn't know that this happened. Did other things like this happen too?" I was like, "No, but there were other things." And we kind of sat down and I just one by one kind of told her everything. And the thing is, a lot is still coming out kind of even a couple years later, because in my brain, I didn't recognize this as wrong, because that was the culture. I know I'm not the only one who was in an environment like that, so I was kind of like, "Oh, that's just how we do things, I guess."

So, I think that's kind of the biggest rift, was not understanding how big of a deal it was, and I couldn't fathom why it hurt so much, because I didn't identify it as wrong.

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Menendez: I mean, there were comments about your body. You were being told to continue competing even when you had pretty serious physical injuries. You didn't wait until 2016, though, to tell your parents. There was time before when you did tell them, right?

Hernandez: I was told not to say anything and when I did, and I wouldn't give everything, because also I know I grew up with a social worker in the house. My mom is so badass. I mean, she's really something else. My parents are lit. My mom is just... She's a saint. The world's softest heart. But then when it comes to her kids, she's mama bear, because she cares so much. And so, I knew that when I told her that things were getting a little rough or that something was said, I would kind of water it down, because I knew that if she really knew about it, she would pull me out, which looking back now makes sense.

So, I would kind of withhold it and she would call my coach and was like, "My kid is really kind of distressed, what happened? I don't get it. This is not okay." And at first it was kind of like, "Oh, okay. Talked to your mom last night. Here's what happened." And it would get better for like a week and then it would go back to old patterns, and then I would kind of let it happen for a while, and then when it got really bad, then I would tell my mom. But it was like, "Oh, you know, practice is getting rough."

And then it got to the point where practice started getting worse every time my mom called. So, telling my parents anything made things kind of worse. Not because of how they reacted, but just because of how somebody else reacted. I really didn't say much until after 2016.

Menendez: Can you paint a picture of what was happening during those years? What was being said to you that you didn't at the time recognize as emotional abuse?

Hernandez: The biggest red flag that I didn't know was a red flag was like gaslighting, and like being a kid, obviously I don't know what gaslighting is. I don't... This is an adult, almost parental figure to me. I'm told to trust them. I'm told that they're correct. So, when she yells and then I bring it up and I say, "I don't like when you yell." And then she says, "I don't yell, why are you saying that?" My brain was kind of like, "This doesn't make sense." I felt like I was going crazy. I was like, "Okay, maybe..." And then the next time it happened, and then they would yell, then I was like instead of actually paying attention to the fact that someone's yelling at me, then I was like, "Is this person yelling at me? Maybe they're not. Maybe..."

I was like, "Maybe my hearing is just really sensitive." I was kind of just like... But then at some point, it just kind of kept happening, and then I brought it up again and I was like,

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“When you do X, Y, or Z, it doesn’t make me feel good. I can’t pay attention at that point.” And they were like, “I don’t do that! I don’t know why you say I do that.” And this person could be very gentle, and very warm, and very open arms, and everybody loved this person, and... Well, almost everybody. But everybody loved this person and the people that were in the gym while I was training agreed and didn’t say anything. I don’t know what’s happening here.

Yeah, and then that was just a lot to deal with, because you have someone saying that it didn’t happen when it definitely did.

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Menendez: You have suffered at the hands of people who were supposed to care about you. What has the process of healing through that looked like?

Hernandez: The healing, that was almost worse than going through it, because I was rational paying attention to it. Ignorance is bliss. I didn’t know that it was a bad thing. I was kind of just going through the motions, whereas as I started to get a little older and I started to have more experience outside of gymnastics, like after 2016, I was completely done for two years. I wanted nothing to do with it. I was out. I got to do other things. And I was fine with that. But every so often, something would come up and I was like, “I don’t get what this is.” And I hadn’t started therapy until also two years later. I just couldn’t explain just like a huge, just negative fog over everything, and I was like, “I don’t get why I’m doing that.”

And so, going to therapy, and I like being open about it because mental health is so stigmatized. So, growing up with a social worker, and my sister is a therapist, I see one, like it just... It feels important to talk about, because I can’t do that by myself. I can’t heal by myself. I need a little guidance and that’s where she comes in. And so, kind of to have someone walk me through and say like, “Okay, here’s what happened. That actually was not a good thing. This should not have happened.” Like kind of helping me weed through it, it was really hard, because I was like, “Well, if that’s bad, then I haven’t told you the worst part.”

Because I couldn’t regulate what was kind of bad and good and whatnot.

Menendez: Who has been there for you throughout this process?

Hernandez: My parents. The whole time. I mean, as soon as I told my mom kind of back in 2016, she had written up an email in detail explaining all the things that I told her. I gave her kind of timeframes and everything and she had emailed it over to USAG, and she wanted it out. She didn’t want to blow it up. She didn’t want to make a huge... But she was like, “This needs to be talked about and addressed, because I can’t believe it was right underneath.”

She was just this huge protector throughout the last couple of years, especially when it came to the case that ended up being opened in an Olympic year.

You know, four years later she was still there, the whole time, and she understood, and my mom had gone through a lot growing up, and so this was kind of like her biggest fear of like, "Okay, it's my kid. Did I do enough? Could I have done more?" And that's kind of been... She's been hanging onto that for a long time and I've been trying to say like, "You can't fix what you don't know about." And she hangs onto that. So, my parents, my siblings have been a huge support system.

Everybody in my inner circle, really. It was a huge relief to finally kind of have it out, like in public and in social media, because my friends had already known about it, and I felt like I didn't really have to carry it anymore. It was out. I didn't have to hold it in my brain. And my inner circle was just there the whole time, so...

Menendez: Talk to me about the decision to take two years off of gymnastics.

Hernandez: I was kind of just done. I mean, my mom had known that after 2016, I was ready to move on and do other things, which is interesting, because a lot of athletes will, myself at the time included, will get nervous of like, "Okay, I've just hit the peak career of my life. What now?" And then you get all this attention, you get the world's attention on you, and then the attention is pulled away just like that and it's gone. And you're kind of left at home like, "What now? That was a really big event. I don't know what else to do with myself." I think Michael Phelps has talked about this as well as other athletes who are like, "You will spiral into a deep depression if you're not aware of what can happen and how to make sure that you're taking care of yourself afterwards."

But I guess in my case, my mom, my little bean, when I was a little kid she always told me that gymnastics played a really big role in my life, or it plays a really big role in my life, but she sees me as other things. And she wants me to make sure that I am still paying attention to those things, even though gymnastics takes a lot of time. And she was like, "You are not Laurie the gymnast. You are Laurie who so happens to be a gymnast, but to me you are so much more than that, so don't forget that."

So, after the Olympics, I was ready to go into other things, and I was ready to put gymnastics to the side and dive into that.

Menendez: Listen. I am not athletic. I am not an athlete. I take though a week off from doing my squats and my lunges and the week that I come back, it is so hard. So, I cannot imagine being an elite athlete, taking two years off, and then trying to come back.

Hernandez: Yeah. And also like my body had changed a lot too, which, that was I think the hardest part. It felt like doing gymnastics in another person's body. I had hit puberty. I had stopped... Instead of training for the Olympics, I wasn't training at all. And instead of eating this crazy strict diet, which is just a total other package probably for another day, but instead of being-

Menendez: No, it can be for today. I want to talk about it. Go ahead.

Hernandez: Okay, it can be for today. Let's do it. But I was so strict on it when we went to the Olympics, they were like, "Yeah, no carbs." And I was like, "This is ridiculous." So, we had to go no

carbs and I was still getting eyed on my weight for that, so then we finished the Olympics. I now get to eat whatever I want-

Menendez: What do you mean I was being eyed on my weight?

Hernandez: Someone was checking to make sure that... Their biggest fear was that I was gaining weight at the time, and I don't... At this point, it doesn't make any sense. Yeah. They were just worried that I was gonna gain weight. So, there's that. We had somebody else saying you can't have carbs, so then now the Olympics finishes, I'm now eating whatever I want. I'm not training for the Olympics. And I hit puberty at the same time. Surprise!

I had changed and I had changed really fast, and I did it all in the public eye. Yikes!

Menendez: What was your relationship like to your body at that point?

Hernandez: It was pretty bad. I got to go ahead and dip my toe in the water in every unhealthy eating, more so distorted eating patterns that would go on for different phases. I just went for all of it. But food was a really big factor into a lot of the stress that I was feeling at 16, 17, even 18, because it's like we now get to do all these wonderful things after the Olympics, and as I sit in front of the camera and talk about something I'm really passionate about, I'm worried about how I look.

Another interesting one was like moving to California, finally going to therapy, starting to kind of get moving in gymnastics, and then about a year in, we had talked about antidepressants, which, yay! We like taking out mental health stigmas, because I don't get why people don't talk about it. That's a big reason why I didn't want to try it in the first place was because there's such a huge stigma around it.

Menendez: I think part of it is because people worry that if you put it out, it will come to define you. I think that people who have not had your level of success worry that it will be a real or perceived barrier to their success. So, the power of someone like you, who has achieved the level of success you have achieved while dealing, like many of us, with mental illness, that is part of chipping away at the stigma, right? Saying, "This is... You can have both. You can do both. You can be both."

Hernandez: Yeah. And because it wasn't talked about, I felt like I was doing the whole thing alone before 2016. Because like I also didn't understand what was going on. There wasn't a lot of people talking about it. It wasn't a huge conversation topic. It was an attempted conversation topic in my house, but I also knew what to say and what not to say, and it was actually my sister who was like, "You know, you should think about it. It could be really good for you."

Menendez: About going on meds?

Hernandez: Yeah. About going on... Yeah, meds. And she was like, "Just think about it. Obviously, I'm not gonna push you into anything, but you've tried a lot of things. It seems to me, and from what you're telling me, it hasn't worked. This is something you haven't tried yet." And it took a while to finally kind of bite the bullet and be like, "Okay, fine. Let me try it."

Menendez: How can you still love gymnastics after everything you went through?

Hernandez: I mean, a big kind of eureka moment for me before I came back was knowing that it's not that I hated the sport. I hated the environment. So, I figured if I changed the environment,

but then I keep the sport, there's only one way to see if that'll work. And so, that's what I did. I mean, I upped and moved across the country and really changed the environment. I mean, I was also juggling high school at the time, too, and homeschooling, so finally being done with school and postponing college for a couple years, and actually taking a second to have my brain on one thing, we did that, and the theory was right. It was just the people. I love this sport with every fiber in my being.

Some days, I hate it and I'm ready to book it back to Jersey, but everybody feels that way.

Menendez: You're part of the new HBO documentary, *Habla Now*. What do you want people to take away from the film?

Hernandez: I think what I want people to take away is the fact that there are so many of us that look different and that still share the same roots. I know for me, growing up, I think I mentioned this a little, but holding the term Afro Latina with pride, and being raised as like, "You are Puerto Rican, you are Taino Indian, and you are Black. Those are your roots. Own them. Accept them. Embrace them. Because that's you." You know, it's like you're Laurie who happens to be a gymnast, but you are Puerto Rican.

And so, being able to talk about that, whereas a really close friend of mine, family even, was told, and her skin tone is darker than me, her hair is kinkier than mine, is told that she doesn't have any Black in her. And she was like, "This doesn't make sense." And that's a subtle form, or not so subtle form, of racism that happens in the Latina and Latino community between the Black community, and it's knowing that a lot of us, most of us share a foundation. And owning that, but also recognizing that my skin tone is lighter, so I have privilege. It doesn't mean that I don't struggle, it's just I struggle in different ways, but a dark skin tone isn't what causes that.

So, there has been a lot of that. However, going back to that term and that foundation and that label of Afro Latina, it's something I own with pride and I will flaunt it. I don't care who says what. It's something I'm very proud of.

Menendez: Here's my last question, which is what have these last few years taught you about the power of sharing your own story?

Hernandez: Well, the power of sharing my own story after sharing mine and the case coming out with the results, so many people shared their story on social media, and then a documentary came out on Netflix, and then more people started to share their story. So, I know I felt a little more comfortable, not to say I didn't call Aly crying and was terrified to post that post on Instagram five minutes before I did it, but women like Aly, and like the rest of the gymnastics community, and then I have a couple actresses that have come out with stories that I just so wholly admire, and they've shared a lot of things that I've learned about myself that I didn't know was happening because they were willing to talk about it.

And I figure, "Well, if they did that for me, then maybe I can do that for someone else." And sure enough, a lot of people started coming out with stories and saying, "Well, there were a lot of familiar words and familiar feelings in your story that I recognized with mine, not realizing that that happened to me too." There was thousands of that.

But I think the biggest thing is that kind of like I mentioned earlier, I'm a big believer that everything is connected. And it's an unfortunate piece that connects all of us, however, it reminds all of us that we're not alone. And I think that was a really big piece of like, "Man, I

feel really lonely, because this situation feels so unique, like I was homeschooled, I'm a little Hispanic child. I am 16. I was on reality TV. I was doing all these crazy things." My story felt really unique, but that was something that when I shared it, I felt a lot less alone when I did, and I think that's a really important feeling. There's like a huge hole in my heart that's been filled because I have other people saying like, "No, you're not alone. This thing sucks. It sucks that we're connected by it. But at least we have each other!"

Menendez: Thank you for taking the time to do this. This was absolutely delightful.

Hernandez: Thank you so much.

Menendez: All right, bye Jersey girl.

Hernandez: Bye!

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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