



Illustrator Michelle Rial Wants You to Feel Better

The acclaimed designer took her experiences with chronic pain, an auto-immune disease, and the loss of her father, and poured them into her new hilarious and moving book, *Maybe This Will Help: How to Feel Better When Things Stay the Same*.

Alicia Menendez: Do you meditate? Have you tried Whole30? Would you consider talking to a psychic about it? These are just a few of the suggestions Michelle Rial fielded as she managed chronic pain and an autoimmune disease diagnosis. Those musings, along with thoughts on cultural imposter syndrome, and the grief of losing someone we love, are part of Michelle's latest book, *'Maybe This Will Help: How to Feel Better When Things Stay the Same.'* Told partly in prose and as only Michelle—a mega talented designer and illustrator can— through hilarious and heart-breaking charts.

Michelle Rial: Michelle, you open your book by writing "I'm the absolute first person to tell you to go to the doctor if you have any type of body pain." How did you become that person?
Chronic pain does that to you. If you have no idea that if you have an injury and you just don't do anything about it, it might just stay with you forever. I had no idea and so the thing is I went to a yoga class and I was yoga beginner, and this was people who have been doing it a long time. And I just was like, oh, this is what yoga is. And so I tried to do a headstand and the teacher lifted me into it. And then I just feel like I just blacked out. Nothing happened, I just remember thinking like, okay, that's enough. And then 24 hours later, I just couldn't move. And then after that, I just had so much work to do that I couldn't address it. I was just working with a heating pad on and I didn't have good insurance at the time because I was full time freelance. I was doing Groupons for healthcare, so I kind of had no idea what I was doing. And then it just didn't go away, the pain just didn't go way.

Menendez: And how long did it take you to actually get a diagnosis?
Rial: I got all kinds of diagnoses, I guess you would say. I got a diagnosis at a physical therapy place. They said it was just a trap strain, and looking back, I think they had me doing the wrong exercises for it. I went to a Groupon chiropractor, they said, oh, this is something with her tailbone. Somebody else would say, oh, it's a trauma, mental trauma. It's actually not even related to your body. I was just trying all these different Groupons and seeing what they would tell me. I also didn't realize I had celiac disease, I didn't realize, one doctor thought I had chronic Lyme. It's all these things, autoimmune diseases can create sensitivity and inflammation and just poking around, trying to find with minimal... I had catastrophic insurance, but eventually I would get a neck MRI. I think I have the diagnosis now. I mean, I still don't really, because you think once you have a diagnosis, you could just say, okay, I can fix it, but.

Menendez: Which I tee up all these stories because this is now the premise of your book, which is then people in the interest of trying to be helpful, try to share every remedy that has worked for them or their mom or their neighbor. And it actually has the effect of making you feel worse, it seems, a lot of the time.

Rial: Yeah. And even knowing that I do it, too.

Menendez: It's hard, we want to be helpful.

Rial: It's like... I've had so many people tell me something is life changing and it works and then I go and I feel this resentment like, oh, I just spent so much money trying that, didn't work.

Menendez: At the same time that you have dealt with all of this, your dad starts to express that he himself is in pain. And of course you're having this experience, your immediate response is you have to go see a doctor, but he resists.

Rial: He says, "I just got my physical," or something like that. And he said, my numbers are perfect, it's fine. And he's one to work through pain, he's one to work all the time. And I just said have you gotten an MRI? That was my magic thing at the moment, you need an MRI because what if it doesn't go away? What if it's something bigger?

Menendez: And it was something bigger.

Rial: Yeah. He got diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.

Menendez: It's also then that your stories in this regard intersect, which is you're doing these cross country flights, which wreck you, even if you don't have chronic pain. And then very often, even though you're there to help, you end up in pain yourself, which feels like such an emotionally fraught experience.

Rial: Yeah. It feels like I'm there to be helpful and that I'm just, my mom's bringing me snacks as she does. I imagine many people feel that way when they go home to quote unquote help their parents, they just end up being the child.

Menendez: I also love the reference to your mom bringing you fruit and hot tea, because that really is a... I'm just surprised she didn't do Vick's Vapor Rub and then you would've been all set.

Rial: Yeah. There's one chart in the book that is kind of about who gets care, the patient. Who needs care, and it's the patient and the caretaker or the caregiver. You always overlook that person, which is my mom in this case, it's a lot about her doing everything for both of us. And she's even kind of a minor character in the book. It's all about me and my dad basically, and without her, we'd be in bad shape.

Menendez: And then with your dad, his diagnosis originally comes back, they say he probably has about six months to live, he gets four years on top of that. And that entire time is spent in that back and forth that so many of us know of should we hang on to the hope of the fact that this has gone on longer than we ever thought was possible or do we manage our expectations? And in as much as Maybe This Will Help is about pain, it's about grief and the things that people suggest to us for our grief and how we manage our grief. And I wonder there, too, if any of the things that people put in front of you actually made you feel any better.

Rial: One of those phrases that I started seeing a lot, this is after he died, but, "may their memory be a blessing," something like that. "May you have nice memories with them." And I find that to be the most helpful thing to say, to me at least, because some people don't have good memories with their family. It's that thing of "may you reminisce sweetly." People are always just trying to be helpful, even if it doesn't help. That's one thing to think about. "Oh sweetie, that's not helpful, but thank you."

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Menendez: Michelle, I know you primarily as a designer and an illustrator, but the prose in this book is so beautiful. You write about this sort of shame of feeling like your family is too loud or too much and it's your family who needs to change to fit in. And then you flip the page and the next chart is so appropriately titled, 'Sometimes Trying to Fit in Will Only Hurt You Later,' which is oddly enough, a hilarious chart about tweezing your eyebrows. How did trying to fit in, how did policing your parents show up, and then how did it hurt you later?

Rial: Definitely hurt them in ways I probably don't even understand or realize. My parents immigrated from Venezuela. My mom's family is from there, my dad grew up in Venezuela, but his family was originally from the Canary Islands. They got exiled, my grandfather went to what they would call a concentration camp. They were kicked out of Spain slash Canary Islands, ended up in Venezuela, and then eventually my parents came to the United States together. So I grew up in the south and I just felt I could sense this feeling of "oh, you're this assimilated child" or "you don't look any different than we do, you don't have an accent." You're almost the authority to your parents. And so we're going to treat you differently, we're going to ask you the question, whether or not I am imagining that, but I felt this pressure that they just were not welcome and that I would also reinforce that by not wanting them to come places, by telling them not to come to the performance at school, things like that. Looking back, it's really sad and embarrassing. And it also gives me, like "okay, I don't belong to this culture because I did that." The embarrassment and the shunning and pretending not even to know Spanish in Spanish class, maybe that I don't deserve to partake now.

Menendez: I think when it comes to Latinas, most of us are raised and acculturated to care for others before we care for ourselves. The opposite of put your oxygen mask on first, before you care for others. And I wonder what your own experience has taught you about the limits or the dangers of that approach to pain and to health.

Rial: I always put strangers first. I don't feel I look Latina. As this child, feeling like people, like I'm passing or just, they don't see this. They're willing to tell you things that they think about Latinos.

Menendez: Writ large, uh-huh (affirmative).

Rial: Right. It's almost like you're in on the conversation when they don't know that you're listening. And so you get this feeling of, oh, I need to tone myself down in certain ways or to please these people. I'm people pleasing by changing to fit in. That's a way of putting others first, you're people pleasing by changing who you are to appease the people who don't like you.

Menendez: You're whitewashing yourself.

Rial: Yeah. I was hella whitewashing myself, pretending not to know Spanish, but the teacher was friends with my mom. She's like, why is your daughter pretending? Why is she saying it like "free-hoe-lays?" And I don't know if that comes from having a difficult parent, my dad had a very explosive personality. Fearing that people don't accept your culture or both.

Menendez: My answer to everything these days is all of the above. So yes.

Rial: Yeah, totally.

Menendez: How did all of this become part of your work?

Rial: Initially, I started doing these charts 10 years ago and I was a graphic designer at a magazine, but I just, to be honest, I just wasn't good at it. But I always really wanted to do my own content, so I kind of just started pitching my own things and they were very light

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and universally relatable, just kind of humor category. Then I actually, I had been wanting to do something around the chronic pain stuff. I had had a notebook. I actually wrote in it, "maybe this will help, maybe this..." I was just writing maybe, because that was my thing that I felt would be the title of this future book that may or may not happen. And I would make little charts about the experience. I had left my job actually making silly, funny charts - that was at BuzzFeed - because I had wanted to focus on healing. That's a thing you'll hear people with chronic illnesses or chronic pain say, they'll try to quit a thing so they can focus on it because they kind of feel like maybe if I rest, maybe if I try this starting over thing, maybe I can manage it a little better. If I'm not aggravating it every single day, it won't create this vicious cycle. I did that thing, I started over. I quit my job and I got an injection the day I left my job because I was almost like, I got to get this going, we're being efficient here. I got this injection and it made everything way worse. So I could barely move my arm. So I did this kind of ugly, shaky, rough style because my arm was barely working and I started off doing these chronic pain related charts and it felt so depressing so I started doing funnier ones. I started doing basic just life ones and that's how I came into doing my first book. Then that book did really well, I had the opportunity to do a second book, so I went back to this idea of doing the chronic pain related book, even though it seems very niche. And then it happened to be while I was at home with my dad, those were the things that were creeping into my mind. And then with COVID, it felt like I just did this deep dive internally in a very vulnerable way that I almost felt nobody would ever read it. I was just writing all the things I would probably never say aloud because it's like, no one was watching.

Menendez: Were you an artsy kid? Did you come into it from the art or from the data piece of it?

Rial: I was not really an art kid, I was more of a math kid. My dad wanted me to be a math kid and I think I was good at it. And he showed me all these patterns and things and so that was a little bit of a tribute. Then in college, my roommate was an advertising major and I thought that was fun. And I was doing well in math and then I thought these creative concepts are really interesting to me so I leaned into that a little bit and that's where I got into more graphic design and have always just really loved charts and data and things like that, but yeah. My dad would give me almost visual riddles as a child. I think that's a lot of it.

Menendez: When you look back, do you... I mean, do you blame that injury on that yoga instructor? Or do you feel that the repetitive nature of your work and the desk nature of your work primed you to have something like this?

Rial: I spent a lot of time thinking about that. I spent a lot of time trying not to be resentful because that is an unhelpful emotion that does create more body pain for me. Yeah, I do have a lot of resentment for both things, honestly. And in the first few years I would think about those things and I put it in a book and I feel weird about that. Something that chronic pain people will often bring up that just writing everything down, all your kind of traumas and doing therapy will help, it's almost like releasing some of that energy that you have tied up. And I think writing about it did help me.

Menendez: Michelle, anything else before we go?

Rial: You never want to say this bad thing is positive. "Oh this chronic pain is positive because I made it into art." That's not true. It's not positive, but it is true that I feel good about this thing that I've made out of it as well as with my first book. I think a lot of it came about

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because of the pressure to assimilate. Am I overthinking this? It's overthinking every single thing. It's like my parent didn't do this thing that people do here, so what am I supposed to do? That pressure to assimilate plus anxiety or whatever anxiety creates this overthinking person, this person who's always looking for kind of the etiquette of things there are no etiquette for. It is almost like I took all these very personal things about myself that many people probably don't experience this Venn diagram of things, which is chronic pain or chronic illness or something that won't go away plus grieving someone in your family who was complicated and a little bit narcissist maybe. And how that affects you and having this cultural imposter syndrome or tension or it's... Yeah, it's this very personal book that I kind of hope it will find its people. That pressure was not necessarily a good thing, but it led to this art that I do feel proud of and creating art out of struggle can be very beautiful and it can help a lot of people. I've gotten a lot of private messages, people message me very emotionally privately about the second book, which feels so important.

Menendez: I loved it. I was captivated by it and I think it is also a perfect gift for when you don't know how to be there or what to say. Michelle, thank you so much for doing this.

Rial: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode, Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. We love hearing from you, it makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMS on Instagram, tweet us at [@latinatolatina](https://twitter.com/latinatolatina). Check out our merchandise latinatotlatina.com/shop and remember please to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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