



Why Yvonne Castañeda Wants Latinas to Receive Culturally Competent Mental Health Care

How much of our relationship to food begins with our parents' relationships to food? And how much of that is informed by their experiences of uncertainty and scarcity? Yvonne, a mental health clinician, explores the roots of our relationship to food, the connections between mental health and eating disorders, and offers a framework for talking about food, eating and well-being.

Alicia Menendez: There are many books on eating disorders and mental health, but few informed by both the immigrant experience and practicum. It's why when I learned about Yvonne Castañeda's memoir, *Pork Belly Tacos With a Side of Anxiety: My Journey Through Depression, Bulimia, and Addiction*, I knew I had to share Yvonne's story here. Yvonne is a clinical social worker who practices in our communities, and so this conversation is both about Yvonne's personal journey and her expertise in how we unpack layered traumas and break vicious cycles.

Hi, Yvonne.

Yvonne Castañeda: How are you?

Menendez: I am really looking forward to this conversation, so thank you for being here.

Castañeda: Oh my God, thank you for having me. I'm honored.

Menendez: I want to start in a place that I don't normally start, but I think it is important given what we're going to be talking about today, and given that you are the one who actually has the training and the expertise in therapy and psychoanalysis, which is how do we have a conversation about eating disorders in a way that is not triggering, re-traumatizing, does not glamorize eating disorders? Can you give me some parameters for how we have this conversation in a way that will benefit our audience as women, as daughters, as mothers?

Castañeda: I think that is such an important question and I appreciate that you asked it. Just kind of staying away from questions then or discussion that has to do with the ins and outs of the actual eating disorder. Because the way I approach the eating disorder is through the lens of mental health, whether it's the eating disorder or alcohol addiction or exercise addiction, I'm not so focused on what that looked like. I'm focused on those were actually just symptoms of something much deeper that had to do with mental health.

Menendez: Absolutely, and I want to dig into how it is that you arrived at that understanding. You write so beautifully, Yvonne, about the ways in which food very early on became a reward for you. How did that relationship develop?

Castañeda: It's a relationship that started long before I was ever born, the relationship with food that my parents had. My parents were both extremely poor in their native countries of Cuba and Mexico, and I think that when they arrived in the United States and started to build a life for themselves with no education or very little education, food for them, like a stocked fridge and a stocked pantry was the very definition of, "We made it. We are successful." For us, especially a mom who suffered hunger, my mom was never going to say to me, "No," if I asked for a donut at 10:00 PM. Mami would never do that. Mami would say, "Claro que si, mija, ándale." "Here, have the donut. Do you want a glass of milk and do you want another one?" It wasn't necessarily reward so much as it was just a thing that was never denied. It was never denied us in any way.

Later on, I don't know that reward is the right word. I would say it was just the thing that I turned to when I was feeling a certain kind of way. If I was feeling nervous, pressured, it was food.

Menendez: I'm thinking specifically about the early experience you had as a pretty gifted child pianist and the ways in which then you would do sort of those McDonald's runs at the end of a lesson. You have what is for our listeners, just such a very shared and common relationship to perfectionism and perfectionism as a way of not just calming your own nerves or managing your own anxieties, but as a way of catering to your mom's anxieties, right? That if you are perfect and you are in control, then it is one thing you can check off her to-do list even as a child.

Castañeda: 100%. Yes, I think my mom, again, I wrote in the book, she was so excited. I think my family was just really excited that they had such a talented daughter who had this gift for piano that seemingly came out of nowhere. Where did she get that from? Certainly these trips to McDonald's, which for us, Alicia was a luxury. Like, ooh, you were bougie if you were going to McDonald's, watch. If you were getting a Happy Meal, wow. Whether it was McDonald's or stopping at 7-Eleven and letting me get a Slurpee and a Snicker bar and a bag of Doritos, whatever it was. There was that.

Ten definitely, again, it was something I noticed as a kid is when I do these things, my mom is happy. She's not worried. I don't know that I did that super consciously. As kids, we just do the things that we do because we just want things to feel safe and to feel okay. I just noticed how much joy it brought my family, how much joy it brought my parents whenever I played the piano. Sometimes my father would get emotional. He'd be sitting on the couch listening to me practice, and then I'd look over and I would just see tears. He wasn't bawling, but I would see he would get very emotional. I think I just kind of took that on as it's my responsibility in a big way to make sure that these two people are okay.

Menendez: You then layer adolescence, which is already a pressure cooker of a time onto those foundational dynamics and your relationship to everything changes, your relationship to your family, your relationship to food, your relationship to your extracurricular activities. What was that experience of adolescence that reshapes your relationship to your body?

Castañeda: I think what was really hard about that is that growing up in elementary school, I was never bullied. No one ever bullied me. We were good kids. We were nice to each other. I had friends. It didn't register to me again that I was "gordita," that I was overweight, but it wasn't on my radar necessarily. Then when I hit junior high and that adolescence phase, it was so heightened. It was so over the top, this

preoccupation and this awareness of my body, and of course having Cuban relatives consistently comment, mira, on everything from my eyebrows to my toenails. Legit, everything. Coño! I couldn't do anything.

Menendez: My most vivid memory of being at my Cuban grandmother's funeral is actually just the parade of mourners where every person felt the need to either tell me that I had gained or lost weight depending on when they had seen me last.

Castañeda: Oh, so you know.

Menendez: No, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Castañeda: "You've gained weight."

Menendez: Depends when they saw you.

Castañeda: Something, something. They have a reference point and then they judge your appearance based on that reference point. I'm like, "Oh, I remember you this way and now you're this, and I have to say something."

Menendez: It's actually your mom who sort of incepts this idea of bingeing and purging into your mind. I'm curious then when you later share that that is what you are doing, if there's any sense of responsibility on your mom's part for having one, suggested that throwing up was a way of finding relief.

Castañeda: Not in that moment. I think when I shared it with her, I could literally see the wheels in her head spinning, trying to wrap her head around that. "I don't understand why you're purging the food that we worked so hard for." I think if she has on some level felt the guilt of that and responsibility of that, she has not said that to me. Truthfully, Alicia, I don't need that because I know. You know what I mean? I know mommy meant well. I didn't tell her with the intention of saying, "It's your fault. This is your fault." I just needed to tell her, she's my mom. I just needed to tell her what was going on and hopefully she would help me fix it.

Menendez: I have to say, when you go to your parents and you tell them what is going on with you, you actually are met with what we would want, which is love and an embrace. It actually is sort of a little bit later when you're going to go see some more family members that the shame of the whole thing hits because your mom says, "Well, don't tell them-"

Castañeda: Oh, yeah, nobody, no, I couldn't.

Menendez: "What's going on."

Castañeda: Nobody knew. The only people who knew were my mom and my dad. There was one instant where one of my aunts came over, she made a comment about my weight. She said something about my appearance and my dad, I have never seen my dad flip, and my dad flipped and he was like, "I need you to get out of my house and I need you to never return until you learn to walk in the house and not make a comment about her appearance."

Menendez: Were you able to find culturally competent care?

Castañeda: Oh, no. No. Oh, that's so sweet. That would've been so nice. No, I mean, no, this was, wow. This is the 80s. I'm going to be 52, so this was a long time ago.

The young man that I met in my karate class with whom I was very close, he was the person who was like, "No, we've got to get you some help." This was initially when I first started bingeing and purging, and he took me to a therapist. He paid for it himself, a private pay therapist, and she was lovely. She was a nice abuelita. She was a grandmother and white and wonderful, and just didn't understand anything about my culture, didn't understand *familismo*, didn't understand the idea of "we don't share outside of our family." Also I can't necessarily put that on her. It was also, I wasn't... I didn't want to be bad. I just wanted to be skinny. I didn't care. I was willing to do whatever it took to be thin.

Menendez: What was the experience of learning that eating disorders, disordered eating is fundamentally tied to mental health, and did that make it easier to talk about the eating disorder or did it actually make it in the moment harder to talk about it?

Castañeda: It was never easy for me to talk about it because for a long time I denied it. I deluded myself into thinking that I was okay by adopting all these other coping mechanisms, like exercise. I was exercising a great deal, but I had this little negotiation going on, "If I eat this, then I've got to do this over here with exercise," and "If this happens in the exercise space, then this is what it means for me with food." I still had an eating disorder, I just didn't admit it and I didn't fully understand it, and neither had I connected that the eating disorder, alcohol abuse, cigarettes, exercise addiction, that these were all really just maladaptive coping mechanisms that I was utilizing to manage anxiety. It was as I got older and I went through a period of time where I just really intentionally decided to go inward and really explore a lot of things and finding that at the heart of everything was fear. It was just really fear.

Menendez: My original question as I was preparing for this interview with you, Yvonne, was how we learn to talk in our own homes about eating disorders, but listening to you talk, it strikes me that the question is bigger. It's how do we learn how to talk inside our own homes about anxiety, about depression, about things that manifest as maladaptive coping mechanisms? What are the tools that we need to have as parents, as tías, as friends, for how to begin these conversations?

Castañeda: The first thing that we need is a willingness to know ourselves better. That's it. Without that, forget it. I think there needs to be some kind of recognition that there's something going on that maybe we need to address for ourselves. We need therapists, we need individuals to help us first identify, let's just start with identifying how we're feeling. I was shocked at how many people can't identify their emotions, literally don't know how to identify their emotions. Like, "I don't know what I'm feeling." I couldn't articulate anything with my family. I couldn't tell them that I was sad, that I was scared because I didn't know. I was fighting it tooth and nail. I was digging my heels into the ground. I didn't want to believe that I wasn't okay.

That was a big theme of the book is believing that I was a *guerrera*—a warrior—that is so strong. Me growing up, that was celebrated. I think a big piece of it, honestly, is for us as individuals, whether you're a tía, abuelita, a mom, a dad is to pause. Are you brave enough to just sit still and identify what you're feeling? Then from there, accept it, be okay with it, and then you can talk about it.

Menendez: I'm thinking as a mother of two daughters, about the fact that they're little. They're three and they're six, and people still comment on their appearance all the time, and I try to find ways that are gracious to redirect family members away from talking about the way that they look. How do you set those ground rules before you get to the point where your like your dad, you flip out and toss someone out of your house?

Castañeda: Great question. I am not necessarily as gracious. However, what I do, Alicia, is if somebody makes a comment, whether this is in my family or outside of my family system, and there's an opportunity for me to offer, I always say, "Can I offer you something?" Because then what it implies there is that they're receiving it. They're choosing to receive what I'm going to say. I say, "Can I offer you something?"

They say, "Sure."

I said, "Look, I know that maybe you came from this background in which you say these things and you don't necessarily mean harm, and this is how it could be interpreted by this child." I used my own experience growing up. These things were said to me, and the way that I interpreted that is that my worth is wrapped up in my appearance and/or my achievements. If you're constantly commenting on a child's appearance, for good or for bad, "Oh, you look very pretty today," I catch myself all the time. Why do you need to comment on someone's appearance? That's how I offer it to them. I said, "I just want you to think about that."

Menendez: What has it required of you to disentangle these notions of attaching your worth to your looks and to your achievements, and how constant is that work? I think sometimes we talk about it as though it's not a journey as though it's like you do some therapy, you wrap it up in a bow, and then you're just, you are done.

Castañeda: No. No. Growth, the evolution of your spirit, of your soul is a journey. It is never ending and I would hate for it to end. Honestly, Alicia, it has taken time. If you were to ask me what it took, it took time and it took patience, and it took trust. It's just having faith.

Today, whenever I feel offended, hurt, any kind of emotion that causes distress, I lean into that as, oh, okay, I have room to grow. There's something for me here, and let me just explore that. Now, in terms of separating myself from achievements and appearance, again, that is a journey that started when I was 35 years old that I have never stopped. I'm not saying that I'm perfect. Of course not. I'm human like anybody else. My ego is tempted and teased by all kinds of things. I'm very... Again, I check in with myself. Whenever an opportunity comes up, I check in with myself and I just assess internally what is happening, and if it feels good, it feels like something that is true for me, then I go with it. If it's tied to something else, like wanting to get attention, wanting... Then I turn it down. As difficult as that is, I turn it down. I'm like, that is not the intention. That is not what I want to move forward with. This is not about me. I didn't write the book for my comfort and entertainment. I wrote the book because I wanted to love and serve others.

Menendez: Which brings me perfectly to my next question, which is, this is a hard book to write. I could tell on the reading side of it how this is a story where you were excavating years and years of trauma. What emotional supports did you build in for yourself as you were doing that excavation?

Castañeda: Alicia, I would love to tell you that I had a lot of emotional support, and I would be lying. I think I relied heavy on God. I relied heavily on prayer, on guidance on... There were many moments where I was writing that I can't tell you how many times during the book, I was like, "Ay ya coño! I just want to let this go. I don't want to write this anymore. I'm done." I would consistently get pulled back. I think that it kind of ties into something I just said, God is intentional in all of His ways. There's no way that I have had all of these experiences and also maybe have a gift for writing, for communicating. What was the purpose of all that? I think my emotional support was very much so rooted in just connecting and staying connected to God. That was meditation, that was spending time alone, that was walking. I just kept, again, I kept going back to, "Why am I writing this book? Why am I writing it?" I kept reminding myself, "It's something bigger than me. I don't want to write it just for me. I want to put something out there in the world to help other people."

Menendez: Yvonne, thank you so much for doing this.

Castañeda: It is my pleasure. Thank you so much, Alicia.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Trent Lightburn mixed this episode.

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