

75. Decolonize Your Brain Part 2 How to Heal Internalized Racial Trauma

SPEAKERS

Vanessa

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to coaching for Latina leaders, the only podcast dedicated to the advancement of Latinas at every level of life with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Latina with over 20 years of leadership experience, Harvard grad physician and mother of two.

Vanessa 00:20

Hello, friends, welcome back to the podcast. So in part one of the series called decolonize your brain, we reviewed the history of colonization in the colonizer mentality. And I purposefully started there because I wanted to get us all on the same page, make sure we're all speaking the same language. For some of you that might felt very, very remedial. And for others, it might have been a great refresher. I know for me, a lot of these terms are common because I've learned about them before. But it wasn't something that it was in my general vernacular. And I've, you know, a lot of these things I've learned so many years ago, that was really helpful for me to refresh. So again, if you have not listened to that episode, and you are interested in having a refresher and getting yourself sort of back on, you know, level grounded, we're doing this part two, I recommend you go back and listen to that episode.

Vanessa 01:06

Okay, so in this episode, I want to start to give you tools to decolonize your brain and do your own internal racial healing. Because again, when we start believing the lies of the oppressor, believing that we are inferior, or believing that we are superior if we are in a white body, we are doing the work of the oppressive system of the colonizer system. And again, anti-apartheid activist, Bantu, Steven big who said it best, the most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. So as you start liberating yourself from these thoughts from these internalized feelings of inferiority, you are doing the work of liberating your entire gender, and your family, and not passing on that gender, racial racialized trauma to your children and your children's children.

Vanessa 01:58

Okay, so let's get started. I want to start by giving you a framework to start thinking about how you know whether or not you have internalized racism. So, you know, I'm going to give you some thought-provoking prompts to help you understand if you've internalized racism for yourself. And I will present this by saying that unless you've done this work, of identifying and healing racial wounds, odds are you likely have internalized racism. Now, you know, again, your race doesn't matter, because just like the patriarchy has no gender internalized racism, and colonial thinking has no race. And as I'm giving you these prompts, you might start to identify with what I'm sharing. And you might start feeling

things like shame, guilt, shock, those types of things are normal when they come up. So expect that to come up. And when they do, give yourself grace, be kind to yourself.

Vanessa 02:52

And remember, the shame you feel is not yours, it doesn't belong to you, what has happened, and what is happening now is shameful, but it is not your fault. And when we attach shame, to our experiences, it makes it so much harder for us to heal. Because shame is kind of like an electric fence, and it blocks in our thoughts and our feelings, and it keeps them behind this electric fence. And the only way to turn off that electricity and unlock that fence and do our own healing is to say these things out loud is to process it's to do the work. So know that uncomfortable feelings are going to come up for you in this episode. And when you start to feel shame, I want you to stand tall and be proud of yourself for having the courage to do this uncomfortable work.

Vanessa 03:36

I felt so much shame when I started doing this work for myself. There was so much stupid shit that was coming up for me. Like one of the things that came up for me was I couldn't believe that I hadn't processed this earlier, or I couldn't believe that I was still dealing with this. I couldn't believe how many ways it had showed up in my life. There are so many other BS stories that my brain made up for me as I was doing this work to offer me the feeling of shame to keep me locked up to keep me playing small. Again, that system of oppression getting in the way of your healing and your liberation. So what I recommend, and this is what I did, I literally sat up nice and tall at my desk, and I would put up my hands really big as a way to make myself really big. And I would say out loud. I'm proud of myself for doing this work. This is my journey, and I honor it. So I want to offer you that thought if it's helpful for you as you're doing this work. Again, be proud of yourself for doing this work and honor the journey that you're on. No journey is the wrong journey. It's just your journey and it's a beautiful one. And again, when your brain is able to see that you are witnessing what's coming up for you and choosing not to feel shame. Shame gets weaker and weaker and it doesn't develop because shame only develops when something's unwitnessed and you're able to like hide and be afraid and be scared. But when you witness it for yourself and you say I'm proud of myself for doing this work. This is my journey and I honor it, all of a sudden shame gets smaller.

Vanessa 05:02

Okay? So let me list off for you a few ways that I want you to start thinking about whether or not you've internalized racism. Okay? And again, unless you've done this work for yourself already in a really deep and healing way, it's likely that you've internalized racism. Okay, so what are some signs that you've internalized colonialism? Or internalized racism? So one sign is, you know, you have this learned disempowerment due to systemic racism that leads you to underperform academically, professionally or financially, where you underestimate your own potential, your own intelligence, your own ability and your own power, where you question yourself or you're afraid to speak up in a meeting, because maybe, maybe what you have to say in the way you have to say it won't be valued as much as somebody else in the room that might not be a person of color. Conversely, as a sign of seeking mainstream approval and acceptance, you may overcompensate socially or rationally, academically, professionally, and politically. So this may be seen as overachieving. So you know, you might be the type of overachiever where you're extremely grateful to be given a chance at your work at your

organization, your community, and you want to prove to everybody and to yourself, that you deserve to be there, that you're terrified of letting anyone down.

Vanessa 06:23

Now, a lot of people have internalized the sense of not being good enough and are afraid to let people down. But when I talk about this, in the sense of internalized colonialism, it's when this is because of your race, that this is the problem. Now I am ambitious by nature, I was born an ambitious human being and I'm grateful to God for the ambition that he blessed me with. And I also know that I internalized hyper achieving mentality because I never thought I was good enough, you know because I had my own internalized colonialism to deal with. And what I thought was gonna set me aside or finally prove that I was as good as the white person by continuing to achieve. So yes, I excelled super quickly, but I also burned out and I was also doing it in a way that wasn't intentional or aligned with who I am. Okay, so another way that this might happen is you sacrifice your own heritage or identity or your point of view, and your self-expression in order to conform and assimilate. All right here that was all part of number one, which is a sign of learned disempowerment.

Vanessa 07:24

Okay, number two, you worry about fulfilling a stereotype. So you're conscious of kind of the stereotypical behaviors associated with your race or your identities and you try to avoid them at all costs. For example, if you are a black woman, you might overcompensate sort of that angry black woman stereotype by being extra soft, polite or people-pleasing. If you're an Asian woman, you may evade the Lotus Balsam stereotype by being more assertive, more extroverted, and individualist. Number three, you suppress aspects of your rationalization. You're self-conscious about the way you might appear to ethnic. So for me, for example, I had I have really, really beautiful wavy hair, but I was afraid that it was too ethnic. And you know, the people I wanted to be like, who I thought were the good people had straight yellow hair. And so I would straighten my hair every day, and I would lighten it every day. And you guys have all seen examples of this out there. So this isn't, you know, something new or unique, but it's something that really affected me. You might also dislike your accent and attempt to code switch and train your speech to be more you know, more in tune to the colonizers or white in hopes of sounding more intelligent and civilized.

Vanessa 08:33

Now, this is not the same thing as tactfully code-switching, which a lot of people that have done this work do all the time, you tactfully code-switch to avoid racial hostility or to attract better services or better support as a way to maintain psychological safety. Those two things are not the same. When you're doing it intentionally. It's different than when you do it out of psychological unsafety you're doing an unintentionally because you've internalized this racialization Okay, internalized oppression requires a belief that your racialization makes you less professional, less approachable, and less likable. So you know, tactile assimilation comes instead from a place of self-love and self-acceptance. But knowing that you need to play the sort of game to make life easier in this white supremacist capitalist, you know, sis hetero, patriarchy, society that we live in.

Vanessa 09:26

Okay, number four, you're uncomfortable talking about race and racism. You think that talking about race and racism is making a lot of fuss about nothing and you're worried about coming off as a troublemaker by raising political issues, you'll think you're going to ruin everybody's fun by bringing up negative topics. And you know, I had internalized the idea of a good minority is somebody that goes with the flow is calm. It's so grateful for the gifts of like, you know, the American dream, as opposed to a bad minority, which is someone who stands up to the oppression someone that protests It's like this idea of, you know, Martin Luther King versus Malcolm X, the white people's support, they celebrate Martin Luther King for being seen as this, like peaceful protester. And they chastise Malcolm X because he was not visualized like that in history.

Vanessa 10:18

Alright, number five, you're embarrassed by your culture and your community, for example, you might judge others for being too ethnic and daily activities and social interactions on social media, you think that your culture is less refined, it's less elegant, less tasteful than white European culture, you might think that your own racial or ethnic groups are less cultured or less sophisticated or less than beautiful. You know, there's this idea that you know, the most beautiful skin is the lightest skin, the most beautiful hair, the straightest hair. And so a lot of people have made a ton of money from skin whitening cosmetics, for non-white women, which actually just poisoned the body, they're made out of a ton of mercury and other things that cause damage to our bodies, to our skins to our kidneys. And they're huge in a lot of countries. And not just you know, America, but also African countries, Asian countries. This is huge because we've all internalized this sort of colonizer mentality that makes us feel inferior.

Vanessa 11:20

Okay, the last one here, I want to mention is displaying intolerance and discrimination toward other oppressed and marginalized groups. So you know, maybe you've heard of the term colorism, where you might start discriminating against people that are darker skinned than you. Or if you are a minority that's not black, you might start discriminating against other groups that are black, because you know, you've internalized this way of thinking that, yeah, maybe you know, we're not as good as the white people, but at least we're not black. And that, again, is something that's really hard for me to say out loud, but it's part of the healing process.

Vanessa 11:58

Okay, so up until this point, I've been sharing examples of internalized racism that affects people of color, also known as sort of internalized oppression or internalized inferiority. And, you know, psychologist, D watts, Jones, says so nicely how, you know, just like the patriarchy has no gender, racism has no race. And white people have white bodies, white body, people will also experience this internalized racism, though, they will experience it differently, not like internalized inferiority, but instead internalized racial superiority. And you know, that sort of internalized racial superiority, it's equally grounded in the assumption that whiteness is best, that it's more intelligent, that it's more beautiful, that it's purer, that it's more virtuous. And here's the thing that I want to get across to everybody listening. And if you are of a white body, this is incredibly important, because the idea, you know that racism equals hatred is not at all the case here.

Vanessa 13:06

When you internalized racial superiority, you're not necessarily being hateful, you don't even sometimes realize that this is happening. And I know I have a lot of beautiful friends out there that are really well-meaning, especially with older generations that have a really tough time with this word racist or racism or internalized racism. It's sort of a non-starter for them, because they're incredibly kind and loving people and helpful and quote, unquote, they don't see color, they don't see race. And what I want to say here, again, is that this type of internalized racism for white bodies is so subtle, it's often covert. And it's really taken for granted because it's not hatred by any means. It is just a feeling of superiority that is so subconscious.

Vanessa 13:55

So I'm going to share with you some ways that that can show up. So for example, here are some ways that racial superiority can show up. Let's say you're walking straight down the sidewalk, and there's a person of color coming your way, instead of you moving out of the way you keep walking straight, and you force that other person to walk out of the way. Another example is you are in a meeting or you're with a group of friends, you voice your opinion at a meeting you interrupt colleagues of color speak over them, or you might even appropriate their ideas, you might say their ideas louder or you might even not even realize that now you're making their ideas, your ideas. You might feel like you would be much more interested in learning about racism and anti-racism. If someone would just explain it to you. They will just make it really quick for you or simple for you. If your black friends would just tell you all about it. Just teach yourself about it without making you feel ignorant without making you feel sad, angry, guilty, or ashamed.

Vanessa 14:53

And you might separate good people of color from bad people of color, specifically You might believe that good minorities are polite, respectful, grateful, they assimilate into the American way, and they stay in their own lane. And they never bring up things like racism. Well, bad minorities join protests, and they raise their fists up. They openly challenge injustice, like Colin Kaepernick, for example. Okay, so now I'm going to shift and I'm going to share with you a process or framework to help you start your own journey of healing your own internalized colonialization, or internalized racism, and decolonize your brain.

Vanessa 15:39

Now, some of this comes from Dr. Susan Lipski, who is an author and director of the Black Cultural Center, as well as other incredible scholars out there. So the first one here is to learn as much about internalized colonialism and racism as possible. So the reason why I even started with this podcast and did this series and started part one with you know, the history of colonization is because it how important it is, to destabilize those myths that, you know, Europe, Europe was this big powerhouse, and, you know, destabilize the myths that they got there by themselves or destabilize the myth, especially one that drives sort of the American culture, which pulls yourself up by the bootstraps, that individualistic culture, that's fairy you know, colonial thinking. And it was so important for me to start there. Because part one of doing your healing is learning as much as you can about colonization, about, you know, how colonization has affected our brains, how the colonizer mentality has affected our brains, and our own internalized racism, learn as much as you can.

Vanessa 16:54

So I want to just give you a few books for you if you're interested in continuing to do this work. First of all, you can just go to Google and start doing your own research on Google. But I also recommend how to be an anti-racist by Dr. Abram Kennedy. That was one book, a huge book that was recommended. You know,, in 2020, when America had its own huge racial awakening when George Floyd was murdered. Another great book that I love so much is called the some of us, as you m of us, us. And that was written by Heather McGee, McG H, E. And she's a wonderful black woman scholar in the space. And I love the book because it talks a lot about how racism has affected everybody in society, not just people of color, but also white bodies, and how when we do this work, to start healing a lot of this racial racism and start doing the work of true equity, how we struggle to lift up, everybody, all communities get lifted up. Again, that book is called the some of us and if you're someone that really likes data, like me, I'm a huge analytical brain. You will love a lot of the research that she shares, it's really compelling. And then lastly, I want to share the book called Raw white fragility. Another really popular book out there by Robyn D'Angelo, white fragility. So those three books I think, are paramount to start your journey in learning as much as you can about internalized colonialism and internalized racism.

Vanessa 18:25

Okay, step two, after you learn, start to think about how internalized colonialism and racism have impacted your identity and your life. Just start thinking about, you know, the decisions you've made the way you've felt, how you've shown up in groups, how you've shown up in groups of people of color, versus groups of primarily white people. Alright, number three, seek counseling and healing on a lot of the memories that you've had of internalized racism, incidents where you've been harmed by you know, that trauma of other people of color, or by white bodies, incidents where maybe your own internalized racism has harmed other people of color. You can do this with a trusted friend, a therapist, or a coach. And remember, as you were on this journey, you really want to give yourself grace, because what's going to come up for you is a lot of shame, as I was on this journey, I started thinking about how my own internalized racism, how it really harmed other people of color that brought up so much shame in me as someone that cares so much about my community and wanting to lift up my community. And you know, like care so much about bringing up like the next generation of physicians of color specifically, when I started doing this work and realizing how I was actually harming people with my own community that brought up a lot of shame and I had to do a lot of healing around that.

Vanessa 19:50

So again, give yourself a ton of grace and the way out of shame. The way that this gets easier is by saying it out loud by witnessing it and by remembering that the shame isn't yours, it was never yours, to begin with. And remember that it was not your fault. Okay, so I want to give you a few questions or a few prompts to get you started on a lot of these, a lot of this work on a sort of, you know, going back and thinking about incidences when you were harmed or when you may have harmed others. So I'm going to ask you a few of these questions. So I want you to feel free to pause this and do these questions as you're going along or come back to this episode when you have time. Alright, so here's a few questions that I want you to ask yourself. Number one, what has been good about being a person of color? So I want you to insert your own ethnicity there. What has been good about being a Latina? What has been good about being, you know, a black female? What has been good about being? South Asian or Indian?

Vanessa 20:49

Okay, so what makes me proud of being an intern in surgery? So I'm just gonna say Latina because that's what I am. But I want you guys to insert your own ethnicity here your own race? What are Latina people really like? What has been difficult about being Latina? What do I want other Latinas to know about me? How have I been hurt by my own people? When do I remember standing up against the mistreatment of one Latina by another? When do I remember being strongly supported by another Latina? When do I remember that another Latina person really stood up for me? When do I remember acting on a feeling of internalized oppression? Or inferiority or racism? When do I remember resisting and refusing to act on this bias or these bases?

Vanessa 21:44

All right, I want you guys to answer these questions for yourself, journal on them, and come back to them if it's helpful. And here's the last one for you. So those were, the first one again is to learn as much as you can. Number two, start thinking about how internalized colonialism and internalized racism has impacted your identity and your life. Number three, seek counseling and you start to do sort of your own work. I gave you those prompts. And here's number four. Number four is to commit yourself to take bold steps towards overcoming these habits of internalized colonialism and racism. And of course, that's the last step because it's the hardest step first, you got to do all the work. And then you can do number four.

Vanessa 22:25

And you know, something that I read in the book, How to be an anti-racist by Dr. Abram Kennedy, that has really, really impacted me as so if you don't know who that is. He's a Ph.D. in anti-racist studies. He's this incredibly smart black man who's married to a black woman who's a physician, I think she's a pediatrician. And he jokes and calls her the real doctor candy, which I think is hilarious. But what he says is this, being anti-racist, or practicing anti-racism is not something that you do once. It's not like you do this work and all of a sudden, you're done. It's a decision that you have to make everyday moment to moment over and over again. Every second, he does a black Ph.D. in anti-racist studies every day, he needs to make the choice to choose to be anti-racist, he needs to choose, you know, he needs to be mindful and intentional with his thoughts of his actions of what he's doing every day and choose to be anti-racist. So this isn't something that's super easy to do. And the journey is a lifelong journey.

Vanessa 23:29

You know, my growth is a lifelong growth that I'm choosing to embark on because this really matters to me. Equity matters to me. So, again, be kind to yourself, and give yourself a ton of grace, I should be doing this work and remembering that the next step is choosing to be an anti-racist choosing to you know, liberate yourself, liberate your community, liberate your mind, from this colonizer mentality by choosing acts of anti-racist acts every day. Okay, friends, as I wrap up this episode, I am sitting here again, with so much gratitude. I'm grateful to all of you for being willing to start this process by listening to this entire episode. If you also listen to part one, I'm really grateful for your courage, for your curiosity, to you know, go through your own journey.

Vanessa 24:16

I'm grateful for my curiosity and my courage. It was, you know, it's a really tough thing to work through working through the shame and these feelings wasn't easy, but I am so grateful that I did the work for myself. And lastly, I want to share something with you that you might start to experience that may come up for you as you do this work. You know, as you start to do this work and you start to decolonize your brain and shatter oppressive beliefs, you may notice that you're holding your head up a little higher. First, you're gonna notice a lot of discomfort in your body. You're gonna be really uncomfortable, you're gonna feel all the feelings of shame, and you're gonna be shocked that this stuff has impacted so much of your life and so much of what you've done. And you know, the next step after that is you might notice yourself walking around with your head held up a little higher, you might notice that you're more confident. And these new ways of being might make other people uncomfortable. Because they haven't seen you that way before. They're not used to that. But they might also not be used to a female person of color or you know, a female of color walking around with that level of confidence. And when that happens, you may fear that you are now disrupting a peaceful dynamic. And if you have tendencies to people, please already, like I have people-pleasing tendencies. For example, if you have tendencies to people, please already, you might be afraid of disrupting that dynamic. And you might want to shrink yourself, you might want to shrink yourself because you want to create that level of peace that you once thought existed. But this is what I want to remind you that the dynamic that existed was built upon a false sense of peace.

Vanessa 25:57

That dynamic existed to oppress people of color, to oppress women of color, for the purpose of centering and elevating the colonizers. And, you know, when this happens, when you feel that discomfort, you're going to have a choice, you can revert back to old ways of being, you can revert back and play small. Or you can hold your head up high, and not do the work of the oppressor. And remember, everyone is on a journey, including your white friends, family, and colleagues. And you know, when you start holding your head up high, you might make them feel uncomfortable, too. And I want to remind you that when you shrink to avoid making other people uncomfortable when you are out of integrity with yourself, and who are you becoming who you're becoming, but you're also hindering the growth of that other person. Because that discomfort that they feel that's a sign to their bodies that something's wrong, that's time to question something, and then they get to make a choice, are they going to grow along with you? Or you're going to lift them up? Are they going to start doing this work for themselves? Or are they going to shrink, and you get to decide if they decide they don't want to be on this journey with you. Then as the Lego you get to keep going, you know, you playing small to make other people feel comfortable. All of that does is keep you from being in integrity with yourself. And my friend, you are too beautiful, you are too bold, you are too brilliant to do that. Okay, my friends here is to your growth into your liberation.

Vanessa 27:33

Let me just give you one last thought before we sign off. And this is something that I use for myself as I've been holding my head up higher, walking around, and sometimes sensing a little discomfort. This is what I tell myself. I can choose to play small. Or I can choose to stop doing the work of the oppressor. And that's just what I tell myself. Sorry, I'm not doing the work of the oppressor. I'm gonna hold my head

up high. This is who I am meant to be. Okay, my friends again to your growth and your liberation as la approxima. I'll see you next week.

Vanessa 28:13

Hey, if you love what you're learning, then you've got to check out my free Ultimate Guide to stop people pleasing, where I teach you a simple five-step process to stop saying yes. When you really want to say No, you'll be so glad that you did. There's a link to the guide in the show notes. I'll see you next time.