

Any Questions Podcast
Episode 8: Difficult Conversations

(INTRO MUSIC)

Maui: Hi, my name is Maui Romano. I am an art major and I use she/her pronouns.

Arielle: Hi everyone. My name is Arielle Vertsman, I'm a government major and I use she /her pronouns.

Maui and I are both peer leaders with the University Health Center at the University of Maryland. We deliver presentations on topics ranging from sexual health, alcohol and other drugs, mental health, and power-based violence.

Maui: So, today we're going to be talking about the difficulties that come with when you're in a situation where you're with your loved ones, your family and somebody says something that makes you uncomfortable, that's problematic and you don't know how to respond.

Arielle: Yeah

Maui: We're going to be talking about the barriers, we're going to be talking about why it's important to step up and intervene, and we're going to be using our own personal experiences to do this.

So without further ado.

Arielle: Here's "Any Questions"

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

Arielle: Problematic Language. So, what is that? We define problematic language as any obscene words or phrases that specifically target a group or identity. And, this type of language is derogatory, it makes people feel uncomfortable especially if, you know, it's targeted towards your group or identity. It makes people feel like they're outsiders. So just keep in mind that language doesn't have to be

intentional to be considered problematic. Someone can say something with the intent of it being a joke but still offend people and again make them feel like they're outsiders.

So, we find that all of this is easier to explain with examples and actually what inspired the idea for this podcast was a story that Maui told me the other day about her own personal experience with problematic language. So, Maui if you want to share with the audience.

Maui: Oh my gosh. Okay.

So, what happened was I was hanging out with my boyfriend and his friends and his friends were all male and one of them starts talking about a girl's rack and how it's totally fine to comment on it cause biologically men are attracted to women with bigger racks and so it's totally fine and it's for survival, just saying all this stuff. I obviously felt so uncomfortable and like offended (Arielle: Yeah, who wouldn't) and yet I just, I felt like I couldn't say anything though. Like, I felt like I don't know there was something stopping me and that was, that bothered me and it was something I kind of wanted to talk about.

Arielle: First of all, thank you for spilling the tea on that. I appreciate that. So, I feel like to us it's sort of more obvious that it's problematic but I want to talk about how other people can tell especially in different circumstances.

So, we categorize statements as problematic by identifying words or phrases that come up as red flags. So, essentially what red flags do or rather what red flags are, are these sort of uncomfortable gut feelings that you have when someone says something. So whenever someone says something and it makes you feel uncomfortable, that would be a red flag.

So, in the instance that you shared right, the idea that biologically men are attracted to women with bigger racks for survival is a red flag because it targets you as a woman right? And it makes you feel uncomfortable and then that goes into the bigger picture of why it's problematic because inherently that dialogue is sexist. It implies that anyone has the right to comment on another person's body especially to a sexual degree. Again, totally not okay, not true, and it promotes the idea that women are defined by their sexual features and that their sexual

features exist solely for the survival of men. Also not true. It can also be interpreted as heterosexist because what your friend was doing was confining men and women to heterosexual relationships without recognizing LGBTQ (Maui: Right) or other identities at all. Again, obviously not okay but what I find really interesting is the idea you know like you were able to identify that it was problematic and you were able to you know like be receptive to red flags but why was it that you couldn't complain.

Maui: In that situation, it almost felt like I would be laughed at or dismissed if I called him out on it.

Arielle: Yeah, that's interesting.

Maui: Like I felt like I was the only woman in a sea of men I would be like regarded as the angry feminist, I would be regarded as like the person ruining the mood and like that just stopped me from saying something.

Arielle: So, I think you're bringing up a really good point about barriers to having these conversations.

So, people find it really easy to identify problematic statements but not necessarily speak up against them because again it's like you're sort of treated like an outsider, you're afraid of the idea of like "ruining the mood" but sometimes it's necessary right? Like that discomfort is necessary in addressing the bigger picture of problematic language.

Maui: Exactly. And so since that incident, I've been looking more into barriers and why they stop us from doing the things that we think are right. Right?

Arielle: Share please.

Maui: So, one of the things I found was this idea of conformity.

So the idea is that we're all social creatures who want to fit in and it's really hard to go against the grain and when we're in, like when we're alone that's fine when we're like with people we don't really know but when we're with our friends we want to be you know included, we want them to accept us (Arielle: Yeah for sure)

and so it's even harder to go against that like it's hard to be the person who ruins that mood (Arielle: Yeah) and so that's definitely a barrier that I felt.

But another one that I found was this idea of the bystander effect. It's like the idea that just because you're in a group of people, you are going to feel like somebody else is going to step up and somebody else is going to intervene. And then that moment passes while you're just waiting for someone else to intervene and then you don't end up saying anything, nobody ends up saying anything and then, you know that moment passes.

Arielle: Literally nothing gets done, yeah.

Maui: Exactly.

There's also an idea of ambiguity and this takes place because a lot of people have just lived different lives and like what you were talking about with like red flags, people interpret different red flags differently and so different people are going to look at a certain situation and see different things (Arielle: Yeah) and so you might interpret it as something as a problem but your friend might not and they might not step up. So it kind of almost like lands on you to be that person.

Arielle: Yeah like going back to the idea of like the groups and identities, it's like you might have a different group or identity and then when someone makes a statement that targets that you obviously will react more strongly than someone whose not a part of it. So I totally see that.

(SEGMENT MUSIC)

Maui: Another thing that I found was this idea of authority. And this doesn't happen so much with friends as it does with family but like basically something that is pretty common is that people will find it hard to challenge authority especially when it comes to like your older relative or your male relatives.

Arielle: Too real. Too real.

Maui: Too real?

Arielle: Yeah. I was actually going to say like this is the most relevant barrier for me in terms of you know loved ones in my life? So, I'll explain.

Essentially while at a family dinner, I was helping put away the food and utensils like any normal person would and one of my male cousins offered to help but my uncle told him to sit down. I was like what? Why is that happening? He said that setting and cleaning the table was "a women's responsibility" and went on to joke that a women's place is in the kitchen.

Maui: Oh my god.

Arielle: Which is obviously not okay and then he said this with the intention of it being a joke but you know I addressed it even though it made me feel uncomfortable.

So, pretty much what happens is with me, well with my cultural background. There's this idea that your relatives are in this position of power and authority and whatever they say goes. So, you challenging or questioning what they say is sort of regarded like you challenging their authority. Which obviously isn't necessarily the case right? So, that to me would prevent me from intervening usually and so what I have done in the past is I address that straight up. I would say you know this isn't done to be a challenge to your authority however we're at a family gathering and this is making me feel uncomfortable and that obviously shouldn't be the goal of a family gathering right?

Maui: Right, right.

Arielle: Cause then no one would want to go.

Additionally, what happens with sort of these like family gatherings with me is that more I guess like authority and legitimacy is given to older, male figures that are present and so when it was my uncle making that comment again he was like an older, male figure and then me as a younger woman especially one that he was targeting made it difficult to say something.

And so what I sometimes do when I don't feel comfortable directly intervening is bringing, delegating that responsibility to someone who is older and male who I

trust. So in the past it was like I would tell me dad that a comment that his brother or his cousin, whoever cause we have like 50 family members, said is offensive and derogatory and then my dad would intervene on my behalf. And they would take him more seriously. But listen that's still a valid form of intervention and it helped me too.

So, and then also, what I've learned over time is that you know, practice makes progress. So, the more that I practiced with like my friends or just honestly, people on the street when I would just overhear something problematic. It made it a lot easier to have the initiative to intervene with my family members because I guess like it's not as scary because you don't need to think about challenging their authority or all of these other factors. And so I just felt more comfortable then when it came to me personally intervening. And yeah.

Maui: That's really great, that's really great.

Arielle: Yeah, trying to work on it.

Maui: And it's great that you can do that because something that I've noticed is when I've talked to people is that a lot of people feel like intervening in these kinds of situations isn't as important because they're kind of like (Arielle: Totally not true). They're like oh what does it matter, it's just a joke. And the thing is that in a moment it's easy to say that oh it's just a joke, it's just a comment but the thing is that a lot of the times it really does matter. A lot of the times, see okay. A lot of the times we think of bigotry as like the big stuff right?

Arielle: Yeah

Maui: Like sexual assault, violence, hate crimes but these things exist to a degree that they do because they've been like normalized in society. You know? We live in a culture that allows these things to happen. And part of what the thing that normalizes this is these comments that we hear, these jokes kind of saying oh this is okay, this is like you know based off of a true stereotype and I'm putting true in quotation marks but like that's kind of the vibe people get when like we constantly hear these comments.

Arielle: Yeah

Maui: And so, addressing these comments, addressing the situation almost like breaks that foundation off of which situations can escalate and violence can occur. So that's why it's like so important to talk to our like the people we love and talk to our family members. Even though it's almost harder sometimes. That's, yeah.

Arielle: Yeah, so I think that again with like our overall focus with like problematic language. Again, the idea that it doesn't have to be intentional to be considered problematic language because all of it altogether feeds into like you said, that bigger culture of enabling these other members of society to commit these acts of violence.

And, obviously we would encourage you to intervene when you can, when it's easiest to you and that would be at this lowest level right? When it's a joke, when it's a statement because then you could discourage them from going on to perpetuate acts of violence or just other people around you so.

Maui: Exactly. Right.

Arielle: So, it's actually important.

Maui: I've heard before you know it's only like a very small amount of people who actually commit crimes.

Arielle: Oh, exactly.

Maui: But it's a huge amount of people that enable these people to commit these crimes.

Arielle: Yeah, so we discussed a lot today. We discussed challenging and educating people in our lives about problematic language and while it's important to say something, this maybe can cause us to feel like we're responsible for constantly defending whatever group we belong to and I think (Maui: Right, yeah) this is especially relevant for you exactly.

Maui: Right, yeah. No, I feel it's almost like it puts a lot of pressure on us as like people in marginalized identities to be the one to step up. You know, as a queer woman, whenever I hear anything vaguely homophobic I feel like a duty to stand up for my people and stand up for other people but this can add a lot of pressure and this can you know almost feel like you're taking on the world.

And so we want to encourage you that it's not your responsibility to like be the one person to educate everyone on how to treat you with respect you know? We encourage everybody to step up and intervene with when the people we love say something problematic as much as possible but it's also important to take care of yourself and take care of your mental health. If it's too much, don't do it you know?

Arielle: Yeah. Obviously again like you're not going to be able to remove that factor of discomfort with these conversations but again that discomfort is necessary and again addressing the bigger picture of like toppling that I guess like larger pyramid of actions right? That happen when people make those jokes and then acts of violence occur so.

Maui: Yeah. Exactly.

Arielle: Really important that you do so but as you said, practice self care and make sure that while you're uncomfortable in the moment like it stays in that moment only. That it doesn't define like the rest of your day or the rest of your month, whatever.

Maui: But this is really important stuff so we hope some of what you heard today helps you when you hear problematic statements heard by the people you love and said by the people you love and without further ado this has been "Any Questions".

Arielle: Yeah, thank you so much.

Maui: Thank you so much.

(EXIT MUSIC)

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