

EPISODE 961

“AM: I’m someone who cares very much about being well liked. It’s taken me a long time to get to the point where I can say that and own that because it feels lame to care as much as I do”

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:51.3]

FT: Does that sound familiar? Can you relate to that? Our guest today calls that the likeability trap, she speaks about it personally and now in a new book, about how women can be stuck in an impossible bind and work, strong women are criticized for being cold, warm women seen as push over. Alicia Menendez is an award winning journalist who is looking at this fundamental paradox and empowers readers to let go of old rules and reimagine leadership rather than reinventing themselves.

Alicia is an MSNBC anchor and host of the Latina to Latina podcast. Dubbed Ms. Millennial by the Washington post, journalisms, new gladiator by Elle and a content queen by Marie Claire. Her interviews and reporting have appeared on ABC news, Bustle, PBS and Vice news. *The Likeability Trap* is her new book and it proposes surprising practical solutions for confronting the cultural patterns holding us back. It also encourages us to value unique talents and styles and remember that while likeability is part of the game, it will not break you.

Here’s Alicia Menendez.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:02:00.8]

FT: Alicia Menendez, welcome to So Money. I’ve been wanting to get you on this podcast for years, I’ve been a fan of you from the sidelines. I feel like I know you, thanks to Instagram. Truly, you’re everywhere so I think a lot of us kind of know you, welcome.

[0:02:14.6]

AM: Thank you so much Farnoosh, I'm so excited to be here.

[0:02:17.7]

FT: Want to talk about your new book which is called *The Likeability Trap: How to Break Free and Succeed As You Are* and speaking of success, your career and just the last decade has really exploded, you're such a hard worker, you're contributing editor at Bustle, you are a cohost of Amon Poor and Co. Which is PBS's late night interview program and the co-creator and host of the Latina to Latina podcast. You are all over the platforms, print, TV, podcast and now books.

Let's start with the book and then we'll maybe go back in time a little and talk about all the journalism things but the *he Likeability Trap: How to Break Free and Succeed As You Are*. Listen, you've covered so much territory, you've covered everything from like presidential elections to your own generation, the millennials. Why did you want to focus on this topic, the likeability trap? I suspect this is something that was very personal to you?

[0:03:18.1]

AM: Deeply personal. I mean, I am someone who cares very much about being well liked. It's taken me a long time to get to the point where I can say that and own that because it feels lame to care as much as I do and so I had originally set out to write a book about being a person who cares a lot and who learns to care a lot less but because I'm a journalist, whenever I have one of these looming questions on the brain it's not enough to just delve into my personal experience.

I started talking to everyone else I knew about this question of likeability. I suspected that women who don't care or don't care as much as I do were just all out there, living their best lives, being their truest selves, cutting lose friends who weren't worth the time and what I found was, even those women would often acknowledge that they were paying a price for being so much themselves, so unapologetically.

And that was especially true at work where there is a cultural mandate that women care about how others perceive them and how others think of them. And so faced with that, I shifted gears and really started to interrogate this question of why we expect women to care, what that care costs us and how it manifests specifically for women who are very ambitious and who aspire to lead.

[0:05:01.0]

FT: Let's start with the first two parts of that which is the why we are conditioned and raised to arrive at this place of caring so much about being liked and then, I would love an example from your personal career of how that cost you or your personal life about how that may have cost you.

[0:05:21.5]

AM: Across cultures, we raise girls to be very aware of what others think of them, of what others will say about them and there's an element of that that's very good. You know, the fact that women are very much raised to be attuned to other's feelings and wants and needs. The concern is that becomes perverted into only caring about other's concerns and wants and needs and prioritizing those above the self.

Where I have run into it is where I think a lot of very strong women run into it which is, no matter how you lead as a woman, at some point in your career, there is a point at which you were told something about the way you comport yourself is wrong. For some women, it's that they are too strong, too ambitious, too assertive, too aggressive, they ask for what they want and need to directly and they're coached to round off their edges. Then, there are women who are told that they are too warm and they need to take up more space, they need to command more attention, they need to speak up more in meetings.

And some of that advice can be really good. Some of that is great. The problem is that we tend to over index on that advice when it comes to women and it takes the place of pretty much all other forms of advice. To your question about how I've encountered it. I've encountered it both

ways, I've been told in different contexts that I'm too strong or too warm which sort of reveals just how context specific that advice can be, that it's not necessarily even simply about who you are and how you self-present. But so much about how others perceive you.

Then because I'm a person who cares, who really cares. I will take that and internalize it and believe that it means something about me. As a television personality where I found this all sort of misaligned, where I decided to start focusing on this was that I would do these opinion driven shows and the number one piece of advice people give you before you do something like The View is just do you, just be yourself.

That sounds really wonderful especially if you were a person who is fully aligned and clear on who that self is. But if you're a person who is still information and who is thinking primarily about how are other people going to perceive this. Then just be yourself becomes a very confusing direction. It's supposed to be simple and clarifying but actually, is really confusing. I think you layer on about the fact that when I would do many of these shows including Sunday morning shows.

Like this week with George Stephanopoulos. I was often the only person under 40, the only woman and/or, the only minority. And so be yourself, sort of sounded like this dangerous dare. One that was intended for people who are assumed to be competent, where as I always felt okay, it's on me to prove that I'm competent and in order to clear that hurdle that that's almost more important than whether I am being myself.

[0:08:47.6]

FT: And so, I mean, it sounds like, I've heard this too, be yourself, it can feel paralyzing like you've said, well, I want to be like – do I really just go for it because you're being judged too, let's not forget, you're going on The View, people are deciding whether or not they like you, which version of me do I show? Because ultimately, I want the job too. So there's that conundrum. For you personally, how did the journey end? I assume you've come on to the other side of things, right? You've written a book.

You've talked to a lot of other people about maybe their journeys and that's been supportive. For all of us listening, what helps to get in place where you first of all, like yourself enough to be yourself, you know, I think that's a big part of it too is like — maybe you have a lot of insecurities about who you are and so that hinders you from being able to express that whether work or anywhere in life.

[0:09:48.8]

AM: What I found was that this paradigm of care more, care less is just the wrong framework because if you are a woman, you will still operate in a world and in a culture that demands that you care. Caring and having sort of context around that care is just one part of the equation. I will tell you that thinking so much about this question in the context of work, very much made me want in my life, in my outside of work life to really evaluate who in my life I felt I could be fully myself with. Who I walked away from our interactions, energized, liking myself more, wanting to be more myself and prioritizing those relationships over people with whom I felt I needed to be edited in some way.

Work, it's a lot more complicated and part of what I wanted to do was really outline for women just how many traps there are set for them at work so that if you were going to a workplace where this all just feels hard where you want to lead and do good work and be well liked. That you did not feel like that was a challenge that was specific to you. Women across the board, across industries, across generations are dealing with these questions.

I personally hired a life coach which is something I highly recommend. I think it may be an industry in need of a slight rebrand because I don't know that the title does justice to the work that life coaches do but it's really about thinking about the person as a whole and 360 and this idea that you can't coach someone at work unless you understand what's happening at home and part of it for me working with my coach was really getting to the bottom of just the reality that I cared.

Because I didn't want to be a person who cared so much, right? That seems like a very disempowering identity to have. To be a person who cares about being well liked. But embracing it almost made it easier then to put it in context.

[0:12:15.9]

FT: If likeability is not the measure, it shouldn't be the measure that which we as an individual like we're always hoping that we're being liked, do they like me enough. What is the right framework then or rather, metric?

[0:12:33.6]

AM: I don't know that there is any single right metric, I would say that as managers, one of the things that people need to think about is coaching people around results and the work itself and really do assessments of how often you're coaching women around styles. Specifically giving them critical subjective feedback.

Listen, I've been a manager, I get it and I have given lots of critical, subjective feedback because sometimes, when you can't change the circumstances of a person's job, it feels like if you could just coach them up to be a little bit more or a little bit less, then you would somehow empower them to be more aligned with the role that they're in.

Very often, that's just the cosmetic fix. One thing I try to think to myself as a manager is that for every one of those sit down's and pieces of advice, I give a woman who I manage, I really ought to be given her an opportunity or aligning her with a project that she can tackle that will offer her a new scale. I should be introducing her to someone who can be helpful because I'm not going to really propel her career forward by teaching her how to sit bigger in a chair.

[0:13:51.5]

FT: Right, or *Lean In*. What do you think about *Lean In*? I'm thinking maybe this is a – in some ways complementary but also teaching you something entirely new.

[0:14:02.8]

AM: Right. I've had to think very critically about *Lean In* and about the privileged perch from which I had read *Lean In* and digested all that advice. I will be honest that was a fan of the book, I found that I got really useful information from it. I read it before I was married, before I had children and I found the framework around not leaving the work place or not starting to power down simply in advance of partnership and child rearing to be really helpful and informative.

At the same time, I understand that women who have less proximity to power than I have, have always understood that that was a very limited framework in which to operate and wouldn't work for everyone. And so, while I think that career advice and lots of the career advice that has come with it is really well intentioned.

I also think that it has taken our eye off some of the structural changes that need to happen in order to really empower women. You know, there's even research now that shows that people who were exposed to those lean in, self-empowerment messages often believe that it is a woman's responsibility, not only to fix her situation at work but that she is responsible for the situation itself.

That's certainly was not the objective of that work but if you put everything on the individual, even if that is simply in the interest of helping the individual survive in that moment because I get it, right? I'm talking about big, cultural shift and our reimagining leadership instead of asking women to reimagine themselves.

And even as I say that, there is a girl listening to this on the subway, headed too work because okay, I'm supposed to ask for a raise today. That's great that you want to do that Alicia but I'm living in the real world where I have to pay my bills and so that is why so much of our career advice has focused on what women can do for themselves. But, that's simply not enough.

[0:16:20.0]

FT: Now, you're a mom too and I'd love to talk a little bit about – you said before you became a mother and before you were in partnership with your husband, you read *Lean In* and you really appreciate the advice. Now, on the other side of things, how was your perspective on work changed and what's harder, raising a daughter or working?

[0:16:46.2]

AM: It's like comparing apples and kittens, right? They're both hard in their own way. I mean, what I mostly think about now is how before I was a parent, I was very unaware of what parents were up against and I was particularly unaware of the ways in which mothers more than fathers are penalized at work, right? That happens in lots of subtle ways where before you're a parent, you see someone say like, it's 4:30, I have to go pick my kid up from school and I would think I got it but I didn't really get it. Maybe others do, right?

My day now feels like there is a starting pistol at the beginning of the day when I drop my daughter off at daycare and I am just sprinting to the end of the day as quickly as I can and that leaves much less time for things like office chitchat and pleasantries because I'm really trying to maximize the work output of my day.

The cost for women in that is that all of that chitchat and in between stuff you do in the office builds social capital which is so critically important to a person's advancement and so when you don't have the time to do that during the day and you don't have as much time to go out to happy hour with everyone after work or to do any of the office extracurriculars, there is a penalty. There is even research that really just boggled my mind where they would show people a video of parents who were being forced to choose between a work crisis and getting home to a sick child.

And as a parent you know how gut wrenching that choice can be in both directions and when the mom would rush home to her kid leaving the work crisis, she was seen as less competent. When she would stay to deal with the work crisis and dispatch someone else to go deal with her sick kids, she was seen as less likeable. So you feel that, I mean you feel an internal tension of I am either a terrible mom or I am a terrible employee.

But then on top of that people are watching you and they are making judgments about who you are as a person and who you are as a leader predicated on a decision that they may or may not understand what makes that really unfair is that when they did the same experiment with dads, they didn't lose points in either direction and so this is a penalty that really hits women in a very

specific way and I just tried to be very forgiving with myself about the fact that there will be times when I am just doing the best I can and there are balls that are going to get dropped.

[0:19:48.6]

FT: It may sound a little too bubble gum and cliché but is it ultimately the only person that really matters who likes you is you? Because in that scenario for example with the mom who is going to lose or lose, there is no win one scenario whether she stays or leaves her job in that moment of dual crisis. To your point, you just have to be okay with your choice and forgive yourself for whatever guilt or bad feelings you may harbor.

[0:20:20.9]

AM: I think that is true as it relates to the internal costs of making these decisions but there also are external costs at work to every single one of the decisions that we make in our pursuit of success, which is part of why I also wanted to take a new look at the success penalty. You know when Sheryl Sandberg brought the success likeability penalty to the masses first in her TED Talk and then in her book, the framework was really around women who had succeeded.

That once you succeeded, you lost points on likeability that people were suspicious of women who have succeeded and what I think is important to understand is if that were just a onetime choice, right? Choose between being successful or choose between being likeable, then that would be complicated enough and I would certainly encourage you to choose success because likeability cannot be guaranteed and there is no way to achieve success unless you pursue it.

The truth is that it is not this onetime choice. It is a series of micro choices about everything from negotiating a salary to finding placement on the best teams, to advocating for yourself and your ideas and your priorities within the structure that you work in. So it is not as though you just make a choice and then you move on. It is that you're constantly contending with these micro choices and how to be maximally effective in the service of whomever it is you work for and also of yourself.

[0:22:05.4]

FT: It is exhausting. I am exhausted.

[0:22:07.4]

AM: Okay but are you relating to this?

[0:22:09.2]

FT: I am. Yeah, I mean I relate less so now because Alicia I don't work for anybody anymore, you know? I work for myself, I think that – I mean look, I still have to battle. I have this inner battles as well like I do want to “be liked” but I think also when you become more experienced and you mature and you also experience all of life like you are not just someone who has experienced the career variable.

But now you are a parent and you are a daughter of an aging parent and now in the world around you is evolving. So with all of that comes I think just a maturity that to some extent helps to temper any of this securities that you may be having around your likeability factor and at some point you just go F you, you know? F this like this is who I am, it's worked for me, right? Like I have gotten to the point where I am. I am going to keep doing me because it is working.

And I think that along the way for me at least, it's been really important to develop frameworks from which I do work and do motherhood and do sisterhood and you know wear a lot of different hats and I think that if you want all of that to sort of — if you want to juggle all of that it is really important to be intentional about everything and sometimes you are not going to make everybody happy. Like I think I was just on a podcast recently.

With a guest who said, “There is no such thing as having it all,” you know? The reality is as in this case, a female breadwinner in my household, I am probably disappointing somebody at a given point in time during the day like either my kid's unhappy with me, my husband, my boss, my sister-in-law. So that is just life and you just have to become okay with it and I think you can. It helps as you age that just becomes a natural part.

It becomes the way that life runs sometimes and I think the more experience you have, the less painful it becomes to you.

[0:24:23.5]

AM: Right, it was amazing to me the corollary in interviewing women between the amount of time the woman had spent on the workforce, which generally meant how old she was and how much she cared. No one learned to care more, everyone learned to care less.

[0:24:42.3]

FT: You're right, you have perspective.

[0:24:43.3]

AM: You have perspective and I think you also find new things to focus on some of the things that more seasoned professionals are more focused on, where things like self-awareness and understanding how the way that you operate in the workplace, your personal preferences can have an impact on others. Clarity of vision was a big thing I heard about a lot that as a leader you need to be crystal clear about where you are, where you are going.

The path forward and you have to be completely bought into that if you want to buy other people into it and once you're clear, you spend a lot less time worrying about how do other people feel about this because you have such a sense that it is the right way forward. Relatability and connection, right? I had this great talk with Mindy Kaling at Women in the World a few years ago.

Where I asked her about playing this sort of messy character on television and why we don't see more characters like that and she had a great way of thinking about this, which is she is less interested in whether or not the audience likes the character and more interested in whether or not they can relate to the character, which is why I think very often taking the time to provide context around decisions that we're making really helps people come along for the ride.

And then for the self, just being really clear about whose opinion matters, right? That everybody's opinion cannot be held in equally high regard and you do need to have both. You know if you do work for other people and even though you and I in some ways don't work for other people, we still work in an ecosystem where there are people who the way they perceive us, the way they talk about us matters.

Having a sense for yourself of truly how important that is and which decisions and concessions you are willing to make in order to keep those relationships and keep those people happy because if everyone matters, all equally the same then you're maxed out minute to minute.

[0:26:54.9]

FT: Yeah, you're done. It is over. We would love to ask a few and by we, I mean, me and my clone here sitting here interviewing you. I use the collective we, the listeners you know, we are all in this together. We want to know a little bit about Alicia's financial background. This podcast is called So Money and your book topic is so fascinating. We wanted to spend a lot of time on that.

But if we can transition just a couple of questions about your personal financial perspectives and maybe this is a good place to start, your childhood. So a great place to sometimes explore our financial perspectives is way back when — so when you were growing up, what is an example, an experience that was related to money that has now even as an adult stayed with you all of these years that it was significant. It taught you something.

[0:27:52.1]

AM: I have a mother who is incredibly impressive in the way that she grew up working class and much of her financial understanding is self-taught but we really lived on a budget and my mom was really crystal clear about her priorities and she would iterate them to us all the time. She drove a 1985 Volvo. She bought it around the time my brother was born and she sold it the year he went to college, never had a new car.

We went on one family vacation a year. It was planned for, it was the other priority and then when my brother and I went to high school, we both went to a private high school and she had saved for that and that became the financial priority and she was very clear with us when we would complain like, "Why do we have this? Why are we driving around in this old car? Why don't we have cable like all of our friends?"

That we as a family had priorities and that those were personal that other people were welcome to have their own financial priorities but that she had decided that experiences were more important than things for us and she organized our life accordingly and never made any apologies for it and that has really guided the way that I have thought about money in a macro sense ever since.

[0:29:24.9]

FT: And so fast forward to now as a mother and as a professional managing your money and your relationship, what is something that you practice and this is actually a question in partnership with our sponsor, Chase. We are asking our guests about something that they practice, a financial habit that does help to provide themselves with some financial security. Is there something that you recommend?

[0:29:52.0]

AM: I am a big keeper of goals and of budgets. I am always prepared for a rainy day so I abide by this idea that you should have six months of a rainy day fund that is a priority for me and you know my money as I am sure is the case for you is not like I get cut a check every two weeks. That is one of the funny things about not being in an office environment and so I really have to think about money in an annual sense.

And at the beginning of each year, create a budget for myself that is projected and predicated on what I think I will make for the year and I constantly have to come back to that, re-evaluate that and reassess that because it is not as though I have the a fixing company or sometimes there are a bunch of speeches and sometimes there aren't and sometimes like this year there is a book deal and sometimes there isn't and so I have to be very fluid but also vigilant about it.

And I find sitting down and doing that both annually and then weekly and then really just keeping my eye on it is a big part of the equation for me.

[0:31:12.8]

FT: Yeah, it is so important. I can completely relate and I don't know what is going on but in the last year, I feel like vendors are a little slower to pay and I'll give a tip to anybody who gets maybe some pushback from a vendor. You know this one I am doing a speech and the organization said, "We will pay you either" here are my two great options, "We'll either pay you via PayPal ahead of the speech or three months after you make the speech."

And I said, "How about none of those options? One because PayPal, I have to pay fees. So do you want to pay me a little bit extra because that is going to be hundreds of dollars in fees and by the way, according to the freelancers union you are not allowed to pay me 90 days after the fact." I think you have 30 days in New York State and then it becomes an issue and you know what? They came back the next day and said, "We will cut you a check prior to your appearance."

[0:32:15.1]

AM: Bravo to you.

[0:32:17.3]

FT: So that was just one push back from me but I was like, "Wait you're giving me PayPal or they are doing me a favor giving me two options," both of which are terrible but it seems like you really have to these days, I mean I find it in my own experience that I have to be really conservative with my cash flow. I now chart out every month that so and so is supposed to pay me in September but let's say they don't pay me until November, what does that look like?

And so you know if I have big expenses coming up that are little flexible in terms of when I do them, I might push them off just because I want to have that breathing room but you know this is

the juggle. This is the dance, this is the great life of being an entrepreneur, self-employed but I wouldn't trade it in and Alicia, thank you so much for the inspiration and all of the work that you are putting in trying to help women succeed in their careers wherever they're at.

And best of luck and congratulations on so much, you know your book and then all the work you're doing in journalism. I know that there are great things ahead and we look forward to having you back when you can share more but thank you so much and congrats.

[0:33:34.1]

AM: Thank you Farnoosh.

[END]