

#76: My Struggle with Identity and Belonging



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With Your Host

Marissa McKool, MPH

[Redefining Rest for Public Health Professionals Podcast
with Marissa McKool, MPH](#)

#76: My Struggle with Identity and Belonging

Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Hey, you all, I just want to pop up in here real quick before the episode to let you know I have a new course coming out, it's called How the Patriarchy Robs you of Your Rest and How to Get it Back. Now, it's not quite available yet but you can sign up for the waitlist to get first access when it does come out. This course is designed for folks in public health who have been socialized as woman to be able to help you get more rest. We uncover all the sneaky subtle indirect ways the patriarchy robs you of your rest.

All the ways it tells you to deny yourself of rest and continue to chase productivity. I promise you this course is going to blow your mind. I'm covering things I haven't talked about anywhere else, not on the podcast, not in my past courses, not even with some of my one-on-one clients. This is all brand new stuff that's going to blow your mind about all the ways the patriarchy doesn't want you to rest. And we're going to lift the lid on all those secrets so you can start resting, feeling better and creating the life you want to live.

So, if this is something that interests you, go to the links in the show note, you can sign up for the waitlist, so you'll be the first to know when it's available. And with that let's get into the episode.

Well, hello everyone, happy fall. As some of you know, I've shared before, fall is my favorite season. I hope it feels like fall where you are. I know there's lots of places where this time of the year it actually doesn't feel like fall, it feels very hot. But I hope you are enjoying whenever life is like, wherever you are listening to this.

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Today we're going to be talking about identity and belonging. And I have been wanting to share and talk more about this for a long time on the podcast. If you follow me on LinkedIn, or on Instagram, or on my email list, I've shared a little bit about my story and struggle with identity and belonging in those spaces. But I really wanted to bring it to the podcast. And even though I've wanted to share this, my brain has really been wanting to avoid recording this episode because it's vulnerable and because it's something I'm still working through.

It makes sense, today my brain wanted to get very distracted of course but for me it's really important that there are some things where I'm sharing my experience, and perspective, and insight as I'm going through the work myself. There is lots of things where I share once I've gone through the transformation or the growth. and then retrospectively share with you all so you can learn, and I can teach. But I do think there is really a lot of value in talking about the journey and the experience as we are going through it, (a) to just normalize it.

And (b), I think that there are some insights and perspectives that maybe are missed or not shared in the same way when you're doing it retrospectively. And I also want to note, of course in this 30 minute or however long this is going to turn out episode there is no way I can cover everything that has to do with identity and belonging. I mean there are whole fields of study and research careers that are focused on understanding these topics, from anthropology, to sociology, to many other fields.

There's lots of podcasts and books on it, and thinking about it from evolutionary perspective, and what does it mean for human involvement and with technology, and big social issues, and policy, and so many other things. Today I'm sharing my personal experience and I'm going to be sharing a coaching perspective. So, I've been coaching myself on this. I coach a lot of clients on this. I've had coaches coach me on this. I just

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finished my intersectional feminist coaching certification with Kara Loewentheil where we dove deep on this, and I did a lot of work.

So, I'm sharing my experience from a coaching perspective which I think is super powerful and super useful. But I just want to be clear, I'm not claiming to be a research expert and I want to be clear that this episode is just a small, small insight into obviously a complex topic. And what I'm going to be sharing today is really about my experience exploring my identity and my feelings around belonging as a white Arab. So, the intersection for me being Arab which I personally identify as kind of an ethnicity and being white which it can be identified as a race.

So, the intersection of that area and I just want to say that I'll probably cry at some point in this episode because this is vulnerable because I am doing this work right now. I love crying. I process through crying. I'm not sharing that out of shame but just to let you all know. And no matter where you might be struggling with your identities or the experience of belonging, whether it has to do with race and ethnicity, or it has to do with gender, or sexual orientation, or religion, or politics, or any other identity, or intersections of identities.

I'm talking about my experience with this around being a white Arab today. But I've also struggled in a lot of other areas. One big one which I really haven't dove into too much is I definitely struggle being at the intersection of identifying as a Christian and identifying as what some may call liberal or progressive. I don't personally necessarily use those terms. But really as someone who supports abortion and reproductive freedom, LGBTQ rights, and the intersection of that and identifying as Christian.

And how other Christians, what they believe, how they act, or churches and all of that. So that's all to say there's lots of different types of identity. And all of us I think on some respect do struggle with a part of our identity, or feeling like we belong. So, what I hope today, it's going to be a little bit

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different, but I hope by sharing my current journey in this one intersection I have, that you can pull out some takeaways and insights so you can apply it to your life and to your journey.

So, I did not identify as Arab for a really, really long time, I mean until I was in my late 20s. I always had this lingering thought in my mind that I'm not Arab enough, that I'm a fraud, that if I did identify as Arab, I'd be an imposter, that I'm lying. My brain would also offer me a lot and it still does, this fear of, well, if you go there, if you go to that meeting or say you're Arab, or join that club, then they're going to find out you're a fraud.

And you're not Arab, but I am Arab, but my brain still offers me that fear and it feels real in my body. In your brain about whatever identity, you struggle with might be offering you different thoughts or similar thoughts, telling you you're not bi enough, or gay enough, or you're not Mexican enough or whatever it may be.

And on top of that, I also felt like I didn't belong in Arab or Lebanese spaces, with other Arabs or other folks who are Lebanese. My brain would keep telling me that I can't relate, that I'm going to be called out, that we are too different. And my brain would constantly find evidence for why I didn't belong or why I couldn't identify as Arab. Well, you don't speak Arabic. Well, you didn't grow up raised in the culture. Well, you don't know how to cook Lebanese food. Well, you don't look Arab enough and on, and on, and on, and on.

And when I was a young child and adolescence I don't think I had the consciousness to really think about my identity in that way. But as I got older, became an adult, went to college, got jobs, went to grad school, all that stuff, I started to notice this small desire to be more connected to my Lebanese heritage, to my Arab identity, to learn more about my family, to learn more about the culture. But I suppressed it, big, big time because of these thoughts I have, until about four years ago when that really

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jumpstarted me on this journey which has been a long journey to working through my identity.

And when I say long, it's because I really struggled with it. I think there is lots of people who could go to therapy or get coaching and have a different experience than me. But for me, it's been, okay, I'll explore a little bit. I'll get coaching a little bit. And then I need a lot of space. It is kind of emotionally charged for me and very vulnerable. So, it's taken me a while and taken me small steps to work through and I'm still working through it and that's okay.

And when I think about some of the reasons that I might have internalized this belief, I'm not Arab enough and I'm going to keep referring to that one because that is the loudest voice in my head of all the beliefs. And when I think about, okay, where did that belief come from? Why did I start to believe that? Why do I believe it so strongly? There are some things about the circumstances in which I was raised that do make sense. I really had no Arab influence in the home. My dad who is Lebanese, I don't know what his personal perspective is.

But as his daughter, what I observed is him not talking about his culture very much or anything that has to do with being Arab or Lebanese. We didn't have Lebanese food growing up, he didn't cook it. My family who are Lebanese American and live in the US, most of them I don't even know. My family in Lebanon I had no idea even existed. We didn't speak Arabic. I knew almost nothing about my family history, so that makes sense. I really had no exposure growing up.

And then in society, in media there is very limited Arab representation, especially as I was growing up, very limited representation that looked like me, or had my experiences, really what I saw especially as I kid who hit young adulthood after living in America, after 9/11 was only very, very racist Arab representation. And then of course thinking about things like internalized white supremacy.

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That's really some of the deepest work I've been doing recently is understanding how my own internalized white supremacy prevents me from identifying fully as Arab and embracing that part of my identity. And I have had to be really honest with myself, that my whiteness, the world seeing me as white and treating me as such gives me protection, living in a very racist society. So of course, my brain first of all, internalized this idea that I'm not Arab. But then is attached so strongly to it because my brain's job is to protect me.

So, if my brain has inputted so much information that says if you're not white, you're in danger, of course my brain is holding on tightly to telling me I'm not Arab. And so, what happened was about four years ago I had the opportunity to go to Lebanon on a cultural trip that my aunt really prompted me to go on. And it was with a ton of other Lebanese Americans. And first I want to recognize obviously it's a huge privilege to be able to do that.

There is lots of people whether Lebanese or another culture who don't have the opportunity, or don't have the means, or don't have access to do something like that and I want to recognize that. And that trip really, really spurred this kind of exploration of what I believe about my identity and how it's really impacting me. Because when I went on this trip what I realized is my brain might be lying to me. I started to think things like whoa, maybe I am Arab. The people on the trip who were Lebanese American looked a lot like me, had a lot of the similar experiences.

I saw people in Lebanon of all different racial backgrounds, people with all different experiences, all different perspectives, not just the narrow representation lack thereof that I have been exposed to in media. I felt so welcome by the Lebanese people including some people who I found out were distant relatives. And I felt so connected. And on that trip instead of the constant shame, and worry, and guilt that I still to this day feel a lot but then felt way more often about my identity.

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I was able to finally maybe for the first time truly access feeling proud, and feeling connected, and feeling excited about my identity. And that was really eye opening. It allowed me to see, there's another way to feel about this. There's another way to think about this and I want that. And what happened was when I came back from that trip, I was really on a high. I felt really good. I felt really connected. And that didn't last that long. The shame, and worry, and guilt didn't stay away because my brain didn't change.

The baseline thought that my brain had been thinking over and over that I'm not Arab enough, that I'm a fraud, didn't just magically disappear because I went on a two week trip. When I got back I signed up for Arabic classes and over time those thoughts came back stronger and stronger. Well, they all grew up but their family's speaking Arabic. Of course, this is easier for them. Well, they all have an understanding of what this food is. You stick out, you're a fraud. Maybe I don't belong.

The organization I was working at, at the time eventually started a staff affinity group that included Arabs. And I went to one of those meetings and my brain only focused on all the 'evidence' that I don't belong, that I'm not Arab enough, that I don't have the same experiences of them, that I'm fraud. The result, I removed myself, stopped going to those affinity meetings, stopped going to Arabic class, of course.

Because here is the thing, when you believe you can't, shouldn't or don't identify with a part of you that exists, that is a part of you, you will create distance from the people and communities that also share your identity. But more importantly you will ultimately create a wall and barrier in your relationship with yourself. You will deny yourself and who you are. You will feel farther removed from yourself, not closer. And when you believe you don't belong you will only find evidence that supports that belief, and you will ignore and filter out and disregard evidence that you do belong.

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This happens to me all the time still. I'm more aware of it now, but looking back when I was sitting in that staff affinity group, because my brain just kept telling me, I don't belong, I'm not Arab enough, all my brain was showing me, all I was looking around seeing were all the evidence that I don't belong. Well, they speak Arabic, and I don't. Well, they were born in their Middle Eastern Arab country, and I wasn't. Well, they were raised with the food. Well, they know their family history. All I was seeing were the things that were supporting my belief that I don't belong.

And I was filtering out so much evidence that maybe I do belong. I was not even thinking about or focusing on seeing there are some people here who also don't speak Arabic. There are some people here who also look like me. There are some people here who also have similar lived experiences to me.

Even when there is community available to you, a community that shares your identity, if your brain still believed you can't identify that way or you don't belong, you will see that community as a danger and not safety. You will avoid that community. You will distance yourself from that community because your brain when you're engaging with that community is only going to bring up shame, guilt, and worry, not pride, not connection.

When I went to Lebanon, the only reason I was able to start to believe that maybe I am Arab enough, and my belief 'I'm not Arab enough' was more suppressed I think, and I had the safety to believe that. Was because I was intensely immersed with other Lebanese Americans who were a lot like me. But it didn't make my belief that I'm not Arab enough, go away. It didn't resolve my identity struggles.

When I came back and joined other communities that had other Lebanese Americans, other Arab Americans, in my Arabic class, in my affinity group, that thought came back to the surface loud, very loud. When your brain believes you don't belong, or don't identify, you will always distance

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yourself from yourself and others, meaning you will not create belonging internally or externally. You have to address the internalized beliefs in order to not just really heal but to really embrace your identity and create belonging for yourself no matter how much things change externally.

There are so many changes with Arab representation in organizations, in the media. I mean we need a lot more, don't get me wrong. But there is a lot of changes. And no matter how much the changes happen I need to address what's in my brain. If I move to Lebanon, the first couple of weeks I might feel really like I belong and I identify. But over time, those thoughts are going to come back. That's what needs to be addressed. And that's what I've been doing over the past year or more, coaching on my identity.

And I've been very, very fortunate to have coaches in my life who understand intersectionality and internalized oppression to coach me on these things. It's important to recognize that not all coaches and not all therapists have this understanding or the ability to hold space.

So, when you are doing this work, at least from my experience, you do benefit from working with folks who have that understanding. They don't have to have the same lived experience as you as far as I don't need to necessarily work with a white Arab coach. But work was someone who has a broader understanding of intersectionality and internalized oppression. And I've been doing a lot of self-coaching. And this work has been really to change my internal beliefs where I've started to question my thoughts.

That quote that folks say around you are your ancestors' wildest dreams, for a long time every time I heard that I felt deep shame. I'd just tell myself, there's no way. There is no way my ancestors are proud of me. I don't speak Arabic. I don't understand my history. I don't understand the culture. And I'm starting to question that and prompt, well maybe they are proud of me. I'm starting to create more understanding as to why I have ended up internalizing these beliefs, not to excuse them and not to abdicate

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responsibility, to undo them. But just to have a bigger understanding of the whole picture.

I'm starting to see, well, in the time period my great grandparents and grandparents really emigrated here, their decision to not teach their children Arabic or have it in the home might have been safety. It might have been to assimilate and be safe. So that is helpful. Starting to understand things like why Arab or Middle Eastern isn't on demographic forms and is lumped into white. Learning the history that at the time a lot of Arabs were emigrating there was the Exclusion Act, that was excluding particularly Chinese immigrants, but other Asian immigrants from coming to America.

And Arab countries, a lot of them, not all obviously but at least the area my family's from is a part of Asia as a continent. So, understanding that many immigrants would advocate that they weren't Asian and then they got lumped into white in order to emigrate. So having some of that bigger, broader perspective, I have been working to expand my own view of Arabs because I have internalized the narrative that society and media has sold. I've been watching videos on YouTube to see more diversity and understanding, and see where I have shared experiences or similarity.

And I'm starting to understand why my brain is so attached to these beliefs and it's taking time, and coaching, and processing to really let them go and believe something else. Because in our racist world my whiteness gives me a privilege, gives me protection from discrimination, microaggressions, bias and more. So of course, my brain is trying to prevent me from identifying more with my Arab identity. I'm not saying this is okay.

I'm just saying this makes sense. And I'm not going to lie to you all, it's not easy. It is vulnerable, and touchy, and sensitive internally to do this work in this space being held by a coach and to share publicly or even just share with family and friends. For me my process has been doing a little bit, whether that's intentional coaching or whether that's sharing a little and

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then stepping away. Because exploring this does bring up the deep shame, and guilt, and worry, and anger, and so many other emotions.

And also, as I'm doing this work it does sit at the surface more. I've had some experiences, I shared this on Instagram a long time ago. I went to Powell Books in Portland which is a huge bookstore. And I was so excited to see how many aisles for Arab and Middle Eastern books that they had. But they didn't have one book about Lebanon, or at least from what I can tell from a Lebanese author. And I left, I'm still getting emotional as I talk about this.

And I left the store and got in the car and cried. Now, if that would have happened 10 years ago I don't know if I'd have that reaction. But I've been doing this work and bringing this to the surface to really work through it so it's there. But it has also brought so many gifts, the ability to feel proud of who I am and feel closer to who I am. I have created deeper trust with myself, learning to fully accept myself and be authentic feels so good. And creating the belief in myself and reducing the shame and the guilt feels so powerful.

And yes, I've been learning so much more about my culture and heritage. And that's amazing and that does help me feel more connected. But what makes me feel the most connected and helps me embrace my identity, and feel like I belong is really the work I'm doing to connect with myself. That is the most important. And as an outcome of creating that internal connection with myself I have been able to create connection with others.

The times I have shared publicly about this work and my struggles I have gotten so many messages on LinkedIn, on Instagram, from my email, from people telling me that they can relate. Sharing that what I shared really resonated with them, that they had experienced similar as a white Arab, that they also struggle with this, that I am the first person they have heard

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talk about their experience. Putting myself out there in my identity, talking about struggling with my belonging.

Before I figured it all out has actually created exactly what I have felt for so long, I was missing. Which is to feel like I can identify as Arab, to feel like I do belong. And to feel like I have a community. And I still have to do the thought work. I still have a long way to go.

For example, this week alone, someone posted on LinkedIn an article about the racist history of the Mediterranean diet which I have talked about a lot with my friends, being that half of the Mediterranean is not represented in that talk about the Mediterranean diet. And I almost commented on the post saying something like as a Lebanese American I agree or something, and I didn't. I sat, I thought about it and my brain offered me thoughts of like you're going to get questioned then you're going to have to defend yourself.

I still struggle with where do I fit in when there are coaching calls specifically for BIPOC folks, when there are spaces, podcasts, groups specifically for women of color. I am not a woman of color. I do not identify as a BIPOC and I'm not going to pretend that I do. But what I struggle with is where do I belong as a white Arab? Where my folks, my communities that are white but aren't Arab don't understand. And the communities and spaces that really bring in Arab folk, I still struggle with my brain offering me thoughts that I don't fully belong.

And where I am at right now is letting that be okay in the sense of knowing I'm figuring it out, knowing I'm on a journey, knowing I am on a process, and I'm seeing changed. And while it's uncomfortable and while it brings up a lot, it's also bringing a lot of beautiful things into my life and into my relationship with myself.

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So here is what I want you to walk away with from today. Your thoughts about why you can't identify as x, y, z or with x, y, z, or don't belong, are probably internalized beliefs, whether you internalized it from systems of oppression, or family, or society, or media, or anywhere else. And those thoughts aren't necessarily true. They might feel true, it doesn't mean they are true.

And it doesn't mean that the work of detaching and undoing them won't be uncomfortable because let me tell you, at least my experience, it has been uncomfortable as hell, however it is 100% worth it. And you can do it in your time and your way. But the amount of energy, and effort, and time you are spending denying your identity and telling yourself you don't belong isn't restful, it is exhausting. And I know because I have been there and there are many days I am still there. It prevents us from not only showing up in the world as our authentic beautiful self where other people can truly connect with us.

But it prevents us from showing up for ourselves authentically. So, the last thing I want to leave with you is a takeaway I had from our annual alumni mastermind for the Life Coach School where I got certified. This year, Chris Hale who is an amazing coach for queer creatives spoke. And it was truly so impactful for me personally and has really sent me on another phase of my journey to diving deeper into my own identity and belonging. And Chris said, and I quote, "Representation is a circumstance and lack of representation is a circumstance. You get to decide what to think about it."

Now, to many of you that might sound simplistic and not powerful at all. But actually, it is everything because when you are waiting for someone who looks just like you, or has your specific experience, or your identity to show up in the world as your circumstance, you end up holding yourself back from showing up fully in the world. You are waiting for someone else to be just like you to give you permission to be you, but you don't have to. You get to be that representation. You don't have to wait for someone else.

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And I want to end by reading a post I wrote at the end of the conference because of what Chris shared. And I shared, this was a while ago on LinkedIn and Instagram. But I think it is so, so powerful. I have been waiting my whole life for an Arab woman just like me to show up, an Arab woman who is white, doesn't speak Arabic, doesn't know her broken family tree, who other people don't assume is Arab, who doesn't know Lebanese traditions and wasn't raised in Arab culture.

I've been waiting for that woman to show up and be unapologetically herself, to be proud and loud about who she is so that I could see her and think I can be me. I have been waiting for her to show up and make a name for herself, make a shit ton of money, influence, and impact millions of people so that I could see her and think that could be me. She is me. I am that representation. I am the person I have been waiting for. It is me, I am the representation I have been waiting for, it is me.

And you my friend are the representation you have been waiting for, it is you. It is not the other person, it's not someone else that will come along and be that for you, it is you. That shit is powerful and let it be. And go out there and shake shit up in the world because of it.

So, with that, everyone, I hope you had some helpful takeaways and insights there. I'm sure I'll be sharing more as I continue this journey. And I know I didn't cover everything, but I hope you have a great week, talk to you next week.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to mckoolcoaching.com, that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.