

# HW S2 EP 1 FINAL

**Voiceover:** How's work is an unscripted one-time counseling session focused on work. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality names, employers, and other identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real.

[00:00:18]**Woman:** I had an eight year affair with my career. It took a crisis for him to find out.

[00:00:37]**Man:** You've said before that sometimes the solution to our problems should be just to lie better.

[00:00:44]**Woman:** I'm not saying that anymore. I knew that I would slip and the truth would come out. So it was better that it came out from me. It was better that I not continue the life and I just tell him.

[00:00:58]**Esther Perel:** In where should we begin? I often explore secrets, but they often are romantic secrets, family history secrets, but this is How's Work? They came to talk about the deep conflict and the secrets that they both carry surrounding their work.

[00:01:20]**Woman:** The work I do is not nearly as sexy as people think it is. There's that perception of what it is and it is not that.

[00:01:33]**Esther Perel:** One person can't talk about what she does and one person can't talk about the fact that he no longer wants to do what he does.

[00:01:39]**Man:** Being a physician is like being a sponge. Every patient that you see, you take something from them and keep it with you. And I think my sponge is full.

[00:01:54]**Esther Perel:** During the height of the Coronavirus pandemic, he was at home and he described it as a very emasculating experience.

[00:02:05]**Man:** Crisis came, some people were drawn to the fire and some people were pushed away.

[00:02:13]**Woman:** He didn't go to the hospital setting and I'm not sorry. I know how dangerous COVID is. I've watched enough people die. I'm glad he wasn't one of them. Is that selfish of me? Yes. Did you know I was secretly happy that you were safe here?

[00:02:33]**Man:** I guess it would be nice to get my hands a little dirty. She has that opportunity. She has that opportunity too much.

[00:02:42]**Woman:** I can't help him get his hands dirty. I don't think he'd like it much.

[00:02:45]**Man:** I think that, uh, both of us have lost sense of who we were before we started down this long road. And, um, the journey that we took both professionally and personally ran and continues to run concurrently with our marriage. And while our marriage has issues, you know, we have issues in our own

individual lives that we need to deal with. And we also need to deal with how they're intertwined with our, with our marriage and our relationship.

[00:03:31] **Esther Perel:** First degree, I'm sure that every time we will go a layer deeper, but as a first layer, what are we talking about when you say, you know, we've lost ourselves? I think, where did they begin? Where did they land? When you say we have our own individual issues, I say, what are his, when you say it also involves work I'd say, what's just happened? And I would probably start with the more recent and then move backward because I think that there's a lot of changes happening in our work lives. So you can pick whichever one of those three to start. And I will just keep my foot on the pedal.

[00:04:14] **Man:** I've been a physician now for about 15 years. More than that, actually. The decision to become a physician was made before I knew what being a physician was all about.

[00:04:29] **Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm[affirmative].

[00:04:31] **Man:** The decision to become a physician put me on a train that I didn't have to get off of until the very end of the journey. I didn't have to get off. I didn't need to get off. Didn't want to get off and look at anything else along the way. We continued to work and sacrifice and look forward to arriving at an ultimate goal. Now that I've been there for a while, I'm not sure if I wanna stay at that station. And it is hard for me to imagine myself doing anything else, but what I have worked at for so long and yet I know I need to change, but that is very scary. And it brings out a lot of insecurity because I've never had to prove that I can do anything else other than what I'm doing now. And I do it well.

[00:05:29] **Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm[affirmative]. Very well. Can I ask you to hold one moment? Tell me if I heard that accurately, I have always known and wanted to be a physician. I have never known to be anything else, and yet I no longer have the fire and I am wondering if I am to be, not just to do, something different, but to be someone different. This is not just a change of what I do. This is almost an identity shift.

[00:06:07] **Man:** It's a fundamental identity shift, and there will be an identity shift that many people will not understand and whatever necessary risks I have to take to search for whatever it is I want, which I'm not exactly sure what that is, but I know it's not this.

[00:06:43] **Esther Perel:** Sometimes just a very uttering of I don't want to do this anymore is such an ominous statement that feels almost like a taboo because your whole identity is wrapped up in this. You spent so many years investing in this, studying it. How can you suddenly say, I'm done I don't want to be at this station, but his dilemma is not unique and it is actually a statement that many people find themselves making at some point in their life. Some people or many people may not understand it, but is it accurate if I say, if I understand it, and if my wife understands it, those are the main protagonists of this transition, of this loss, of this redefinition, and of this probably new life that this will create for us?

[00:07:53] **Man:** Yes, we will be the ones who hopefully will expect the benefit. We will be the ones who potentially will pay the price for failure, but the

embarrassment of failure will spread beyond just the walls of the house and our marriage. Um, and that's real.

[00:08:15] **Esther Perel:** Why are we talking about, who's the Greek chorus?

[00:08:20] **Man:** Uh, certainly my, my parents. As a middle-aged man, still searching for an understanding that I probably am not the person that they thought I would be. And the fundamental break in the relationship between my wife and my parents has to do with that marrying her took me in a much different direction, I think, then they envisioned. And therefore they were not prepared to see me go off in a different direction.

[00:08:59] **Esther Perel:** What religion did you grow up in?

[00:09:01] **Man:** Episcopal.

[00:09:03] **Esther Perel:** And was her being Jewish an issue.

[00:09:06] **Man:** That sent them to therapy themselves.

[00:09:09] **Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm[affirmative].

[00:09:11] **Man:** So-

[00:09:12] **Esther Perel:** If my son marries a Jewish woman, then she's nodding. So I'm just gonna continue ask.

[00:09:21] **Man:** ... I think we would've had children that are Jewish.

[00:09:25] **Woman:** His mother was, I think, delighted that we never had children because they would have been Jewish. They would have had in their own words, mixed blood. They used those terms. Those sting. I come from a family that, uh, had Holocaust survivors as grandparents who escaped and that stung to say the least, that stung, it still stings. It burns, it, it burns every day.

[00:09:55] **Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm[affirmative]. I see it, I feel it, as you say it. And did, but he pursued you anyway.

[00:10:05] **Woman:** He took the bravest leap of all and stayed. It's been 19 years.

[00:10:11] **Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm[affirmative].

[00:10:13] **Woman:** That's insane. If you knew me, you'd know how insane that was.

[00:10:18] **Esther Perel:** I'm hoping to get to meet you in a minute. Um.

[00:10:21] **Man:** That is a little insane.

[00:10:25] **Esther Perel:** But basically I didn't marry who you wanted, but at least I have the profession that you wanted and have done you proud by my profession. And if I give that up now, then I basically have nothing left for you to actually look to me for.

[00:10:38] **Man:** Um, I have not put it in those concise, uh, words, but yeah, that's probably it, you know, we don't live there, not a doctor anymore. Didn't give him

any grandkids, not there when they get older, pretty much, I guess the things one will expect from a child.

[00:10:58] **Esther Perel:** Are you an only child?

[00:11:00] **Man:** I have a brother.

[00:11:02] **Esther Perel:** And where is he?

[00:11:03] **Man:** Um, much closer to my parents part than I am.

[00:11:07] **Esther Perel:** And he's a doctor too?

[00:11:07] **Man:** Um, no, he's not.

[00:11:09] **Esther Perel:** What was the other profession that was expected?

[00:11:12] **Man:** Uh, he, he works, uh, he works with my father, um, in the business and he, he is single and gay in the closet. It is our belief that one of the reasons he cannot come out of the closet is for fear of the reaction.

[00:11:35] **Esther Perel:** Like he would be kicked out of the business?

[00:11:38] **Man:** Maybe not kicked out of the business, but he would certainly be looked at. If they couldn't handle marrying a Jew, being gay takes it to another level.

[00:11:48] **Esther Perel:** Which is the parent that you fret about most when think about leaving medicine?

[00:11:56] **Man:** I think that my father is likely to be more proud of the fact that I'm a physician, but leaving the profession would probably sting harder with my mother.

[00:12:15] **Esther Perel:** The more I listen to him, the more his kind of affectless, tone, stirs intensity inside of me, my producer thought that it was kind of a doctor's cadence. I began to question to what extent am I in the presence of repressed anger? And that this anger is the consequence of a conflicted sense of loyalty that he has towards his parents, rage at himself for what he did and didn't do, rage at the family for squeezing him, for making it impossible for him to make certain choices freely, for all the losses that he had to live with.

[00:13:08] **Man:** Certainly what we've said thus far has painted a pretty bleak picture of them, um, are my parents perfect? They are not.

[00:13:16] **Esther Perel:** No, no, no. This is not about bleak, this is about a son who is acutely aware when he disappoints his parents, was deeply attached to them, doesn't want to upset them and has done all kinds of things to try to lessen the volume of their voices inside of him. It's a love story. It's not a bleak story.

[00:13:52] **Woman:** His father is wonderful. His father is lovable. I feel like I have to speak that because he is, he's amazing. He's a polio survivor. He built a life from nothing. I wouldn't want to disappoint him if he were my father.

[00:14:15] **Man:** Well, we don't have, we don't have children. So it's difficult for me to imagine how a parent feels about a child and the expectations, the vision, the dreams that you would have for them. I think that my parents want only the best for me. I think that they want me to be happy. They sense that I am unhappy.

[00:14:40] **Esther Perel:** Can I ask you why you don't want to stay a physician?

[00:14:46] **Man:** I think as, as hard as you might try, being a physician is like being a sponge, every patient that you see, you take something from them and keep it with you. And my, I think my sponge is full and needs to be wrung out. So to say it can absorb more things. I know that when I come home, there's nothing much left for the people and the person that I love and care for the most. This has been sent elsewhere on other people in a much more superficial way. The longer I stay a physician, the more I dislike people and that's not healthy. It prevents me from doing my job well. Eventually my patients will pay the price. They haven't yet, but I can absolutely envision a scenario in which they would, and they haven't paid a price yet because I still have energy enough to project a facade. But that facade is certainly much more thin than it used to be.

[00:16:03] I do primary care. Primary care is centered on the management of problems over time, which are sometimes a euphemism for not fixing them, but indeed just managing. So if you can't sell a fix, then you have to sell yourself to encourage people to get on the train with you. And that costs something. So when I envisioned doing something else, helping people is still a part of that, but helping people in a different way that doesn't require as much in something. You know, my mother was a school teacher. My father worked in a shipyard for 40 years. I'm sure that there were times when they didn't want to go to work. They got frustrated, angry, maybe hopeless, but they didn't quit. And certainly part of me definitely thinks that after having grown up under their care, having had much, if not all provided for me, if there's anyone who doesn't have very reason to quit it's me. And yet I'm the one who wants to.

[00:17:37] **Esther Perel:** His choice of the word quit is very telling. He could say, I would like to change. He could say, I would like to try something else that I've been wanting to do a long time. He could say, I would like to take some of the skills and begin practicing medicine in a different context. It is very clear that the word quit puts an entire meaning to this transition that he's contemplating and a meaning that is anything but positive. It is self-loathing. It smacks of contempt for himself. Of course he can't move and he's stuck and angry about being stuck and angry at the people who remind him how stuck he is.

[00:18:30] **Woman:** And that makes me angry.

[00:18:32] **Man:** Why does that make you angry?

[00:18:34] **Woman:** Because that choice to be selfless is not your burden to carry. It seems to me that they chose that path. They gave you something amazing, something I am often envious of, but they gave it to you in theory, I remember the worst fight I ever had with your mother was right before the wedding was about free will. They gave it to you so you could become something amazing because you are incredibly smart and I've seen what you are capable of. They gave you these, they gave him this, this toolbox and he can do anything with it. And I, I know that

people go to work and do horrible things for their children, much worse than be a school teacher or an engineer. But that doesn't mean that their children should not go and be exotic dancers, or, um.

[00:19:46]**Man:** So what if I just wanted to tell them I'm gonna quit. And they said okay.

[00:19:51]**Woman:** That might, that might happen. It might. That might be it.

[00:19:56]**Esther Perel:** Because it may not actually be the way that you would approach them. What you just shared is the inner dialogue, the soliloquy, but that's not necessarily the way you talk to them. The way you would talk to them may involve first and foremost, how much you appreciate the path they put you on and the values that they have inculcated in you, including the value of free will and agency and, and diligence and integrity and the wish to help et cetera. And that you've decided to find different platforms, different spaces in which to bring those values that you adhere to no less.

[00:20:41] The way you're presenting it, I quit. Anybody who has a vocation like you if they stop has only one vocabulary, it's the vocabulary of quitting, you know, because it's one passion is replaced by another. It's the passion of doing it and the passion of not doing it. But when you talk to them, it's about what are the values that are involved in what you do and that you are going to translate into other fields. You will always be a doctor, even if you don't practice as a physician properly, but I'm gonna put three dots at the end of this for a moment. And then I'm gonna ask your spouse here next to you or your partner, because where are you and what needs to happen for you today? And where does the personal and the professional connect in our conversation today for you?

[00:21:37]**Woman:** I don't know if I have a personal and professional anymore. I'm in a very different line of work. I have helped people, I have been a paramedic, I have fixed cars, I have done lots of things. Some of them not so reputable, some of them reputable, but what I do now is I work for the government. Do one job on the face of it and then do another in reality. And what I do in reality comes with a significant price tag, one but he did not sign up to pay I did not tell him when I made my decision. I had an eight year affair with my career. It took a crisis for him to find out, um.

[00:22:27]**Esther Perel:** You found out or you told him?

[00:22:29]**Woman:** I told him, I told him, admittedly, I think five, five gin and tonics in with my dying sister in the next room and all my family dead around me.

[00:22:42]**Man:** But you wouldn't have told me if it didn't feel you had. to. You would have continued.

[00:22:50]**Woman:** Um, I felt I was out of options. I, I had, I couldn't run interference on too many fronts anymore. I had maintained one job on the face of things, I had maintained the other, had been in an ICU for months with my sister, trying to keep her alive. We had gotten her back alive, miraculously. It was tenuous. It had taken millions, five States. It took superhuman efforts even by my ridiculous standards. And I had a, well, I knew that I would slip and the truth would come out. So it was better that it came out from me. It was better that I not

continue the lie. And I just tell him. So I told him and so he found out that he was on a train that he never bought a ticket for. And it was incredibly unfair. And I will live with the guilt for the rest of my life. Every morning I wake up, there will be that. And every night I go to bed, it's still there. And I'm also tired, like he is. I'm tired of all these facades. 'Cause there have been many faces to meet. Lots of faces. Lots of places.

[00:23:36] The work I do is not nearly as sexy as people think it is. There's a perception of what it is. And it is not that. It is long nights and airports where people know you better at an airport bar than your own family will ever know you. But like him, I was born into it. I was set on a path. I was custom built like a car for a specific race. And I've driven that track. And the car is now burning oil. The balance of that, it's probably leaking at exhaust port number four. I'm exhausted, and he carries the burden of my exhaustion on top of his exhaustion. And it's ridiculous. And yet here we sit in the middle of COVID where we all had to come colliding together to do two very confidential jobs in a very confined space and my whole world and networks that I had built and worked so hard for.

[00:25:17] And that he has helped support me. And since I told him the truth, that came crashing down around me, when you couldn't travel anymore, those connections, that interpersonal bond, where you have to meet the person for them to trust you, you have to meet them, they have to see you in the flesh. You need to share a drink with them. They need to know that you can handle your liquor because right, you never trust someone who can't have six beers. All those things went away. And I watched my world dissolving now in a new way. And so here we sit. He wants out of his world and mine is crumbling around me again. And it's really the only thing I have left alive. Everything else is dead. He is my world. Yes, he is everything. If I leave my world and my job, I leave some of the security that comes with it. It protects me. We protect our own.

[00:26:24] **Esther Perel:** Her dilemma is less clear because in some way, her dilemma is not being played out in the session, but is being played out by the very fact that she reached out for the session. Listening to her, I thought a few times, what could she be doing? And then I decided it's none of my business, but it's probably nothing that I imagined. Or maybe even you are imagining. She had played, she was tired and fed up and wanting at least to have the option of leaving. By coming to doing this podcast with me, she was basically creating a path of no return to make it impossible to go back. And that is the dilemma that is being played out without my ever knowing what she actually does. The two people who have reached a limit, but only one of them will be able to leave at this moment because at least one job needs to maintain the stability, the economic survival of this family.

[00:27:51] **Woman:** And mine is making very poor money at the moment with no ability to go out into the world.

[00:27:58] **Esther Perel:** That, is that accurate? What I just said, that one of you at this moment, it's about in part deciding which one of you-

[00:28:11] **Woman:** Could go.

[00:28:12] **Esther Perel:** ... could go and what are the family repercussions, the economic repercussions and the safety repercussions?

[00:28:22] **Woman:** Yes. I can make money doing anything probably enough. So for me, the economics don't matter so much. I know he worries that I will worry about the economic stability, but that comes second to physical safety, social safety, and not seeing him progress in something. I, I called him off hand a corpse a couple of weeks ago in the living room, he was like watching a corpse do their job. It was awful, which was a little harsh.

[00:29:02] **Esther Perel:** Is that exacerbated because of confinement, because of COVID-19?

[00:29:09] **Woman:** Probably.

[00:29:10] **Esther Perel:** Has pushed everything, exacerbated things.

[00:29:14] **Woman:** Let's say it, it's like a frost heave, it's pushed it up to the surface more so because we've been in close quarters.

[00:29:20] **Man:** I think as we have, as we have become more frustrated in our jobs. And as we have recognized that our frustration shows to each other and as we have learned, my frustration with my job makes her angry for me, her frustration with her job makes me angry for her, but there's no one else to direct that anger at except the other person. So oftentimes she gets angry at me for staying at my job. Um, and she sometimes seems to set out to make my job appear miserable as if, to give me more motivation to leave, but because I can't leave tomorrow, um, it really makes it much harder to actually go into work. Um.

[00:30:26] **Woman:** I've tried to tone it down, really.

[00:30:27] **Man:** Right.

[00:30:29] **Esther Perel:** When, what happens is that you both are so taking over the experience of the other person that you enter into a situation that we call empathic distress. Instead of being able to really be an empathetic listener to the distress of the other, you take that distress in and you are unable to be empathetic to each other and you become angry to each other. And now each of you on top of your miserable job situations, you have each other that you need to fight with as well.

[00:31:02] **Man:** We have done much fighting.

[00:31:04] **Woman:** Much fighting, much more than the last 18 years in the last six months.

[00:31:12] **Man:** Yeah.

[00:31:12] **Esther Perel:** Give me a snapshot.

[00:31:15] **Woman:** Back yard last night.

[00:31:16] **Man:** In the house last night.

[00:31:17] **Woman:** In the house last night.



[00:31:17] **Esther Perel:** What's this scene? Just so I have a sense

[00:31:23] **Man:** A very good example. My wife obviously needs to stay in touch and connected all the time with many different people all over the world, and most of the time, it seems that the types of things they deal with are bad. So we might be having dinner or watching a TV show or going to bed and my wife, who by virtue of her job is still way tuned in to the badness of the world. And there is no real opportunity to shut that off and to kind of break that connection. So she and I may have dinner with many more people who are invisible to me. Um, she needs to be able to do things like just detach and sit and read a book. That girl is not able to exist anymore.

[00:32:33] **Woman:** The definition of my job is to care for a million different people in a million different cities by virtue of its nature.

[00:32:47] **Esther Perel:** And today, instead of the books you drink?

[00:32:51] **Woman:** Drink, sit in the backyard, scroll through email, email, text messages signal, email, text messages, signal.

[00:33:06] **Esther Perel:** So he says, when I come home, I've given the best of me to my patients and I bring the leftovers home and I have nothing left to give to myself or to my wife. But you say at the end of the day, there is no end to the day because I have to give everything of myself to these people. And since they're all over the world, there is no time zones. And therefore there is no day and night and I have nothing left to give to myself and to him and you are both depleted and then you end up taking it out on each other.

[00:33:45] **Woman:** Then it starts over again the next day.

[00:33:47] **Esther Perel:** Right. So the first thing we need to find a way to insert here is the ability to not make each other continuously feel worse about that which you need no help feeling bad about.

[00:34:11] **Man:** That's true.

[00:34:13] **Woman:** I would say we have both done the self-flagellation exercise very well.

[00:34:21] **Esther Perel:** Yeah. But then you go back and forth between blame and self blame and you need food. You need to nurture each other as you are contemplating major life transitions. Each of you in your own right, are making a very important decision. Even if you only have one of them put into action right now, if you spend all your energies on fighting each other off, you will not be able to make any decision about work because you both are massively isolated and you are each other's biggest support. If you don't have that available, you will not be able to make any decision. You are each other's most important consigliere here. But if you experienced the other as on the attack, then you can't ask them to help you to sit with you, to ruminate, to think it through, to, to, to calculate the consequences, the cost and benefits of every inch of the decision. He has no one to talk to about this, or at least not in the important cast of characters. And you have nobody to talk about this in your cast of characters.

[00:35:42] **Woman:** We're very isolated and it is growing worse in COVID. We're very alone.

[00:35:48] **Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm[affirmative].

[00:35:50] **Man:** Probably for many people the work environment is a lonely one, I have many acquaintances at work, people that I work with quite well all day long, we're pleasant and laugh and do all of the superficial things that you do as you are at work. Am I going to go ahead and drink with any of them to kind of talk about how I really feel with any of them? No, they're not those types of relationships. We are employed by an administration which is oftentimes distant, and that's probably characteristic of many workplace environments.

[00:36:35] **Woman:** No, but tell her that you came from something better. Explain that you have a point of comparison. I think just like I do that you came from something that worked, your prior practice. And so, you know how isolated you are now. I think that is a point of pain here for him. He knows it can be better. And if you know there is better out there, what you're experiencing is 10 times worse.

[00:37:02] **Man:** Yes, that is true. I came from somewhere that was different. I came from somewhere where I was an owner and when I first started working where I am now, I was frustrated because of the differences. And I was frustrated that we were unable to accomplish things and be the type of doctor that I was.

[00:37:26] **Esther Perel:** But you never think, do you, do you think sometimes I need a different place to practice rather than I need a different profession.

[00:37:38] **Man:** So sure. Simply doing primary care in a different environment or returning to my former place of employment. And I have thought of that.

[00:37:50] **Esther Perel:** Say more.

[00:37:53] **Man:** My gut tells me that my path to satisfaction, goes somewhat deeper than that.

[00:38:04] **Esther Perel:** It occurs to me that while he's talking about his guts, he keeps speaking from his head when she would actually listen to the dog and not to him. The dog seems to be reacting with the kind of intensity to the matter that he is repressing.

Do you know how to put your head on his shoulders on that occasion, regardless of if you are talking about how you feel, but just simply to rest, is he good at putting his head on your shoulder? Do you know how to support each other? Just with your hands and body, without having to talk, to lean on each other?

[00:38:50] **Woman:** Only once one of us is sobbing or angry. It has to get bad before we reach that point of it, it's not a habit.

[00:38:58] **Man:** We would perceive each other as weak.

[00:39:00] **Woman:** As weak. Correct.

[00:39:02] **Esther Perel:** Mans, they can never be weak. And in my line of work, you can never be weak.

[00:39:06]Man: Well I think it's more for just-

[00:39:09]Esther Perel: Our family.

[00:39:09]Man: ... if you showed signs of breaking down, you would look weak in my eyes.

[00:39:15]Esther Perel: Yes.

[00:39:15]Man: Forget everybody else. And if I just came in and-

[00:39:19]Esther Perel: Sobbed.

[00:39:20]Man: ... sobbed and broke down, or I was weak, if I asked you for help, I would seem to be a burden. And you would think less of me. So it's easier just not to ask. And we also aren't necessarily the best teachers and supporters of each other.

[00:39:43]Woman: No, no he sounds like the voice in my head right now. If I come home and I tell him, I need a hug, I failed at picking myself up off the ground and dusting myself off.

[00:39:56]Man: You've said before that sometimes the solution to our problems should be just to lie better.

[00:40:03]Woman: I'm not saying that anymore.

[00:40:05]Man: If I come home and I've had a bad day at the office and I show that it's my fault because I wasn't, I hadn't suppressed it before I walked in the door. If you have a bad day at work and you show it, it's because you haven't hit it well enough. And that is just so fundamentally wrong.

[00:40:29]Woman: That is built in to the cultures of our jobs.

[00:40:33]Man: And here we are talking to her.

[00:40:36]Woman: Yes, because we've replicated it today in our home life.

[00:40:39]Man: So it doesn't seem like it's working.

[00:40:42]Esther Perel: No, I'd say it's a pretty monumental failure other than the fact that we're still sitting here.

[00:40:50]Woman: This is what happens when two type A analysts survive for 19 years together.

[00:40:56]Esther Perel: Until the last sentence you were doing really well.

[crosstalk 00:41:03]. Yes. You went ahead and deflected the whole thing. You actually, you know, you are very cognizant of what's goes on. You agree, I think quite a lot about the state of affairs, your shared insight. You don't know what to do with it yet, but for a moment, you actually, each were able to say, this is what's happened to us. This what we have done to each other and with each other, some of it is our professions. And some of it is our families that we come from and what we have internalized and how we each basically live with the same monologue in our heads of button up, be strong, be stoic, be fearless, play through the pain,

toughen it up, don't complain, and even if you do go there, there won't be anyone there for you.

[00:42:08]**Man:** Sure.

[00:42:09]**Esther Perel:** So you share actually you may have very different work lines, but you actually share a certain psychology that has been part of your work and part of, and that you have then brought into your relationship. You need to find a way first and foremost, to establish a base of support together. Because I think part of why you don't resolve the professional dilemma is because on some level, you're afraid that if you do, it's gonna separate you.

[00:42:41]**Man:** What if we look weak?

[00:42:44]**Esther Perel:** For having given up? For being what he calls quitters? And neither of you are quitters and you come from families where nobody quits and you've been given all the privileges of people who shouldn't quit.

[00:42:59]**Woman:** I've fought very hard to not quit. I've fought too hard to quit now. That's what my brain tells me. It's taken too much. And then I know this doesn't work.

[00:43:12]**Man:** She defines herself to a very great degree by what she has overcome and the struggles that she faces. And if things were to get easy, quote unquote, because she wouldn't have a struggle to define her.

[00:43:31]**Esther Perel:** Why were you asked to go home?

[00:43:34]**Man:** Uh, the idea was to help with, um, social isolation, um, to physically remove yourself from the environment.

[00:43:45]**Esther Perel:** But why did you not, you're a primary care Man. Why did they not want you in the hospital?

[00:43:52]**Man:** Because we don't do hospital-based work anymore.

[00:43:55]**Woman:** Outpatient.

[00:43:56]**Man:** As an outpatient, only primary care doctor with a hospitalist team that supports you and takes care of your patients when they're sick, we can talk about a lot of stuff over the phone, a lot stuff over video, but you don't have to necessarily be there in order to get that work done.

[00:44:15]**Esther Perel:** Why emasculated?

[00:44:20]**Man:** I think when you're a doctor, you have a perception of yourself as a doctor that I'm gonna wear a white coat and stroll around the hospital and treat sick people and fix problems, make people well, we do some of that in primary care. We also manage people chronically over time, and that is less dramatic when a crisis came some people were drawn to the fire and some people were pushed away.

[00:44:59]**Esther Perel:** Does it give you a crisis of conscience? I should have been on the front lines and I chose the comfort of home instead. Then I feel that if I was

quote the real doctor that I've always thought I was, I would have made sure to be on the front lines. See your experience is different from hers. She says I have paid dues in the suffering and loss department. I don't feel guilty about asking you to stay home, but you seem to be at odds with yourself about it on some level.

[00:45:45] **Man:** I guess it would be nice to get my hands a little dirty. Doing office-based primary care is a pretty clean existence, you know, I think sometimes that leads to a false experience, a bland experience.

[00:46:08] **Esther Perel:** Yep.

[00:46:09] **Man:** And certainly during COVID when one day runs together into another, without much definition of time space, you know, you're looking for something else, something to break the monotony, something to break the mold. And when you asked earlier what it is that I'm looking for or where or why now that's certainly part of it is to try to find something new, to challenge myself and to have an experience of something. I think you're right in that it was easier to be stuck and unhappy and bland because at least she knew where I worked.

[00:46:56] **Esther Perel:** You resent her for it, or do you?

[00:46:59] **Man:** I am somewhat envious until I really think about what it is that she does. And I wonder would I really be up for that? It's easy to think that you can do things, it's harder to actually do them. I guess what I'm searching for is a chance to prove whether I can or I can't. She has that opportunity. She has that opportunity too much.

[00:47:32] **Esther Perel:** Right. So she's on the front line.

[00:47:36] **Man:** She's definitely on the frontline.

[00:47:37] **Esther Perel:** And you, you're struggling with a feeling of cowardice?

[00:47:41] **Woman:** And he is not, but I can't convince him.

[00:47:50] **Esther Perel:** Oh you came so quickly to the defense.

[00:47:51] **Woman:** I know but I can't convince him.

[00:47:52] **Man:** That's right.

[00:47:52] **Woman:** And it brings, it hurts. It physically hurts that I can't tell you that you're not a coward.

[00:48:00] **Man:** I haven't really been given that many opportunities to prove that I'm not one.

[00:48:05] **Woman:** You've stayed with me for 19 years.

[00:48:06] **Man:** That does deserve something.

[00:48:09] **Woman:** Um, no, right? You have proven time and time again, you are not coward and it's so, so upsetting to see you sit in this chair and rot and think so little of yourself and I know differently. And I can't convince him. This is, this is one

pitch for the angels I can't make, I can't sell this one, I can't convince this one, I can't translate it, I can't do it.

[00:48:44] **Esther Perel:** Because what he says to you is I need to go get my hands dirty too. You the hands get dirty a lot, different hands, different dirt, that he needs to grow and test himself. And the fact that he is there for you is partly helpful, but he's left with a bit of a moral injury between what he does and his values.

[00:49:15] **Woman:** Which are strong, his values are very strong.

[00:49:17] **Esther Perel:** Right, but then there is a gap between those values and his actions.

[00:49:25] **Woman:** We call it in my line of work, ideological chasms. They're very dangerous because when people step up to the edge of them and they know where they should be, they can fall into it so quickly and just be lost.

[00:49:43] **Esther Perel:** You will do anything, not to lose him.

[00:49:47] **Woman:** Mm-hmm[affirmative].

[00:49:48] **Esther Perel:** Of course, understandably so. So what are you gonna do? He has some idea of how he needs to start his course of action.

[00:49:58] **Woman:** Okay I'll help him get his hands dirty. I don't think he'd like it much.

[00:50:03] **Esther Perel:** No, but you have some of your own questions to answer.

[00:50:07] **Woman:** I'm tired, very tired. He needs to go do the thing that I can't do anymore. That hurts.

[00:50:23] **Esther Perel:** Or maybe it's time to reverse rules. You be there by him while he goes out on the train, the trenches.

[00:50:35] **Woman:** Scary, it's my job to protect, very scary.

[00:50:39] **Esther Perel:** They both sit on the edge of a precipice that their careers have been so central to who they are as individuals and how they have structured their relationship to each other and especially to the world around them. We may be at the end of the session, but we have just begun this conversation.

[00:51:08] **Voiceover:** Esther Perel is a therapist, best-selling author, speaker, and host of the podcast. Where should we begin? And How's work to apply with a colleague or partner to do a session for the podcast or to follow along with each episode, show notes, go to [howswork.estherperel.com](https://howswork.estherperel.com). How's work is produced by magnificent noise for Gimlet and Esther Perel productions. Our production staff includes Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Hiwote Getaneh, and Kristin Mueller, original music and additional production by Paul Schneider and the executive producers of How's work are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Lydia Polgreen, Colin Campbell, Courtney Hamilton, Nick Oxenhorn, Sara Kramer, Jack Saul, and the entire Esther Perel global media team.

