

Announcer: None of the voices in this series are ongoing patients of Esther Perel. Each episode of "Where Should We Begin" is a one-time counseling session. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names and some identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real. This next session briefly describes an instance of domestic violence and may not be appropriate for all listeners. Please take care while listening.

Her: I thought marrying someone from Latin America would be easy. Even though we speak in Spanish, feels like two different languages.

Esther: He's Colombian, she's Mexican. He's 19 years older than her. He never thought he would get married. He had given up on marriage, but now they are married for a year.

Her: Being married to him, it started opening these Pandora boxes that I didn't know I had.

Him: She has more explosive ways of reacting to things and I'm always kind of bringing her back, like, "Come on. Give it a moment."

Her: I know that I've hurt him. Verbally, I can be very abusive.

Esther: They devolve into rigid, predictable, high conflict. They went from heaven to hell very fast.

Him: I do not speak with that person when she's extremely upset and explosive. I just become quiet instead of continuing a conversation where very bad words come out, and it becomes very verbally violent. For me, I'm like, how can I communicate with her?

Esther: Something about the rigidity and the immediacy of these types of negative escalations lets me know that there is a lot more reciprocity in the patterns than any of the two of them allude to. And so we're going to go digging.

Esther, Session...: Encantada conocerles [its a pleasure to meet you]

Him: Gracias, lo mismo [thank you, a pleasure to meet you as well]

Esther: Y vamos hacer en ingles [Lets begin in English].

Him: Claro, of course, for sure

Esther: If there are things that are better said in Spanish, because your heart lives in Spanish, then we switch and I'll translate. Don't worry about that.

Her: Thank you.

Him: Okay.

Esther: Okay? We have nasty fights. From one to 10, how bad?

Him: For me, they're 15.

Esther: Tell me a little bit more about you first so that I have a sense, and then we'll go to the scene of the crime.

Him: Okay. Good. I am 19 years older than she is, so there's a different way of seeing the world just because of that.

Esther: How did you meet?

Him: We met in a place where we did meditation. I've always had that curiosity to find the deeper meaning of life in many ways. I'm very noble, in the sense of childlike almost, innocent, a good heart. I feel that I have a good heart. Because of that, I feel sometimes people might take advantage of that.

Esther: What drew you to her?

Him: For the first time in my life I felt that I had matured in the way I am with the person I'm seeing this person, because of what she is, not what she represents, that laundry list was gone of something-

Esther: What was on the list?

Him: On the list was there's a certain look, there's a certain level of education, and so-

Esther: So that if she was also extraordinaire, then you would become-

Him: Exactly.

Esther: What?

Him: I would look good.

Esther: Tell me a little bit more about your background in Colombia.

Him: Overprotected, I think, by my-

Esther: By who?

Him: By my mom.

Esther: And dad?

Him: My dad, very noble, a good mannered person. The kind of person that never fights, but a bit absent in the process of raising the kids. It was always my mother. I've always felt that the strong women in my family, they're so strong and they've pretty much sucked the brain into nothingness and I kind of feel my dad lost his ability to be a man.

Esther: You're making sure-

Him: I'm making sure that I don't lose my-

Esther: With her, that your brain doesn't get sucked out of you?

Him: Yes. That I don't lose my identity, that I don't ... Do not suck my brains. This is mine. You can't touch it. I remember a conversation-

Esther: Hold on a second. Does that mean that in part, when you respond to your wife, there's a part of you that says, "I'm not going to let you do to me what my mother did to my dad"?

Him: Most likely, yeah. And I think-

Esther: And "I'm going to stand up"?

Him: Exactly.

Esther: What do you say when you're in your fighting mode with your flag defending?

Him: I say nothing, which gets her more upset.

Esther: What do you say inside of you? To her, you say, "You ain't going to move me. You ain't going to push me. You ain't going to get an inch of me," but inside you say what?

Him: "She's acting up. She's saying crazy stuff. She'll calm down. She's making this stuff up that is not going anywhere."

Esther: It's the good old women are hysterical?

Him: Yeah. Yes.

Esther: You're smiling.

Him: Yes. I would say that I go in that stereotype.

Esther: Continue.

Him: "You're not reasoning, so I cannot have a conversation with that." And then another thing that really gets me is when her language changes into something that is very violent. I'm not used to that. I don't know how to handle that.

Her: When I say "cabron ..." Because when you fight in your language, you let it go. There is a release when I say it. It's more for me than for him and I totally forget that it's going to hurt him in some way. I just let my anger go.

Him: For me, the strong words, for some reason, have a huge impact. I feel that it escalates into a place that-

Esther: Part of it is you also think of yourself as so good. "I'm such a good person. I don't deserve this." You're indignant. Something like that?

Him: Sure.

Esther: Say it in your own words.

Him: I'm good. I'm a nice person. I understand my shortcomings, but I don't deserve to be treated with that language.

Esther Commenta...: The way he describes the cycle, the escalation, leaves him out of the equation. It's as if he's not an active participant here and she's doing all of this on her own. In a dance where you have one person who attacks and one person who stonewalls, or one person who withholds or withdraws and one person who pursues, it's very important to understand that if the person who withholds contributes in intensifying the pursuit of the other and the person who pursues intensifies the need of the other to stonewall and to retreat, each person is co-creating the other. That is the essence of the dance, especially in negative escalations.

Esther: You close up, you say nothing, and the less you say, and the more her requests turn into protests, and you kind of wait for her to calm down on her own without engaging.

Him: Right. She normally does. She does that for me.

Esther: She does what for you?

Him: Comes back after that tsunami of extravaganza of things. She normally calms back down. I could easily go to sleep and sleep it off and then we'll talk tomorrow. She would not allow that ever to happen. We might fight until 3:00 A.M. She would not let it subside until some sort of communication gets to a place where we can go to sleep, give each other a hug, which is beautiful, so I kind of wait until all of that happens.

Esther: She does the dumping and she does the repairing.

Him: Yes.

Esther: And you just are-

Him: I listen-

Esther: A passive participant.

Her: Very much so.

Esther: It's very interesting. She runs the whole show and you're kind of almost an audience.

Him: Yes.

Esther: You watch her lose it and then you watch her regain it, and then you thank her for doing it so nicely, but she does everything.

Him: I try to express my point of view. I've tried to say, "Let's talk about this. This is how I feel," but it just doesn't go.

Esther: Because that's not what it's about. You still think that it's about expressing points of views. It's like opening a small umbrella in the middle of a storm.

Him: Right.

Esther: You're trying to open a small umbrella and have a rational discussion in the middle of something that has completely disregulated. It doesn't work.

Him: Right.

Esther: That is going to have to change, because I know when you come in here, you probably think what has to change is her.

Him: No, I understand that I'm a big part of the process.

Esther: Good. That makes us move a lot faster.

Him: For sure. I wouldn't be here otherwise. I know that ...

Esther: Let me hear from you a little bit. You're in the meditation room and you see this man and what draws you to him?

Her: We started as friends, like the lead conversations. He had no clue. I had to do all the job of seduction. He kept saying that he was already ... Love was not for him. He was not going to be with someone.

Esther: He was doing that part?

Her: Yes.

Him: Yeah, pretty much. I was-

Esther: There must be some ballad about that in Spanish too. No?

Him: For sure. There's plenty of those. Where you just drink a lot and listen to boleros

Esther: Some nice boleros with A syrup of self-pity.

Him: Oh, yeah. There's one called La Copa Rota. You should listen to that one.

Esther: It says?

Him: It's violent. "Give me the broken glass because I want to cut my-"

Esther: Cut my veins?

Him: Yeah. All these songs. This one, the lyrics, oh, my God. We grew up listening to that.

New Speaker: [Esther plays song].

Him: That one. There it is. That's it.

Her: I never heard this before.

Him: Oh, my goodness. That song is ...

Esther: That's the man you married.

Esther Commenta...: He knows exactly what I'm talking about. He knows exactly which song to bring up in the Latin blues repertoire, of the man who's been treated unkindly by life, of the man who did everything, and the woman abandoned him in the songs. This is a script that he has learned in his childhood, but also that is part of the cultural tradition that he comes from. By putting it in the larger context of a character, it's taken out of pathology and put back into a cultural legacy.

Esther: And for you?

Her: For me, my upbringing is that it was the opposite of his household. My parents would fight in front of me. They would yell, they would scream, they would shake each other. There was a lot of banging and a lot of hitting. My mom would hit me a lot. My dad would defend me. It was a whole Mexican telenovela that would give you material for years. It was a lot of pain. I had to

put myself together many times. I always wanted to see myself in the eyes of a man and to put my value in a relationship.

Esther: But both of you say, "I was looking for a person to whom I could see myself."

Her: Yeah.

Esther: It's just that you wanted somebody to fix, because then you would know how important you are, and you wanted someone who was so perfect, there was nothing to fix. These are very old, rather gender-based scripts. In this case, he finds the perfect woman and she becomes the perfect woman by fixing the broken man who cries without solace.

Her: Yes. Totally.

Esther: That telenovela has been done too.

Him: Many times.

Esther: No matter how much you've traveled, the two of you, you've stayed rather faithful to some old stories.

Him: Mm-hmm (affirmative). From where we come.

Her: True.

Him: From the place where we come.

Esther: Right. They travel with us. For all of us, they travel with us. But sometimes we don't realize it.

Esther: Tell me something, when you fight, you threaten each other with divorce all the time?

Her: All the time.

Him: She does. I don't.

Her: I even go online and I find tickets, and he's like, "But your immigration." "I don't care about my visa. I don't care about my green card. I'm out." I always just want to escape.

Him: She goes to 100%, or 120. I cannot stay back. "Wait, let's see."

Her: I think that for me, it's like when I'm fighting, I go to this void. It's like this anger takes over me and it's so difficult for me to explain him, because in his eyes, everything he does is perfect. For example, we were having a conversation and I

say, "It would be so nice if you brought me flowers." He's like, "Why are you not buying me flowers? I'm a human too. I have feelings too." Like, "It'd be so nice that you tell me how nice I look." "Why are you not telling me that I look so nice?" It's always about him and it's never about me. I don't know if that's a very childlike part of me or what, but I am ... I think I'm exhausted because now that you describe it, I was like, "Wow. I do everything. That's right." It never occurred to me I do the repair and I do the break, and then I do the cleanup.

Esther: He does the being nice.

Her: Yeah. Now he's getting better at least at talking, but before, he would just go into the room and literally put-

Esther: He sulks.

Her: Yeah. Because he doesn't like me to tell him "cabron" or "pendejo," but for me he's saying, "Fuck you." I'm like, "This is a person, your wife talking to you. Help me. Don't let me go through hell alone. Let's talk about this." Also, what happens to me is that I get angry so fast that it's never about the trigger. It's never about what happened that it got me angry. The conversation then becomes, "You are a bad person because you got so angry."

Esther: When you yell and fight and feel like you're not yourself, does it feel like it's similar to how you saw your mom?

Her: Yes. I became my mom and I hate that. She has beautiful parts-

Esther: So do you.

Her: But ... Thank you. But her toxic parts are very intense. The worst thing I see is seeing myself as fighting as she would be fighting.

Esther: She's a very, very important part of you. She's a mixed blessing. She's the one that has taken you out of many tough situations, but she sometimes fights as if every situation is a tough situation, when in fact you're just talking about breakfast.

Esther Commenta...: She grew up with tremendous violence and was often threatened. As a result, she developed vigilant skills to detect threat and to take her anger and to turn her fear into belligerence, so that she could defend herself. What happens to us when this is our childhood is that later on, we sometimes don't know really to differentiate. Is this a threatening situation or is this just an unpleasant situation? Our nervous system is geared up to fight as if everything is red alert.

Esther: The part that struggles more is the one that doesn't necessarily know to assess danger. Since danger is imminent and could happen anywhere, at any moment, God forbid you got too comfortable, your whole marriage becomes a threat. It

becomes a danger from which you need to leave right away, when in fact, you're having an argument about breakfast.

Him: About cheese.

Esther: About cheese?

Him: The last one was about cheese.

Esther: Cheese. Glad I was close.

Her: He didn't want cheese, and I'm like, "How dare you!"

Esther: Right.

Her: You don't want cheese.

Her: I know he's a good man I didn't want my anger to transform him or to push him away, and I think that is something that I would not forgive myself, if I would have pushed him away because of my violence.

Esther: The thing that I keep being moved by when I listen to you is that nowhere do you justify it. I think that makes a big difference for him. At the same time, as you learn to speak with him in a way where you speak forcefully but without lashing out, he's going to need to learn to stay and not continuously think, "Nobody has a right to criticize me on anything, or even to ask me for anything, or to make me feel anything less than perfect." That's the flip side of this. She then goes around thinking, "I'm so bad," and you go around thinking, "I'm so good." There's nothing more annoying than living with a saint.

Him: For me, it's almost ... I don't know how to deal with it maybe because of that, because how very-

Esther: Wait. When she says, "I would love for you to bring me flowers," what's the problem with that statement?

Him: Exactly.

Esther: Tell me.

Him: Nothing.

Esther: Obviously there is. Because you don't hear it as a request. You instantly hear it as a protest. You hear it as a criticism, and then you say, "Do you do it?" And you do this eye for eye business.

Him: Yes.

Esther: Then you go into a competition. Who does more? Who sacrifices more? Do you do that one too?

Him: Oh, sure.

Her: Yeah, all the time.

Esther: Tell me about that one.

Her: He comes home and I have the meal ready. One day I didn't, and he's like, "Why is the meal not ready?" Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Kind of giving me the macho Latino, and I'm like, "No, honey. I work too. I'm tired too. You want dinner? You cook it yourself." And then he could go like, "Whoa," or he gets angry. He gets a little bit fussy, but that was it. Then on that note, on another day I was trying to ... He was falling asleep and I was trying to kiss him, or starting to try to do something, and then he's like, "I'm falling asleep. I'm tired," and then I got so angry. I'm like, "I'm tired too, but we have to make time for these things."

Him: No. I was just falling asleep. I was very tired and I wasn't thinking of that.

Her: In a way, it's like that. He's always perfect, he's always fine, whatever he does he's great, so there's no more room for improvement or to give a little bit extra mile. I can give all the extra mile there is, but he won't.

Esther: You do put her to work, and you have this interesting, if you allow me-

Him: Please.

Esther: Way of thinking that you're entitled.

Him: Yes.

Esther: There is an expectation that there should be a meal ready on the table when you come home.

Him: I was alone most of my life, so I would go home and make my own meal. I got used to that, but now it's probably like, "Thank you for ... This is great. This feels great."

Esther: But do you tell her "This feels great," or do you mostly tell her on the one day when she doesn't?

Him: I tell her on the day when she doesn't. I also tell her when she cooks for me, "Thank you. That was very nice. This is beautiful." I do tell her this, but also when it's not there I'm like, "[inaudible 00:22:42]-

Her: You tell me more on the day that there's nothing there.

Him: Okay.

Her: Also, if I'm watching Netflix and I'm just like ... My five minutes of Netflix and chill and you open the door, you expect me to come run and kiss and "Welcome, honey. How are you?" And then he gets annoyed and he says that my iPad is my affair.

Esther: But it wouldn't occur to you to walk over to her?

Him: What do you mean, "to walk over to her"?

Esther: Instead of waiting for her to leap towards you-

Him: Right.

Esther: You could also-

Him: Go towards her.

Esther: Go to her.

Him: Yes, of course.

Esther: But you're too good for that. That you would consider is humiliating.

Him: Yes. I am aware of a tremendous pride that I carry everywhere I go.

Esther: What do you call him? The one that is so proud that anything that is not catered at the top-

Him: Yeah-

Esther: Can instantly make him feel deflated and humiliated?

Him: It's like the little prince, the "principito." I catch myself being that person that I despise.

Her: Maybe this "principito," it has also helped you at something, because if you didn't have that pride you couldn't have gone far in this country as an immigrant.

Esther Commenta...: It's a very nice moment here. She caught onto the idea that the part that she struggles with today is also the part that saved her as a child. She realizes that something similar may be happening with him. The part of him that he calls his pride and that he struggles with may also have been a part of his survival strategy earlier on. It's a beautiful empathetic reach from her, and I just wish that I had highlighted it then.

Him: I'm not sure I ... I think I could've done much better without it.

Esther: Describe your relationship with the "principito," because I agree with you. I'm not sure it has been so helpful.

Him: No.

Esther: I think it has often actually made him say, "I'm too good for this."

Him: It has hurt me quite a bit in my career.

Esther: I feel that. Say more.

Him: I would say my career, because I had an opportunity to be with amazing people and I could've taken better advantage of that by being more humble and learning from them, but the little prince was equal.

Esther: The little prince was too busy trying to show how much he knew-

Him: Yeah, how good he was.

Esther: And so he couldn't really learn.

Him: That he was just as good as everyone else. I think in life, every day, walk around with these things, you lose so much opportunity to meet, talk to people, connect.

Esther: You come in here and you present like you're a new couple, lots of great things, except for the fact that she explodes. Her explosiveness is so disturbing to you and it completely paralyzes you. But then we find out this is predicated on this idea that you are the saint, you're the grounded guy, and you are the-

Him: Emotional.

Esther: Right. Hysterical. Let's put the right word. This way that you live with the "How dare you. How dare you ask me. How dare you tell me. How dare you usually is because I very quickly feel ashamed."

Him: That creates all this anger.

Esther: I would invite you to have a conversation with him about that. You'll probably glean more.

Her: Yeah, I can see that.

Esther: Ask him. Let him do the talking to you since you always do the talking and he would ...

Her: Would you like to talk more about why you might feel that you get offended quickly?

Him: I'm so good, right? I'm great. I'm so wise. I've done all this meditation and I've done all this schooling, so I deserve to be treated in a certain way. It goes back to the goodness of my dad. My dad was always a good man-

Esther: But what did you consider him? You considered him good?

Him: Weak.

Esther: Or you considered him weak?

Him: Weak.

Esther: That's what this is.

Him: It's like a beautiful man always there with a great personality, but I always felt like he never got what he wanted. He always was a nice guy, but ...

Esther: And you spend your time making sure that nobody takes advantage of you.

Him: Exactly. So I have this-

Esther: Even when you don't need to fight.

Him: If I drop that thing, I'm going to be a weak person like my dad.

Esther: You think that she's the fighter because she explodes.

Him: Personality, yeah.

Esther: But you are both fighters. Like you say, or like you allude to, it probably has not done you good, certainly not in work, and it's not going to do you good here either, because you are with somebody who is very generous.

Her: See? I'm generous too.

Esther: Don't let him convince you that you're not. You're very generous and he is continuously paying attention to every time you miss a beat, and not to every other time when you sing beautifully. Because you're so making sure that you are not being screwed.

Him: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Esther: This dynamic is actually an opportunity, because you are with someone who is not there to take advantage of you, and you're going to learn what it's like to trust in that way.

Him: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Her: When you have that armor with you, it feels like everything that I'm upset about, it's an illusion. It's like you are gaslighting me, and that's not a good feeling, so thank you for being willing to remove that armor, because it's of no use.

Esther: How does he gaslight you? Tell him.

Her: You gaslight me when I tell you how I feel and you tell me, "You shouldn't be angry about that."

Him: I dismiss it.

Her: And then you make me feel that I am creating this idea in my head, and that what I am feeling is not valid.

Him: For me, it's difficult when the situation goes from zero to 100 in .2 seconds. You're like a Lamborghini.

Esther: I think that's what's difficult for you, you're so busy with the zero to 100, but there's a piece before. The piece before is that if she says, "I feel something," my guess is that part of why you tell her, "No, you don't" is because it's very hard for you to let her feel something without thinking that you're responsible about it.

Him: Mm-hmm (affirmative). The zero to 100 happens, the trigger is right behind it.

Esther: The first thing is, she can't really easily tell you whatever she feels without your being defensive about it, because it instantly triggers you an "I'm responsible for it. I need to do something about it. Since I don't think I should do something about it, or I don't agree with it, then I say, 'No, you have no validity,' and I disqualify. You shouldn't feel this way. You shouldn't want this." Then the Lamborghini gets going. Because then she feels that she's disqualified and made invisible, and she's going to show you. Lamborghini is inside of her, but you often have the ignition key.

Him: I got the gas.

Esther: That doesn't mean that you can't learn not to explode, but there is a dance here that sets her up as well. Can she say, "I feel something" and you just say, "That's interesting. How so?"

Him: Yes, that's very different.

Esther: Can you give him a bunch of those statements, things you feel, want, experience, and just you practice being available without being responsible? Just being curious. Go ahead.

Her: I would like for you to come out with me on Friday nights after you come back from work, because it's like our only night off.

Him: I would love to. Fridays I am extremely exhausted, but we'll do something that will meet our needs. Sometimes I might not be in the mood to go dancing because I'm physically tired from a long week, but we can have-

Esther: Let me help you. I know you would love for us to go out on Friday night. I really like that, actually. I'm not sure I can do it each time, but I like the thought. Just repeat what she says. You don't have to agree with it. You don't have to commit to anything. You don't have to engage with it. You just have to say-

Him: I like that. Sounds good.

Esther: Just to acknowledge it. Or "I hear that's something that you would enjoy a lot." That's that. Most of the time people just want to feel that they're acknowledged.

Him: Have been heard. Right.

Esther: The best way to do that is to repeat what is said. Period. Keep going.

Her: Honey, it would be great that you would be able to consider not to talk to your mom every night before we go to bed, and that is the last thing you do before we get to bed together. I know you're worried about her. I know you're worried about your dad, but I feel that when you do that, you just go into a different mindset and you get very agitated or very sad, and I don't think it's good for us.

Him: I hear what you're saying. What I can do is find ways to get information from her at a time that is not disruptive to the time that we can spend together, but I still feel that I want to know ... I want to have updates and see how they're doing.

Her: Okay. How did we do on that one?

Esther: You tell me. How did that feel?

Her: It felt good. It felt better. It felt more honest. It felt good.

Esther: What would be the usual?

Her: "You are not understanding my mom, you don't understand how she feels. She's going through a hard time. How can you not be more empathetic?" Blah, blah, blah. Kind of.

Esther: Which you know is not the case. This is a perfect example of the ignition of the Lamborghini, because you're throwing stuff at her that is utterly not the case. "You bad."

Him: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You don't care about my mom, or you don't care about-

Esther: Yeah, you bad. You don't care about my mom. You don't understand my dad. You don't see what imminent death is like. As if she doesn't, first of all. Then, you're telling me I'm bad? That brings back the entire relationship and the violence that I knew. What do you think was told when she was being hit?

Him: That she's bad.

Her: With the family especially, it's been hard because when you say hurtful things like, "You don't have a relationship with your mom-"

Esther: So you don't understand the closeness-

Her: "So you don't understand the closeness."

Esther: You go to that place? You're good.

Her: "You don't speak to them. You are the weird ones. You are the ones that are not speaking with each other so often."

Esther Commenta...: What makes me smile, of course, is that this man who is so worried about being manipulated is a master manipulator, because it's not just that he tells her, "You don't understand why I care about my father's health and I need the updates," but then he adds another layer of "And of course you couldn't understand, because you don't nearly have that kind of relationship with your parents." It's hostile. But he thinks of himself as good, and she has bought into the idea that she's the belligerent one and he's the kind one.

Esther: All of that is kindle for the fire. But then you only see the fire and you do not see how much you-

Him: Contribute.

Esther: Yeah. And ignite it. Contribute to ignite it. Doesn't mean she can't resist it, but it doesn't come from nowhere. This was much better. Find a way to connect with your parents not before you go to sleep, so that you can be the husband and not the "son of."

Her: Yeah.

Esther: But I think that you have a lot of things on your menu, and now it's about putting this in place. And realizing that you won't leave here and suddenly transform, but you're going to practice this. You have a good idea, actually, of what works, what is helpful, and what is undermining. If you keep the degree of honesty with which you came here also with each other, you're on a very good track.

Announcer: Esther Perel is the author of "Mating in Captivity" and "The State of Affairs," and also the host of the podcast "How's Work?" To apply with your partner for a session for the podcast, or for show notes on each episode, go to whereshouldwebegin.estherperel.com. "Where Should We Begin" with Esther Perel is produced by Magnificent Noise, for Gimlet and Esther Perel Productions. Our production staff includes Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Destry Sibley, Hiwote Getaneh and Olivia Natt. Recorded by Noriko Okabe. Kristin Mueller is our engineer. Original music and additional production by Paul Schneider. The executive producers of "Where Should We Begin?" Are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Nazanin Rafsanjani, Courtney Hamilton, Lisa Schnall, Nick Oxenhorn, Dr. Guy Winch, and Jack Saul.