

Producer ([00:02](#)):

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.

Her ([00:19](#)):

I was the good girl, I got married out of college, I was abstinent, I did all the right things.

Esther ([00:49](#)):

She played everything by the rules. And he broke all the rules.

Her ([00:57](#)):

So many people have seen my marriage was this example of a good, solid relationship. Now, it's the opposite, where it's kind of the hot mess relationship.

Esther ([01:10](#)):

He did the one thing that was not to be part of marriage.

Him ([01:14](#)):

There was like five different encounters, and I had a sex with two of them.

Esther ([01:22](#)):

And he tossed her entire structure of life, her sense of identity, her expectations around marriage, her sense of herself as a woman.

Him ([01:32](#)):

I've been diagnosed bipolar. And I think that that has a significant bearing on how I've evolved.

Her ([01:42](#)):

He's really interested in a non-monogamous relationship and he thinks that's the only way he can operate, honestly. So it's like all these really shocking revelations, and I'm trying to figure out how to process.

Esther ([01:56](#)):

The aching question that they bring, both of them, is are we still even compatible?

Her ([02:18](#)):

I see things in him that I have in me, but I almost wish I could express more of in my life. Like I love his spontaneity. He strikes me as kind of like a wild guy, who loves new adventures and opportunities and just can easily put himself in situations that I might find uncomfortable. And so when I'm with him, I always feel like I can sort of just go along for the ride, and it feels really exhilarating. And I've always loved that about him, which is actually initially why at first, for various reasons, I kind of wrote him off as a romantic partner. Because I was very itemized and I had my boxes of what a partner would look like, and he didn't really check them.

Esther (02:58):

Wildness and spontaneity, great as a friend, not reliable enough as a boyfriend?

Her (03:04):

Yeah.

Esther (03:04):

Did you see his face?

Her (03:08):

And he wasn't nearly as religious as me at the time, and so all these things caused me to dismiss him initially. But our relationship grew and developed. And...

Him (03:24):

And I changed.

Her (03:24):

You changed a bit.

Him (03:25):

I changed a lot.

Her (03:26):

Yeah, yeah.

Esther (03:27):

Meaning?

Him (03:29):

The wildness that you allude to sort of caught up with me. I almost saw myself as a prodigal son, and I needed to kind of come back into the fold of conservative. Not conservative, but just Christianity that we'd been raised with. And I was also getting older, so three out of four of my brothers were teenage fathers, teenage husbands, and I was 20... I was going on 25, and I was just thinking, oh my gosh, I need to get my life together. I'm getting so old and I don't even know what I'm doing with my life. I haven't even graduated college yet. I also have been diagnosed bipolar, and that was just starting to catch up to me at 24, 25. I had never really experienced it. I would have the kind of hypomanias, but the deep depressions I did not have, and the extreme manias I didn't have. And that was starting to hit me at around 25. And was just trying to reassess my life, and made the decision that I would surround myself with wholesome people, and ideally, Christian people.

Him (04:35):

And I thought to myself, well, who's wholesome that I know? And no one that I know is even religious. And I thought, oh, that's right. She's Christian. It all seemed ordained, it all seemed that it was by God. We were very tapped into that sort of way of thinking. I was effectively trying to be something like you,

and latch myself on to you, I feel like. And your goodness and your wholesomeness, because that's what I felt that I wanted.

Esther ([04:59](#)):

And experienced as a divine intervention.

Him ([05:03](#)):

Yeah, I felt that way.

Her ([05:05](#)):

Well, I think part of it is like, that was sort of the religious community and context we were in, how fast everything happened for us at the time. Felt very normal, in terms of the people we surrounded ourselves with. And now we're in such a different space, or even hearing about that, I'm kind of like, oh my god, I feel like such a different person. But I think it didn't feel strange to us at all. And in fact, you talking about your brothers that were kind of forced into getting married because they had kids when they were teenagers, we felt downright old and adult getting married after getting our college degrees.

Esther ([05:44](#)):

In a way, all these decisions that you have made, you made with a lot of clarity, and a lot of certainty. Maybe in part because they were prescribed, that's what was expected and therefore, you didn't have to ask yourself, what does it mean for me? How do I respond to this? What do we want to do with that? And that clarity has accompanied you up to now. And now, for the first time, you have a question for which what is prescribed doesn't fit the two of you.

Esther ([06:31](#)):

They start by telling me their origin story, how they met and what drew them to each other. And how clear things were. There was a set step of progression. You meet, you foundle, if you want to have sex, you get married. When you marry, there's a very clear code of how you behave within marriage. This very clear idea that she had of life, he shattered it. And he interpreted his multiple affairs as a sign that he must be polyamorous. And because she has been living no longer just in one culture with one value system, she begins to wonder maybe there is such a thing as an open marriage. Maybe that's going to make him more honest. But then she thinks about her mother. Do you wish you had done what your mother did?

Her ([07:31](#)):

Sort of just divorce and then... no, No, I don't. Because she, I think... I mean, I know that she was in a very different phase of life. She had three kids, and the nature of their affair was really different than ours.

Esther ([07:50](#)):

Meaning?

Her ([07:51](#)):

My dad would have long term relationships with women, with a singular sort of girlfriend. So I think that just really wounded my mom, because so much of her love and identity still is derived from family. And

so that felt like such a deep cut for her, that I don't think she's recovered from still. She's never wanted to date. And so I don't want that. And at one point she even told me, a few weeks after I found out, and it makes me really sad for her, but a few weeks after he told me he cheated, I said, "I'm just sad, mom." And she said, "You're always going to be sad." And that broke my heart for her, because it's been over 20 years for her. And I can't imagine, like the depth of pain that I felt without him even being in a long term relationship with someone, I can't imagine sitting in that kind of grief.

Esther ([08:52](#)):

What sense did you make of it? What did it mean for you?

Him ([08:56](#)):

Yeah. So I think that the desire, thoughts, impulse toward a voracious consuming of life has always kind of been in me, I think that sex falls into that category.

Esther ([09:16](#)):

I want you to talk to her.

Him ([09:18](#)):

Yeah, I think that sex falls into that category. And I think that I effectively had to shut off that part of myself and manage when we got married. And so I would take care of it myself solo, I would work out, I would throw myself into work or travel or us, at various times. Like we would buy books, we would try to work on it ourselves. So it wasn't like I was completely just, oh, I'll neglect this, but it was like, I'll work on it with you. Also, knowing that this was not something that you were trying to... you weren't really pressing for, outside of me. So that caught up with me. And then year four and a half, year five, the chance that something might happen outside of my con... of course, I'm always in control, but the chance that I would just let it happen, became greater and greater.

Esther ([10:26](#)):

I'm getting a sense that maybe the priority is not a conversation about polyamory, but rather a conversation about bipolarity. Which is known to have acceleration and a sense of mania that comes with intense sexual arousal. But that arousal should not be confused with curiosity and non-monogamy.

Him ([11:02](#)):

We didn't know what the issue was necessarily. And I was still trying to flagellate myself, of not being so sexually cued up all the time. And how I wouldn't want to put my shit onto her. And that was a big part of it. I thought that this was something that was kind of a solo struggle, that this is something that was my problem, and that you did not need to be involved in it, if it wasn't your problem.

Esther ([11:29](#)):

And my problem was...

Him ([11:31](#)):

That I think about sex all the time. Yeah, and I'm attracted to a lot of people.

Esther ([11:38](#)):

I want to be careful about not conflating a possible discrepancy of desire between the two of you, with one of you being more interested than the other, and infidelity and bipolarity.

Him ([12:00](#)):

Yeah, that's hard.

Esther ([12:02](#)):

We need to separate some of this. Now the conversation becomes layered.

Him ([12:08](#)):

Very.

Esther ([12:09](#)):

Rather than everything subsumed, you know, open, close. It may still be a conversation about open, close, but what you're describing right now has nothing to do with monogamy.

Him ([12:25](#)):

Okay.

Esther ([12:26](#)):

All right. What happens with medication? You are on medication?

Him ([12:30](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative), lithium.

Esther ([12:33](#)):

And has that changed-

Him ([12:34](#)):

The peaks and valleys are far less. So it's rolling hills now. And so I don't go into a severe manic state anymore and I don't get depressed. And medication, certainly lithium has helped that. I also maintain a job, because that offers stability.

Esther ([12:52](#)):

So you have to show up every day, there's a schedule, there's a structure.

Him ([12:56](#)):

I see the same people, and they're usually in the same mood-

Esther ([12:59](#)):

Very good-

Him ([13:00](#)):

... and my moods will be different, and they can sort of anchor me. Yep.

Esther ([13:03](#)):

Good.

Him ([13:03](#)):

I know, it's...

Esther ([13:04](#)):

So she's no longer the only pole of stability.

Him ([13:07](#)):

No.

Esther ([13:08](#)):

That's good.

Him ([13:09](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([13:10](#)):

She can continue to be, but you can't rely only on her as the anchor.

Him ([13:16](#)):

That was not healthy at all.

Esther ([13:17](#)):

You needed the anchor and then you resented the anchor.

Him ([13:20](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([13:22](#)):

All right. So you have... this is good, this is good. So you have a stable job, you-

Him ([13:27](#)):

I meditate. Transcendental meditation.

Esther ([13:30](#)):

Do you do two times, 20 minutes per day?

Him ([13:32](#)):

I don't, I do one time in the morning.

Esther ([13:34](#)):

Okay. It's okay, I'm not your pastor.

Him ([13:39](#)):

I do one time in the morning, I do one time in the morning, yeah. Well, that's because, that's what they ask you. Two times for me is like, oh my god, I can't do that. No, but I do one time in the morning for 20 minutes. And...

Esther ([13:48](#)):

Okay, can you take a deep breath just right now? Just take a deep breath. Now, breathe in and count five. In, two, three, four, five. Out, two, three, four, five. When you rev up, it's good.

Him ([14:17](#)):

I told you I was getting manic today.

Esther ([14:19](#)):

No, you rev up and you can feel it in your speech. You know, slow it down. And there is nothing that will regulate you more than breath.

Him ([14:37](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([14:38](#)):

If you just say I'm getting manic, you don't know what to do with it. Manic is some overwhelming state.

Him ([14:46](#)):

It's interesting, because it just feels like I'm being normal. Likewise, when I'm feeling hypersexual, it doesn't feel like I'm hypersexual. It feels like it's just, this is how I always am.

Esther ([14:59](#)):

It's okay. You're learning to... if you had diabetes, you'd learn to manage it.

Him ([15:03](#)):

Mm-hmm (affirmative), that's what you say. You just got me thinking when you said they feed into each other. You think about sex, so you keep thinking about sex. Then you think about how you're going to think about sex, when you're not thinking about sex, because you're thinking about this whole conversation around monogamy, non-monogamy. And it's like, yeah, I mean, we can have those conversations. That's good and we need to, it's not going anywhere. But how else can we mitigate that? A little bit would be good.

Esther ([15:33](#)):

It's not even mitigate. I think your sexual obsession is separate from a conversation about non-monogamy. And your non-monogamy isn't going to solve your sexual obsessions. You stop drinking, you stop doing any other things, and so this is the one that's that takes care of all the soothing. My guess is

you are often revved. And you discover early on something that many people, boys more easily discover, which is that if you masturbate, it relaxes you. And then slowly this activity gets a name, and it gets some meaning, and it becomes sex, masturbation. It actually gets a word. Rather than just soothing, falling asleep, relaxing. And then gradually, images and fantasies and other things begin to join it, and everything gets mixed up. When you're anxious, you masturbate, when you're happy, you masturbate, when you're worried, you masturbate, when you're sad, you masturbate, when you're bored, you masturbate. Everything leads to the same outlet, you understand?

Esther ([16:45](#)):

And then comes an ideology that is, oh, if I were sexually free. You could be sexually free and in a different relationship with your wife, but that is not going to address the obsession. The compulsion, the feeling that when anything happens in my body before I even know it's a feeling, it's just a sensation. My mind fills up with those kinds of thoughts. Your mind could have filled up with lots of other kinds of thoughts. It's more that, you don't necessarily choose if you want that thought, and you don't know when you have that thought, how to switch it to another thought, if you chose to.

Him ([17:22](#)):

Yeah, right.

Esther ([17:22](#)):

And that's the compulsive nature of this. That's what distinguishes it between, so he has a rich, fertile erotic mind, what's the issue? Versus, he feels beleaguered by it, he feels like he gets taken hostage and he can't take himself out of it.

Esther ([17:41](#)):

What I'm trying to tease out with him is the difference between thoughts, feelings and actions. And the fact that they don't necessarily have to be lumped together, you have a thought, therefore you have a feeling, therefore you must act. And then we look at his other resources, because this is a strength-based way of thinking for me. He has been able to stop a lot of things that used to compound his condition. Sexuality is the place where he feels hostage. It has a different meaning for him. Drinking wasn't an issue. His food habits were not an issue. His sleeping, he was able to correct. He's done a lot to change, and to manage his health. And all of those resources will become handy in helping him when he feels in the grip, to be able to redirect his energy and his attention.

Esther ([18:47](#)):

How do I bring in other thoughts? How do I deal with breath? How do I learn to bring in other stimulants, so that I don't feel like I'm helpless?

Him ([18:57](#)):

Yeah, I think that's the honest answer. I think I could just occupy my time a little bit more.

Her ([19:04](#)):

Yeah, and I think that's what's made... when we do try to have conversations about non-monogamy, it's what makes them so confusing. Because there's not this clear understanding of why exactly you want it, or need it, or it's kind of...

Esther ([19:19](#)):

No, you can't need non-monogamy. It's a choice of life, of values, of what sexuality means, of what curiosity mean. Even if you agree to consensual non-monogamy, it is not going to address this.

Him ([19:34](#)):

Sure.

Esther ([19:34](#)):

This is existing on its own sincere [inaudible 00:19:36]. When you do act, is it act, or, is it act out?

Him ([19:45](#)):

Sure.

Her ([19:46](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([19:46](#)):

Is it a real choice? Or is it just like, he didn't know what to do with himself?

Him ([19:53](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([19:53](#)):

That's a different reality for her, to be with someone who is actually thinking about life, and is conscientious about what he's doing, versus someone who is in the grip of impulse, of obsession, and he's not really choosing.

Him ([20:09](#)):

Right, yeah. I'll just say that I absolutely want to be the first thing that you said, I want to be the conscientious thought out person in life.

Her ([20:21](#)):

You've made a ton of progress.

Him ([20:24](#)):

I guess I have-

Her ([20:24](#)):

In terms of treatment and self acceptance.

Him ([20:27](#)):

Yeah, you don't see that you do, but you do.

Her ([20:29](#)):

You have, yeah.

Esther ([20:30](#)):

You what?

Him ([20:31](#)):

You don't see that you make progress, I guess. It's hard to see it when you're the one living.

Esther ([20:37](#)):

But you have an amazing witness next to you.

Him ([20:39](#)):

But here we are, yeah.

Her ([20:40](#)):

Yeah, oh, there's been a ton of progress.

Him ([20:42](#)):

She's witnessed a lot.

Her ([21:20](#)):

Bipolar, infidelity, open relationships, they just feel so big and weighty. It's hard, because sometimes when I have those conversations, I can see this glazed look come over my friends' eyes of, or my family of like, I wouldn't know how to deal with that, you know? And so...

Esther ([21:40](#)):

And then what happens to you?

Her ([21:42](#)):

It makes me question my decision making a lot, because you can read them, and they'll tell me like, "Just be careful, take care of yourself." And it does scare me a little bit.

Esther ([21:56](#)):

It?

Her ([21:58](#)):

Their sense of caution about the situation, their sense of uncertainty.

Esther ([22:02](#)):

About?

Her ([22:03](#)):

About us getting back together potentially.

Esther ([22:05](#)):

Because?

Her ([22:07](#)):

Mainly, I think for them, as soon as I told them that he cheated, that was it for a lot of them. They were really angry for me. And a lot of my close friends were like, get out of there, it's done. Some friends would even say, I hadn't told them I was getting a divorce and they'd say, "I approve of your divorce." Like don't even question it, that's the ultimate betrayal. And then you sort of add the complexities of, maybe it would be an open relationship, and they just think, why would you be in a... So are you just giving him permission to cheat on you, essentially? These kinds of things, you know? Well, if you would naturally be in an open relationship, why would you go to one with someone who cheated on you already?

Esther ([22:52](#)):

And can you... Why is it the ultimate betrayal?

Her ([22:58](#)):

I think that's the cultural perception, and that's their sort of perception. That is there anything worse that you could do in the context of a committed relationship? And I don't necessarily feel that way, especially talking to him about it. I'm still upset about it, and it wasn't-

Esther ([23:17](#)):

Of course-

Her ([23:17](#)):

... okay, but I can understand why he did these things, even if I don't approve of them. And I can see how there's also so many other things I love about him as a partner, that aren't discounted because he made bad choices.

Esther ([23:33](#)):

Such as?

Her ([23:34](#)):

I think he's the person that I... We've known each other for almost a decade now, and we never run out of things to talk about. We both just have this mega curiosity about the world and this disposition to life where we want to learn more, we want to experience more things, we want to talk to new people. We love traveling. We have the most fun when we travel together. And I love our disposition toward the world together. Yeah, and he's the first person I still want to call, if I have a really bad day. These kinds of things. I have a lot of other good friendships in my life, but our dynamic is very special to me. And he does feel like a support system in so many ways. I know that if I need him, he'll be there. If I really need something, I can always count on him. And he's also really open to critiques, which I think is really amazing. Not that I'm always critiquing him, but there's not a defensiveness-

Esther ([24:37](#)):

You can talk to him-

Her ([24:37](#)):

... about, yeah, there's not a defensiveness about you. When we do have conversations and I call you out, you're willing to own your bullshit, and say, "I want to do better." I love that you have this sense of you want to improve and grow and learn. And I love all those things, and I don't think that's a super easy thing to come by, in anyone.

Esther ([25:00](#)):

So can I dig this whole list? I can't talk to him, he's always defensive. Forget traveling, it's impossible. We've got nothing to tell each other. I cannot count on him. The last person I would call if I have a bad day is him. Every time I suggest something, he says no to everything, he's so utterly uninterested in things. And I find myself so curious and eager. And I really don't like his disposition to the world. And if you make this entire list to your friends, do they tell you divorce?

Her ([25:48](#)):

Oh, I'm sure they would say, don't be with that person.

Esther ([25:51](#)):

Yes, but they wouldn't instantly ask you to leave him on the spot.

Her ([25:57](#)):

Yeah, none of these things are necessarily like, okay, divorce without...

Esther ([26:03](#)):

Therapy.

Her ([26:03](#)):

Right, right? That's true.

Esther ([26:05](#)):

What do you make of that?

Her ([26:09](#)):

It does seem like we do live in a culture where we really, really value one form of sexual fidelity as the ultimate sign of commitment. Which I think sex is very important, but obviously, all these other things are really, really valuable to me in a relationship as well.

Esther ([26:35](#)):

I don't think that he even knows, sorry. I don't think you really know why you did what you did. There's a part of you that asks yourself, is this because I am inclined to, because my spontaneous exploratory self leads me to want to experience sexuality with other partners as well? Or is it because that day, I was revved up and this person was there, and then it turned into a story of, I'm curious and exploratory.

Him ([27:10](#)):

I would answer yes.

Esther ([27:12](#)):

Yes?

Him ([27:12](#)):

To both.

Esther ([27:13](#)):

To both.

Him ([27:13](#)):

Yes. What I would say is that, I've always known, even when I was going to Catholic school, that this idea of sex with one person for life just did not really make sense to me. I was also seeing my brothers have to be forced into marriage, because they had children with somebody that they then went on to divorce three years later. So that was having an effect on me. So I think that the idea of sexual exclusivity has never really made a whole lot of sense to me. When you couple in sort of a revved up state, it makes it far more likely for me to act out on those urges.

Esther ([27:58](#)):

Good. And my commitment to her, and my fidelity to her, how would you describe it?

Him ([28:04](#)):

I would describe it just as that. I would describe it as I am committed to you, because I've chosen to be committed to you. And it is for many of the reasons that you listed, it's also for qualities in you that I would like to have more of in me, that I really admire. I knew quickly that I could commit to you in some capacity or another, for the rest of my life. What I did not realize until marriage was the sexuality bit would be difficult for me. I never have committed anybody else, I've never wanted to. And I've thought, when I was 23 years old, that I could go my entire life without committing to another sole person. And then when I decided and I made the decision that I did want to commit to you, that was it for me.

Esther ([29:02](#)):

You can let that sink in.

Her ([29:03](#)):

Thanks for saying that. It's just, it's hard to know what to do with that now. Like, we know that we love each other, but...

Esther ([29:22](#)):

But I don't want to be hurt like this again.

Her ([29:25](#)):

Yeah.

Him ([29:27](#)):

Likewise, I don't want to hurt anybody like that again.

Her ([29:31](#)):

Yeah.

Him ([29:31](#)):

That's a huge piece of this. So I can't promise sexual exclusivity to one person, but I can promise that I'm not going to act in the shadows-

Esther ([29:43](#)):

You can, you may choose not to. This is not about capability.

Him ([29:47](#)):

So I can, or I can't, right?

Esther ([29:48](#)):

Monogamy is a practice, it's a choice. It's not a can or can't. I want to be really careful here. I don't know that the two of you are that different, sexually speaking. You have decided you are incompatible. No, I don't see it. I see the meaning of sexuality is different, the role it plays, but not when you connect. I also don't know that what we're talking about is, should you be together or not? All of what you've addressed until now for me, is part of marriage.

Her ([30:26](#)):

Yeah.

Him ([30:28](#)):

I like that.

Esther ([30:28](#)):

This is marriage. This stuff is what people need to deal with in the context of marriage.

Him ([30:34](#)):

Sure.

Her ([30:36](#)):

And I mean, our disposition towards each other, even though I feel like we try to curb it, to act like we're not together right now. But our disposition is as though we're together and working on it.

Esther ([30:51](#)):

I wonder to what extent this notion of having to say we are not together right now, is, that's the statement to the world.

Her ([30:59](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([31:00](#)):

So that you don't think I'm weak and I am gullible and I am a fool. And I'm just some romantic and I'm a woman who allows herself to be stepped down. And for you, I show you, I'm creating a boundary, we're not together. And internally, you are actually embracing something that is much more complex. And that doesn't mean you're weak and you're being stepped on, and you're a fool and you're letting him walk all over you, et cetera, et cetera. And you're not holding your ground, and you're letting him make the power because he cheated first and then he brought in that conversation. I see an internal and external conversation inside of you, that is just as much with normativity as he is having.

Her ([31:46](#)):

No, I think that's spot on.

Him ([31:47](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([31:49](#)):

It's a different set of norms, you are arguing. But the two of you are having chats with norms.

Him ([31:55](#)):

Sure.

Her ([31:56](#)):

Yeah, spot on. Yeah, absolutely.

Esther ([31:58](#)):

Say it in your own words.

Her ([32:00](#)):

I do question myself, and I think it's good to question ourselves consistently. And not just assume that we're always... our feelings are in the right. And so I really try to do that, and have those dialogues with myself about, well, what works for us. And if my friends are challenging me like, "Really? This man cheated on you, and you're going to have an open relationship that you're not even interested in?" They think I'm totally being stepped on. And so I think I have, in part to convince myself, but in part to tell them, well, we're not together, and we're working on it, as this sort of, I'm not being stepped on. But I feel like I am a little bit. When we're apart and I think about it, I can get really fixated on how can I ever feel empowered in this relationship again? But then when we're talking face-to-face, I don't feel that. So I have this disconnect, and what should my values be in this situation? But then there's this relationship that I do want to keep working on.

Esther ([33:10](#)):

And that's a value too?

Her (33:12):

I think so. I think a commitment to this relationship is a value, even though it's hard. But we we are still legally married, and we made that commitment to each other. That does matter to me, even though I think about it differently than when we made the vows. That commitment still matters to me. I don't know, I don't want to fool myself as well.

Esther (33:39):

Meaning?

Her (33:40):

I don't want to let my love for him allow me to make foolish decisions that do end up hurting me again in the future. Because I do think about it, if...

Esther (33:50):

You want love with minimum liability.

Her (33:53):

Maybe.

Esther (33:54):

What you've just said is in part, the definition of love.

Her (33:59):

The risk aspect of it.

Esther (34:00):

Yes.

Her (34:01):

Yeah. Yeah, that's true. Because when I think about potentially dating again, I'm going back to the check boxes in my mind of like, this time I would find a stable partner. And sort of try to minimize the risk.

Esther (34:18):

One risk. You have not minimized the risk of the 10 other things that you mentioned that you have. I think, instead of spending our time defining sex and monogamy, that where we are landing is a different definition of love. If you want love without hurt, or love without risk, or love without vulnerability, or love without the fear of what the other person can do to you, then we're not talking about love.

Her (34:58):

Yeah. It's making me think about my mom again, because it's like, she's made that decision. She's not going to let love make a fool of her. And therefore there's no love in her life, in that regard now. You can't take the risk out of love, or the pain. And it's like, we'll probably run into other painful things that have nothing to do with infidelity.

Esther ([35:20](#)):

But it's so interesting you just brought up your mom, because 10 minutes ago I was going to ask you, how has your mother's sadness shaped you? So I'm going to ask it now. Because I think that you talk about your friends, but I would put mom in that conversation too. And you're right, you see her, she made sure that nobody can ever hurt her again. But the price she pays...

Her ([35:56](#)):

Yeah. She often will tell me, "Well, I've made the choice to never date again." And the way she frames it is kind of in this very empowered way of like, and I'm good because of it. I haven't been hurt because of it. Can you imagine the pain I would have been going through since then, if I had? And I think that does stick with me of... because there's so much about her I also look up to. So I think, well, maybe that is the better model. Maybe I should just go it alone like her and be really strong, and have accomplishments and relationships in other capacities. Because I think it's easy for me to see love relationships as sort of fickle, unnecessary things. It's hard for me to see it as a value, to see maintaining a romantic relationship as a value, actually. Now that I think about it.

Esther ([36:57](#)):

But he does. He's actually intensely emotionally monogamous.

Her ([37:06](#)):

I think that is true.

Him ([37:09](#)):

Yeah, it's true.

Her ([37:14](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([37:15](#)):

You may be sexually monogamous, but you question the value of love.

Her ([37:19](#)):

Yeah, I do. Perhaps that's just me trying to protect myself. Because if I say it's not important, then it can't hurt me that much. And so after he told me about the cheating, I didn't feel like I knew myself. I was shocked. Because the amount of emotion that I felt, the depths of like pain and sadness that would just leave me in bed, I never knew I could be that person. And that scares me. I have to answer the question of, is that worth it to me? Is that risk worth it, I guess.

Esther ([38:02](#)):

So you say, when he hurt me, it reached so deep inside of me, I didn't recognize myself. And now, does it really make you see how much you love this man? And how deep and complex of a person you are? Or you think, I can't believe I could be so weak?

Her ([38:27](#)):

Definitely the first, yeah. Yeah. But I had been telling myself the second, that the emotions were a sign of...

Esther ([38:37](#)):

Weakness-

Her ([38:39](#)):

Foolishness and weakness.

Esther ([38:40](#)):

Right, that's the legacy of your mom.

Her ([38:44](#)):

Yeah.

Esther ([38:48](#)):

So I'm going to put her in this chair.

Her ([38:50](#)):

Okay.

Esther ([38:53](#)):

Hey mom. See, your daughter she came here and she thought that she came to discuss monogamy. And that's a piece of the discussion, but she also came to discuss the legacy about, what are the choices that women can make? So she's got a few things to tell you.

Her ([39:22](#)):

Mom, I know that you love me and want to protect me. And I know that one of your biggest wishes that I wouldn't go through what you went through. But it's already happened. I lived through it, I'm okay. And maybe even stronger from it. And we want to work through this, and we're not ready for our relationship to be over. And I think we're in a place to maybe be more honest than we have been. And I want to give that a chance. And I know that, of course it's a risk. Love is always a risk, but it's one that I want to take.

Esther ([40:33](#)):

This is not a situation in which one can experience maximum certainty. But it's very hard for her to maintain that confidence in the face of the external pressures that many women feel. If they say differently than the norm, they're seen as being stepped on, as being weak, as being persuaded by the powerful men. The fact that she may have her own powerful ideas about this is not so easy for her.

Esther ([41:15](#)):

When she tells you, I'm not sure, what happens to you?

Him ([41:25](#)):

I think I take that with just an acceptance of what is, when she says that she's not sure.

Esther ([41:32](#)):

I would suggest that you bring in a little bit more confidence of what you know you want. And that's not the conversation about consensual non-monogamy only. That's the conversation about, I want us. See, a part of what she's grappling with is a very archaic power story. You hurt me once, how will I make sure that I don't later sit down 10 years from now and it happened again, and I will think, I knew it, I allowed this to happen to me again. And then on top of it because you're in a hetero couple, it's the man's story. And because you first cheated on me, and then you introduced it as a nice concept, consensual concept, you already have won over me. And the whole thing is a story of power and protection. Understandably so, but that's the story that you're dealing with. You're not having the same conversation. You don't even know you're having this conversation with her, but that's the conversation she's having with you. And with the chorus, the Greek chorus on the side.

Him ([42:49](#)):

No doubt. Yeah, no doubt.

Esther ([42:52](#)):

With mama as the High Priestess. An essential way that she can intervene on the conflict around power, is if you express the remorse and the guilt for hurting her. Because if you acknowledge deeply your understanding of how much you hurt her, it lessens the power.

Him ([43:30](#)):

Hurting you is the most, it's the worst thing I've ever done to another person. It's something that I've, that is...

Esther ([43:41](#)):

Hold her hands.

Him ([43:43](#)):

It's something that's shifted how I move through the world. And the fact that it happened to the person that I love the most, and utterly committed to, hurt all that much more. And I'm sorry for that. And I'm sorry that I wasn't there in the aftermath. And so I am deeply remorseful and feel deeply guilty for having hurt you like that. And I never want to do that to anybody again, most of all you.

Her ([44:29](#)):

Yeah, I mean, that means a lot to hear. And it is reassuring. It just makes me feel seen, because I think if I don't want to feel like being cheated on was a foolish thing, I feel like I need you to reassure me that I wasn't stupid for hurting. That it was something that was not okay. But it's not going to be our future together.

Him ([44:57](#)):

Yeah.

Her ([45:06](#)):

This transcript was exported on Aug 10, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

His apologizing for hurting her is essential, but not enough. Where he has to go from here is in the full validation that the dilemma that she's in, vis-a-vis her mother, her friends, the society, the condition as a woman, is something that he trusts upon her. It's his behavior that made her constantly now wonder, is she weak? Is she giving in? Is she engaging in a rigged conversation? And he needs to own that. When he can literally validate that part of her experience and join her in that, she will feel less alone and more confident about taking this on as a couple against the world.

Producer ([46:13](#)):

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. And 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.