

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.

Esther: They met on Reddit.

Her: Reddit is not a thing in Brazil. No one knows about it, but I knew about it because I was reading an article about sex starved marriages.

Esther: Which was the fate that they were both in.

Him: I was just on the internet and saw a post and I replied.

Her: I was like, huh, that's funny, and I replied back.

Esther: Which led to a flirtation, which led to a relationship, which led to the dissolution of their marriages, which led to her moving to small town Midwestern America to be with him and start an entire new life.

Him: I have two children under the age of 10. There's a lot of stress and anxiety that comes from dealing with my ex-wife.

Her: I never wanted to be a mom. I have this romantic idea that you must have loved someone so much to have kids. It's almost like I'm not as important.

Esther: She left parents, twin sister, friends, career, language, and the beaches of Brazil.

Her: I wasn't really welcomed when I got here, meeting his mom was one of the worst days of my life.

Him: I carry a lot of guilt that she gave up that and then came here and then I have this baggage. I don't want to disappoint my wife. I'm more happy than I've ever been.

Him (Start Sess...: Before we had started talking, I had a lot of realizations about I'm unhappy with my life and why would I want to spend half of my life unhappy. And I didn't want to live that way.

Esther: Explain unhappy to me because it's a very personal word, right?

Him: Sure. Me, personally, I'm a very giving person. I like to provide for people. I like to do things, and I feel my ex-wife liked to take. All of these things just kept piling and piling and piling, and then there was nothing left to give anymore and I was never getting any kind of refill.

Esther: Was there some things in particular that you were hoping to receive?

Her: Everything that happened was what she wanted to do, how she wanted to do it, whatever choices for our life were what she wanted. And then if I ever didn't do something she wanted, then I was failing the marriage. So it was this unbalanced, in my opinion, unbalanced relationship.

Esther: Is it a shared opinion or is this your...

Her: No, she didn't feel that way.

Esther: What is her version?

Him: She feels that everything was amazing, and I just up and left and disappeared.

Her: That was my fault.

Him: My family now sees I'm so much happier. It's completely different. I think that's really what turned around some of their perceptions and things. I finally met her and I met her family and humanized her very much. She's not just this...

Esther: They met her family.

Him: Yes. Yes. Her parents and her sister and nephew.

Esther: You have one sister?

Her: Mm-hmm (affirmative). A twin sister.

Esther: Identical?

Her: Yes. The love of my life. It's hard to be so far from her. It hurts me, but part of the decision that we made, so I don't keep dwelling on it, but it hurts.

Esther: So you gave up family, country, language, career, and friends to come to... Is it a small town?

Him: Yes.

Esther: Small town America?

Him: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Midwest. Yeah.

Her: Yes.

Esther: For this one man?

Her: Yes.

Esther: He better be. He better be.

Her: I'm all in. That's why I'm here. I'm all in.

Esther: You know what I just thought? The giver found somebody who gave up for him everything she had. So for once he doesn't have to worry that he's with a taker.

Him: And I know she's a giver. I know she's a giver, and it's hard for me to take sometimes.

Esther: And how was the conversation with your family or with your sister about leaving?

Her: They were really supportive, and they saw how my first marriage was,

Esther: What did they see?

Her: They saw that I was putting up a show. So I had this perfect marriage that even my friends are like, "You guys are so perfect. We wanted to be like you. You are our models," and people believed what they saw and what they saw wasn't true.

Esther: And what were you hiding?

Her: I was hiding that I felt inferior, that I felt almost as if it was a favor that he loved me. Sex was nonexistent because of him, and no one knew that. I was like, if he's my husband and he rejects me all the time and he's not even interested, I have to be the problem.

Esther: Did you have kids together?

Her: No. No. Oof, no.

Esther: Oof what?

Her: Well, oof because I don't want to have children. I really didn't want to have kids with him because I was like, in his view, the sad one, the depressed one. I was like, how can I raise a child? I don't have emotional structure for that. I mean, sometimes I think about having children.

Esther: One second, you just smiled.

Him: I think her beliefs are based on the situation that she grew in. I think if her previous marriage was not so difficult on her, she might've had different views about having kids, because she's really good with children, but I think she wanted to protect potential children from him.

Esther: Do you ever talk about it for the two of you?

Him: We do.

Her: We do.

Esther: Is that still possible?

Him: Maybe slight, but not very.

Her: Yeah, I don't... I think that now I have a different set of problems with having children, because I can only think like how about his kids now because it'll be another children, another child sharing daddy. And they are not with us all the time and the kid will be in and then it's unfair. I don't know for sure, but I think things will be tougher with his ex-wife because of that. He has kids already, so I don't know how nice and oh.

Esther: Because I think it's something he would want to give you because he thinks that you didn't because of the context that you were living in. And he thinks that he can give that to you. I'm ad-libbing mister.

Him: I think that's pretty fair. I'm happy with just having two kids. And if she didn't want any children, I'm perfectly fine with that. I'm happy with the family as it is. I'm very much open to, if she said to me, "I would like to have kids," then I'm very open to that.

Esther: She won't because she just gave you the set of rationalizations for why not. So the only way that she would is if you actually give it, offer it to her, countering her own self-sacrifice. It's a dance.

Him: Right.

Her: Yeah, but I...

Esther: Not that I think you should or you shouldn't.

Her: No, no. I definitely get it.

Esther: There is such a story here about who gives up and who gives.

Him: Yeah.

Her: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Esther: This is a big set of things in your relationship now and in your relationships before. And in a way you gave up having children, not only that you didn't want, you didn't necessarily have a deep, deep, deep yearning, which allowed you to

then be more contextual about it, but you gave up on it and he knows that. And since he can give and he loves to give, he's okay as is. But if he senses the slightest desire in you, he will want you to not give up.

Her: I think that's a fair assessment because he said that before.

Him: We've talked about it.

Esther: It would be one thing that's entirely... I'm going to say it like this, but for effect. Not because it is, I was going to say it would be one thing that is entirely yours, meaning it would be one thing that is yours in a world where nothing is yours.

Her: Yes.

Esther: Okay? In a country that's not yours, a language that's not yours, a family that's not yours, a small town that's not yours. So the symbol would become the one thing that is actually yours to whom you would probably actually speak in Portuguese. It actually would have a tremendous symbolic, and it would be something that he would share with you, that would be yours also as in new and ours.

Her: Yeah, because I feel that deeply, that it's not mine.

Esther: Right. So I wouldn't rush on the no. That doesn't mean it's the only way to do it, but that would be it's symbolic, meaning. There's lots of reasons to have children or not to have children, but symbolically that is unmistakable.

Her: Yes. Yes.

Esther Commenta...: She has been so invested in all the things that she has given up in order to be with him that I had to check on the topic of children. And interestingly, if she really wasn't interested, she probably would have just listened to me and said, "Yeah, but I'm not into it." But the fact that both of them are responding the way they do lets me know that this is not nearly as case closed as it initially appeared to be. So as I listened to them, it occurs to me that we also need to explore the official marriage that was done in secret.

Him: We did not tell my family because at that time, things were not in a good place.

Esther: Your family means your parents?

Him: My parents.

Her: His entire family.

Esther: And your mom runs the show?

Her: Yeah, she does.

Esther: When you say things were not good with her because she didn't want you to be divorced?

Him: I think she would have been okay with the divorce. The way things got found out was...

Esther: She didn't like this temptress.

Him: Correct.

Esther: This Latin temptress who flew all the way from Brazil and stole you from your...

Him: Correct. That's very much how it went. Yes.

Esther: So the poor guy got snatched by an adulterer.

Him: Yes. That's very much how it went.

Esther: Is that the language?

Him: Yes.

Her: Oof, even worse.

Esther: Go ahead.

Him: Even when I would own my part of that responsibility, it's like, oh, but I hold women to a higher standard. And when I followed through and went and saw and visited before anything was done, then she was evil incarnate.

Esther: Oh, it wasn't the fact that you went to visit her in Brazil. It's the fact that you allowed him to come?

Her: Yes.

Him: Yes.

Her: Yes.

Him: Even though I know...

Esther: Yes, but you are a man, so you don't have your head screwed up right on your shoulders. Then you need to put the limits on him because man will pursue woman whenever he sees her and woman needs to make sure man doesn't do foolish things.

Her: And I was probably so, I don't know, so wonderful, so sexual, so sexy or whatever, that we never met and I was in a different hemisphere and I did all that. So I carried like 95% of the...

Esther: You know what's interesting? In your first marriage, you have this false story about how everything looks so perfect. And in this marriage, you enter with a full story in which you are responsible for all the shit.

Her: Yes.

Esther: But you are always living in false stories.

Her: And I cannot express the level of frustration that I have with how unfair things are towards me. I cannot forget the things that I've been called.

Esther: What's the one that stung particularly?

Her: Homewrecker.

Esther Commenta...: This story of the man who follows the chant of the sirens, the double standards, the fact that he's the victim of her seductive powers and she should have known better, she should not wreck his family, I mean, it does not elude me that homewrecker does generally not exist in the masculine.

Her: Or not say my name.

Him: Yeah.

Her: They're like, the other woman.

Him: In the beginning, she said the another woman.

Her: Other woman, which is as offensive as anything to me. That's not me. One of his family member that was probably really angry about it.

Him: Because she was close with my ex-wife.

Her: Yes.

Esther: Who was that?

Him: My aunt.

Her: She didn't talk to me. We were in the same room and she wouldn't talk to me, not even acknowledge my presence. And then finally, one day she saw us together.

Him: We were at a wedding.

Her: Yeah. And we were dancing, hugging, kissing, just being playful, and I think she saw that. And then in the next day, she came to me and apologized. She hugged me and she said, "I'm sorry for everything that I said and I did. You're part of the family. I saw how happy he is and who you are, and I'm so sorry." And I was like, "Thanks for that. I really appreciate it. It's all good. Let's move forward." But to me that was...

Esther: Huge.

Her: Huge. I was like, wow. That meant a lot to me, but it makes me so upset. It's just hard because it's...

Him: I know.

Her: You know that. I don't have family. I feel vulnerable, and then they were attacking me.

Him: I know.

Esther: Have you ever said all of this to your mom?

Him: No.

Esther: Why not?

Him: Because we didn't want to damage the progress we were making, because things were getting better.

Esther: So what would happen if you actually conveyed in a very kind way like you know to do?

Him: If I were to guess, I would say that she would say that I thought she knew that we've moved on or whatever.

Esther: Yes, but reparative justice requires sometimes an overt acknowledgement.

Him: Sure.

Esther: And then you would say, "Mom, there is something about you're saying it to her the way that aunt such and such did." That would make a world of difference.

Him: I absolutely think she would apologize.

Esther: So you got to go do this.

Him: I will.

Her: That makes me a little scared, honestly.

Him: But what's the worst?

Her: Backfire.

Him: And what?

Her: And then we do what we do, we move forward.

Him: We move forward because she gets to go home to her husband and live her life. And if she can't acknowledge it, then that's not our fault. That's her fault because it's worth doing if it will make you feel better.

Esther Commenta...: Even though what he says is really kind and loving, he's not doing this to make her feel better. He needs to do this because it is the right move in the triangle between him, his mother, and his wife, where he doesn't let the wife do all the work for him in helping him individually vis-a-vis his mother. But he actually confronts his mother as an adult son. And the other thing that he reminds me when he's talking here is a little bit like when you tell a child who is being bullied in class, "You should go tell the teacher," and the child says to you, "I don't want to go tell the teacher because then they're going to take revenge on me." And so the moment he says, "I'm going to go stand up for you," in fact, when he should say, "I'm going to go stand up for me," she instantly says to him, "Don't do it because I may bear the consequences." That is such an old triangle.

Him: If I told her, I think she would hear me. My mom and I are close.

Esther: So how come you haven't done that, if you are close and if she would hear you? And if you know how your wife feels about it for the last few years? It's not like this is the first time she's telling you.

Him: For the same reason, the fear that we will go backwards.

Her: I would probably stop him.

Esther: You would stop him? Oh man, this is incredible.

Her: I think maybe from now on I wouldn't, but I think I will be so that I would not let him move because I'm paralyzed.

Esther: That's the full meaning of when you say, "I feel so vulnerable." It's like you live a little bit on probation.

Her: I like slowly moving forward, but I still feel almost like a hostage in a way. I don't know. Can I say this? Can I say that? What if I say something wrong? Whenever they talk anything related to his ex-wife, I pretend that I'm not even there.

Esther: But what you're saying is, I want him to stand up for me, but he shouldn't. Because if he does, I'm afraid it's going to backfire on me. I'm on probation. I feel hostage. I feel that I'm constantly monitoring myself as if I'm going to be tripped up for the next thing I say that they don't approve of. But I also don't want him to make a big deal out of it because that would make it even worse. And so what you're describing is quite a bind.

Her: At least now I can stop myself when it's really realistic scenarios. When I was younger, I would really get stuck because I couldn't move because I had so many like tabs open.

Esther: That's a great image, I had so many tabs open. It's a great image. I suddenly saw it.

New Speaker: When you were coming today and you said, "This is what I want for us in this session," what was it?

Her: I was really thinking about how to deal with this entire life and the background that he has because he has the mom, he has the ex-wife, and he has the children, and there's always something happening here that I cannot control. That I'm kind of part of it, but I am affected by it. And to me, sometimes this is really hard because I don't have the children. I don't have the surname. I'm not the mom. I'm not his mom. He has all those unbreakable bonds that I don't have. How can I deal with all this? That was what I was...

Esther: And when you bring that up to him, "I don't have children of my own. I don't have your last name. I don't share your history. I don't share your culture. I don't share your family," what happens when you bring that up to him?

Her: He understands. He gets where I'm coming from. But to him, we being together and the love that we share and the life that we share is bigger than the background and what was before and then everything else.

Esther: What is the thing that you need or that you imagine that would make you feel that you have one thing with him that is an original creation rather than legacy?

Her: I mean, I can see that being a child, but even for that I'm like, "Well, if we have a child, then, then, then, then, then, then." I go all scenarios that are from pretty logical ones to like no, that doesn't make any sense at all, because I understand feelings, but feelings fade.

Esther: So what would be a structure, right? Legacy pieces are structural pieces. And you say, "We have a love story and we have feelings," but they are not nearly as

solid as structural hand me downs. You make a good point, and then you say one structure would be having a child of our own, but then you go right into the story in a not very useful way I think. What would his wife think about you? It's an interesting thing. On the one hand, you feel like all these people are cluttering your inner life. And on the other hand, even they're not there, you bring them in.

Her: Agree.

Esther: You have a whole cast of characters for everything you want. You think about six people and their reactions. So that is your contribution to the bind.

Esther Commenta...: This contrast between love and its feelings and the structural hand me downs that come with a person, that's the thing that one doesn't get to see when you have a six month online relationship. You just see this person who is completely available. Of course, he's available because he's also in part missing out on the rest of his life. And then when they meet, it is still the two of them meeting. And then when she comes and she travels over, she realizes that there is a whole structure that comes with him, that exists independently of his feelings with people who have all kinds of opinions. And he can't control all of that. And that the love story and the life story are not one and the same.

Him: But you are what's important to me. You are.

Esther: But you understand what she just said that-

Him: I do.

Esther: ...feelings come and go.

Him: Yes. I mean, I understand, but it's different. Our relationship is different. I don't see it fading. I don't see...

Her: I also know that having my own child... It's not that it doesn't mean anything, I don't think it's a proof of anything, but it's a bond that we share, that you would share with someone forever.

Esther: And it's a structure. I mean, it's not the child is a structure, but it's a manifestation, a concrete manifestation of something. Yes. And I think that because you didn't want it in your previous marriage and because you have all these what ifs with him, you don't allow for that thought to actually come true, at least for real thinking. And the children that are his, the last name is his, everything is his.

Him: House is ours.

Her: The house is ours.

Him: We bought the house.

Her: We bought a house.

Esther: Okay.

Her: That was huge for me to have the house.

Esther: Good.

Him: I very specifically tried to remove all the history, any kind of things that were shared. So there is no shared history. It's not the same house that we lived in previously. There's none of that because that's baggage that I can control. I don't want that.

Esther: What music do you listen to?

Her: Country music. I'm always listening to country. Every now and then I listen to some Brazilian. He likes it too. But it's basically English all the time.

Esther: Why? Why don't you listen to more?

Her: I think because I... It's a very irrational reason. I think I moved to Apple Music and I had all those playlists on Spotify, and I didn't stop to create my playlists and all that.

Esther: Are you a techie person?

Him: Yes. Yes.

Esther: So why don't you do that for her?

Him: I can. I didn't know she needed it, but I would.

Esther: No, she doesn't know that she needs it either. But you need to create some of these bridges.

Him: Okay.

Esther: Because she's immigrating by country, she's immigrating by status, she's immigrating by family, she's immigrating by profession. She's going through massive, multiple immigrations and acculturations at the same time. And she's good at saying, "This is a lot for me," but she doesn't necessarily know what does she need that would kind of give her relief on occasion. And that's where you, who also knows it's a lot, need to just think, what would be things that could facilitate that? The burdens of living in a foreign language and working in a foreign language and...

Him: I can't imagine. I can't imagine how hard it is.

Esther: You speak only English?

Him: Yes.

Esther: Yes. So there are a few different levels. The music is one just because she happens to come from one of the countries that has the greatest music creation there is. The conversation about a child has to take place, and you have to counter all her thinking about seven other people at the expense of her. What are the things that we can do, small and big? How many trips a year does she go to visit in Brazil? How many trips can they come and visit her here?

Him: I push you to go and she restricts and declines because she's afraid of work. And I want you to go.

Her: I know. I know it's on me, that one. I think especially because of work, I still need to prove myself at work. I'm new there and all those things. Again, with all those obstacles in front of...

Esther: Right. That's where you need to come in. So on occasion, you just put a ticket in her hand.

Him: I think that's dangerous, but I can do it.

Esther: It could be a metaphor. It doesn't have to be literal. You're on the right track, but you retreat when she pushes back. If she pushes back, it means that she needs more of your support and insistence, because it means that she needs you to push through some of the what ifs and the multiple scenarios and the 10 reasons for why she can't do something.

Esther Commenta...: The first 20 years of my career, I specialized in working with interfaith, intercultural, and interracial couples and families. And I remember often thinking that the person who would move to the other country or convert to another religion or raise their children in another culture, language, or faith than the one that they grew up in was often in each couple the only one who could actually do it. And that the role of the receiver was to be forever attuned, grateful, and a facilitator of relief for the person who was doing such an adjustment to the point where they sometimes didn't even realize how much of an adjustment it was.

Him: I know you sacrificed. I know you sacrificed everything for me. I feel undeserving. I don't feel like I'm worth it because I have all this baggage.

Esther: You feel undeserving and guilty or grateful? It's not an either/or.

Him: I feel super lucky. I feel that I didn't do anything that makes me deserve what I have gotten in return, and I don't get to bring the same things to the table. If tomorrow you said, "I can't deal with it anymore. I have to go," I don't blame you. I understand that's a lot.

Her: I see the kind, generous man that you are. Your sense of humor is so clever that I love it. That's what I see. I see you're always happy, you're always optimistic. I'm on scenario a hundred and you're focusing on the two that are the best ones because they will happen. You make me feel happy. That's who you are to me. You are. You have an ex-wife, you have kids, you have all these too, but you are you.

Him: Yes, but all of that carries a lot of importance to you.

Her: It does, but I don't know if it's because I'm operating in what I'm lacking, because I lack connections. My family is not here. I don't have this. I'm so much in what I don't have.

Esther: But is that only circumstantial or was that also an orientation to life that you had before? Did you assess your first marriage on the same principle, What I don't have?

Her: Probably.

Esther: Okay. That's a very important thing to keep in mind. You have a lot available to fill in the bucket of what you don't have. So it feels like it's about the circumstances of your life, which it is, but it also seems to be a certain way that you at times look at life. And this is where you are enormously important, sir, because when you don't engage with the multiple conjectures and you just say, "This is how it is," it actually reassures. But when she goes negative, what I'm missing, what I gave up, or what I don't have, then that's the moment when instead of going into the, I don't deserve it and you bring it on to you, your clever humor will go a long way.

Esther: Because in those moments, she may need perception adjustment, which becomes reassuring, which becomes alleviating, which takes her out of her dark places of dread. I didn't ask you about that. Do you know where the pain and the anxieties come from?

Her: I think I grew up like that, because my parents had a very difficult marriage. They are together still and they have this relationship that they fight, very up and down kind of relationship, but we suffered a lot from it from watching it. In many times, I felt like I was protecting my sister. Even though we're twins, it's like, we're the same age, but I always had this, "I'm protecting my sister. I'm shielding her from things. I will try to manage my parents." I had this role growing up, the mini grown up kind of, but I was a child.

Esther: And your rumination about the multiple scenarios was a way to make yourself less scared?

Her: To get ready. If something happens, I know how to do. I know what to do with.

Esther: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Her: I know I can just get up and go. And to prevent things, I was like, how can I prevent scenario da, da, da, da, da and how I can react with scenario da, da, da, da, da happen?

Esther: It's a way of dealing with being unsafe and a way of dealing with the emotional danger in the house when it's very volatile, and they were volatile. And that's why your clever humor is medicinal.

Her: Even when he hugs me, I feel like I can just kind of let go. He has this bear hug and he's warm, and I'm like, okay, I can let go. I'm safe.

Him: You are safe.

Her: I always say, "I know. I understand, because I'm always in this. I know. I understand. I'm always going to be irrational."

Esther: I don't have to say anything. What he just did was the equivalent of a bear hug, which by the way, if you want to give her one, you can.

Him: Of course.

Esther: So your hugs, your reassurances, your clever humors, all of that and a little more initiatives with the other women in your life, and then ways that you support her so that she doesn't have to ask, and over time this will mature. This is going to require time. Until now, you've primarily done the landing and the surviving and the getting the job and getting the papers and creating the structure, and then you'll have a conversation about a child.

Him: A real conversation.

Esther: A real conversation.

New Speaker: 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

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