

Watch the Kids

[00:00:00] **Jesse (Producer):** None of the voices in the 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.

[00:00:26] **Him:** It feels like I'm a horse in the stable and she comes along and says, "Hey, I want to come ride you now." "Great. I love being ridden. Let's go. Okay. Thanks for the ride. Go have fun riding the next horse." And maybe I'm your favorite horse, right? But I'm one of the horses.

[00:00:48] **Her:** I hate this horse analogy.

[00:00:51] **Esther Perel:** *When I first met this couple a few years ago, their initial request was for me to help them have a more productive conversation about opening up their relationship.*

What made you come up with the idea of exploring elsewhere?

[00:01:07] **Her:** It had always been in the back of my mind. It started with just going, I wonder what it'd be like to kiss other people.

[00:01:13] **Esther Perel:** *At that time, it was very much her request.*

[00:01:16] **Him:** It feels like there's this cap on my happiness. I'm six months into a new job and my boss can give me a great review and say I'm randomly going to give you a raise or you're doing really good work. And I get really proud of myself. I think ugh, but my wife sleeps with other men. There's a little thought of, what kind of man lets his wife do this?

[00:01:38] **Esther Perel:** *She had always experienced her sexuality as belonging first to India, where she was from, to her family, to the church where she grew up in and now to marriage.*

[00:01:50] **Her:** My sexuality has never been mine. It was other people's rules, other people's definitions that shaped everything.

[00:01:57] **Esther Perel:** *And she sought emancipation and reclamation of her own sexuality. Having been with other men actually opened up and unleashed in her, a desire and an energy an erotic energy that she brought to her husband.*

[00:02:11] **Her:** He's a fantastic lover.

[00:02:14] **Him:** I really am.

[00:02:16] **Esther Perel:** Would you like me to say, "Oh, congratulations!"

It was much more challenging for him. He understood what she was saying, but he really wanted to know if what she wanted was for him to be the stable force while she was going and being with other men.

[00:02:35] **Him:** I guess there's a lot of questions that come with it. Do you need me to watch the kids while you go with the other guys?

[00:02:45] **Her:** What I need you to do is to trust that it's not freedom without you. The freedom isn't to leave you and pursue others. It's to hold your hand while I get to experience more.

[00:02:59] **Esther Perel:** *She's been trying to say this for a while. That doesn't mean to take away the jealousy or the fears or anything. Those feelings are normal, but you also want to hear what she just told you.*

[00:03:14] **Him:** The exploring still hurts.

[00:03:22] **Esther Perel:** *I'm seeing them a few years later now. And I'm very curious, how did this work out? It used to be a one-sided non-monogamy or polyamory, it is no longer. But also more importantly, this was presented as the center focus of their concerns at the time. And I'm not so sure that this is really the only thing that deserves to be in the center. And the more I listen, the more I become clear that there's a whole other range of issues here that are directly related to their experience around sexuality, consensual non-monogamy and polyamory.*

Here we are again, many times I end a session and then time passes. And I say, what happened to them? Where are they at now? So this is my opening question, as I welcome you back.

[00:04:24] **Her:** Do you want to start or do you want me to start?

[00:04:25] **Him:** I can start. Well, it was, I think, what resonated in the moment is the same thing that resonates still for me now. And I just felt really validated because I felt a lot of guilt before associated with struggling with opening up the marriage. Esther says it's okay for me to be feeling what I'm feeling and to go through when I'm going through.

[00:04:55] **Esther Perel:** I stand by that.

[00:04:57] **Him:** The message that I see a lot in the polyamory community is compersion.

[00:05:03] **Esther Perel:** Define it.

[00:05:04] **Him:** Happiness for your partners.

[00:05:08] **Esther Perel:** In contrast to?

[00:05:10] **Him:** In contrast to jealousy and insecurity. And the term I see a lot is toxic monogamy. Like if you don't have compersion, then you have toxic monogamy.

[00:05:22] **Esther Perel:** Can we leave the word toxic out? Meaning there is toxicity and then there is monogamy and not all monogamy is toxic and feelings of jealousy are not unusual. Even with people who have compersion at times too. And we can use words that have meaning, but we don't need to trap you in some of the limited meanings that those words sometimes have.

When people choose monogamy or polyamory or any form of consensual non-monogamy today, in our corners of the world in the west, these are choices. These are relational arrangements. When they become ideologies that justify themselves by discarding and trashing the other side so that it becomes non-monogamy, never works or monogamy attached to the word toxic. We really lose what is going on in a relationship that is trying to go through a major transition, such as this couple.

And you say is my jealousy an expression of what you read is called toxic monogamy. And what is, what does that mean as you read it?

[00:06:46] **Him:** Codependency and jealousy and control and possessiveness.

[00:06:53] **Esther Perel:** Yeah. But I never heard you say I'm right. And I didn't even hear you say I'm justified and legitimate, I deserve, I'm entitled. You just said, this is how this lands on me. And I think that is quite honest and real.

[00:07:20] **Her:** But you blame yourself real fast.

[00:07:23] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:07:25] **Esther Perel:** And where did you learn that?

[00:07:31] **Him:** You look like you have an idea?

[00:07:33] **Her:** This is all you, babe.

[00:07:35] **Him:** I don't know, I guess it just makes sense. It's always made sense that if you do something wrong, then you're at fault, accountability.

[00:07:48] **Esther Perel:** But, accountability, responsibility, and blame are not all one in the same. Let me put it differently. When you take responsibility and you express guilt that doesn't translate into shame.

[00:08:07] **Him:** Yeah. I don't know how to recognize a mistake without feeling shame for it.

[00:08:16] **Esther Perel:** I understand. And I asked you, where did you learn that? This is a part of your code.

[00:08:23] **Him:** It is, and I don't remember it ever not being a part of my code. I theoretically know everyone makes mistakes. When I make a mistake, it feels worse. It seems worse.

[00:08:41] **Esther Perel:** Cause I don't just say I did something wrong. I say what's wrong with me?

[00:08:47] **Him:** Yes.

[00:08:49] **Esther Perel:** And that is something we learn. Where should the sleuth detective go?

[00:08:58] **Her:** Do you think it ties back into your peacekeeping conflict avoidance?

[00:09:04] **Him:** It might. My deepest desire is to maintain peace. And the easiest disruptor of my peace, of peace is conflict with someone that I care about, with anyone that I care about.

[00:09:27] **Esther Perel:** Did you grow up with conflict?

[00:09:29] **Him:** Yeah. I grew up... my family was was pretty conflict avoidant.

[00:09:42] **Her:** They're conversation avoidant, conflict is constant, I feel like,

[00:09:48] **Him:** How does the conflict come up, if you don't talk about it?

[00:09:52] **Her:** It's your sister feeling like we don't welcome her enough to the house. So she's going to skip the kids birthday party. It's your, mother sending us a letter 10 years after an incident venting about it. It was like playing whack-a-mole, you know, you guys just want to whack it down and then it goes away

for a while and everyone says, there's no conflict here at all. And for someone like me, I come in and I see the conflict, like, is everybody crazy? Because we clearly have issues. But there is absolutely no path to resolution, but you find peace with that as long as no one's talking about it. That makes me mental.

[00:10:29] **Esther Perel:** Because he does that with you too.

[00:10:31] **Her:** Oh yeah.

[00:10:32] **Him:** Yes.

[00:10:34] **Her:** The biggest lesson for us has been...

[00:10:37] **Esther Perel:** You talk to him.

[00:10:38] **Her:** Yeah. You I remember you'd be having a day where something was weighing on you about the whole thing. And I would look at you and I knew something was wrong. And so I would start getting panicked, like, oh my gosh, okay. What do I do? I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to make him happy. And so I would ask you how I could help and how I could support. And you would tell me, and you would, sometimes it was, I need an hour in the hot tub with my laptop and a movie and I'll figure it out and I'll let you know. And watching him out there while I'm inside going, what do I do? What do I do? I couldn't rely on all the tips and tricks and, just try to be better and make him happier. I couldn't rely on any of those.

[00:11:20] **Esther Perel:** Describe it.

[00:11:26] **Her:** I have spent our whole marriage, so 15 years. The entire time I have felt this burden, this backpack that I've been carrying around and didn't realize, where it was my job as the good wife to make sure my husband was fulfilled. And the difficulty in that is my husband didn't always know what he needed to be fulfilled. And I took that very personally. I can't be who you need me to be. That phrase, I can't be who you need me to be has been a soundtrack, for the past 15 years and I didn't...

[00:12:06] **Esther Perel:** And who you gave me to be is?

[00:12:11] **Her:** I had a picture of someone who enjoyed all the same hobbies he does, and I was entertaining to be around. And I was always on and pleasurable and sexy and kept everything together. And it's every old trope and it was never something he directly communicated to me. But those messages come through in disappointment. So there's almost a passive roundabout way of how I interpreted that message. It would be his disappointment that date nights weren't fun enough. It would be his disappointment that sex wasn't enough.

[00:12:48] **Esther Perel:** You're the only one with other partners?

[00:12:52] **Her:** Currently. He started dating.

[00:12:54] **Esther Perel:** Right. You're going to let him tell that.

[00:12:56] **Her:** Yes, but I am currently the only one with active relationships.

[00:13:00] **Esther Perel:** And he's still primary?

[00:13:03] **Her:** So we don't even we don't have hierarchy. We are nesting partners. We are very heavily entangled. We have a home, we have children, and we build life together. Those entanglements come first,

but as values, he is not more valuable than another person in my life, but we have history. We have trust, he's my best friend. And that friendship is still the most important thing to me.

[00:13:28] **Esther Perel:** *It becomes clear that in the past two years, the structure of the relationship has shifted from them as the primary partners to a more lateral model in which they are co-parenting and they have history and shared financial responsibilities. But there are other partners that she has that are on equal level with him.*

At this point, I'm kind of putting pieces together, right? So you said, well, he doesn't get angry much, much. One of the ways he gets my attention is by actually going disappointed, sad, solemn. And you feel responsible to regulate if he's upset or disappointed or... do you mope?

[00:14:29] **Him:** Yes.

[00:14:30] **Esther Perel:** It often goes, there's another word in English. You pout?

[00:14:36] **Her:** Yes. Oh yeah.

[00:14:41] **Him:** I'll go alone in a corner and be sad. It comes up for fun, a lot. So she gave the example of the date night wasn't good enough. We go out and I didn't have enough fun in my head. So I go home and go do something fun myself, to fill the fun tank.

[00:15:06] **Her:** He likes being entertained. He likes having a lot of stimulation and a lot going on. And when it's our date night, when we've said, okay, we're going to do Thursdays or Fridays or whatever the date nights are for that week. It is an immediate source of stress for me, because is he going to end up disappointed, like every other date night, if I don't find the energy reserves to...

[00:15:27] **Esther Perel:** It's more disappointing because you say she has a better time elsewhere? Or I can see her be more intentional, elsewhere, or she brings more energy to the other person?

[00:15:40] **Him:** It's the activity. So what I think a concrete example might be okay, Thursday is our date night. And what will happen is, let's watch a show in bed.

[00:15:52] **Esther Perel:** That's because you prefer that with him?

[00:15:54] **Her:** That's what I prefer with everybody.

[00:15:57] **Music:** Everybody.

[00:15:58] **Him:** It's hard to get her out of the house.

[00:16:01] **Esther Perel:** And those date nights become ways to prove we still are important. We still are special. We still what?

[00:16:11] **Him:** Care. We're still intentional. We're still invested.

[00:16:16] **Her:** And that proving point has its own fatigue. I have to prove that I am entertaining enough that he wants to spend that time with me.

[00:16:26] **Esther Perel:** Because otherwise?

He's not interested.

[00:16:30] **Him:** You've expressed that you feel... you feel that my priority is the fun and you're an accessory to the fun.

[00:16:41] **Esther Perel:** To which you said?

[00:16:44] **Him:** No, it's that I want to, I want to have fun and I want to share it with you.

[00:16:50] **Esther Perel:** And why is fun so important? Not that I think it's not. Fun has a unique importance for you because it's on the other side of blame and responsibility.

[00:17:03] **Her:** Wait, what do you mean?

[00:17:05] **Esther Perel:** I'll come back to it.

[00:17:07] **Her:** Okay. I'm just going to sit.

[00:17:10] **Him:** If I get to the end of the day and I look at, okay, I worked today and then I got home and then I went to bed. Then it feels like I wasted the day because I didn't have any fun today. I only have...

[00:17:27] **Esther Perel:** Obligations.

[00:17:29] **Him:** And what's the point of life, if you're not enjoying it?

[00:17:33] **Her:** It's a core value for you.

[00:17:35] **Him:** Yes.

[00:17:36] **Esther Perel:** Tell me more. If you had a white board here and you had the word fun on the top and you had to free associate to the word fun. Fun is...

[00:17:47] **Him:** Fun is adventure. Fun is active. Fun is exploring.

[00:17:56] **Esther Perel:** Let's go and add the second layer.

[00:18:00] **Him:** Like specific activities or?

[00:18:02] **Esther Perel:** Either.

[00:18:04] **Him:** Something I discovered just in the last two years?

[00:18:06] **Esther Perel:** You just told me that fun has an existential meaningful... fun is a way of knowing that life wasn't wasted is what I heard you just say. Fun is feeling that at the end of the day, there is something for you after you've done everything you should do for others and for the world of adulthood.

[00:18:31] **Him:** Yes.

[00:18:32] **Esther Perel:** Fun is feeling that...

[00:18:37] **Him:** Feeling that, feeling that, you're not a robot that just went to work in the factory and then got shut off at the end of the day, fun is humanness.

[00:18:55] **Her:** Would you be comfortable sharing about how that's impacted work for you? In your contentment with it?

[00:19:03] **Him:** Yeah. I have a hard time having fun at work.

[00:19:10] **Esther Perel:** Or have, or working in a place that is not fun.

[00:19:14] **Him:** Correct.

[00:19:16] **Esther Perel:** Because then all I feel is the robot and the oppression.

[00:19:19] **Him:** Correct. Being unable to have a fun workplace makes me feel like a robot or not empowered.

[00:19:31] **Her:** This has been maybe the most difficult part of our marriage in my perspective. I have been the primary earner. I don't love what I do. You know, it's not like, it's not like I go to work with a sense of calling and whatnot, but it didn't matter because it gave me the keys to have a family and have fun and have all this, all these things. And he's never felt that way. This is going to sound really cut and dry. I'm so nervous about hurting you. You understand, I'm not judging you for this at all. I just want to...

[00:20:11] **Him:** Just say it.

[00:20:12] **Her:** Okay. I have felt like I have funded his fun our entire marriage.

[00:20:23] **Esther Perel:** *I have often said that in a session, people come in with one story and they should leave with another. But equally important is when people come in with one story and the session is about something completely different and it takes a while to get there. But when you hear it, you know, it.*

[00:20:48] **Her:** I have felt like I have funded his fun, our entire marriage. Me going into work and keeping the jobs and working in a really misogynistic industry and fighting my way to the top. I felt tremendous pressure. I am trying to make ends meet because we have a ton of student loan debt. He went to grad school because he said he thought he wanted to do English and be a professor and he would be remarkable at that. He didn't enjoy it when he was there. So he dropped out of grad school. We're still paying off those student loans, but he had a job and he didn't like that job. So he got another job and didn't like that one. And I was begging him, find the thing that makes you happy, find the sense of purpose, because that's the only way you're going to be happy, that's. The only way I can have life. And the depressive states that he gets in every time he's in a job he doesn't enjoy, it's really hard to live with. And I've told him, like, it is hard to want to come home when I'm coming home and looking around going, we have this house, we have these kids, we have each other in this life that we're building and there's so much joy and there's so much to appreciate about it. And he'll be moping. A majority of last year was just me working my ass off. And last year I told him, I said, I'm done, I'm done chasing your happiness. I am done feeling like I am a fraction of a person to try and keep you. We had some pretty big fights. And he quit jobs, I encouraged him to. Whatever the hell you want to do you want to quit a good job where you're making decent money? I will figure it out. But for the love of God, find something that you can actually settle into. So package that altogether, it's a loaded topic.

[00:22:49] **Esther Perel:** It is loaded and, and I listened to it with. Respect and humility. And the reason I asked you to free associate the word fun is because you're using one word to talk about a lot of things. We started with date night, we started with fun is my vengeance on a life of work and obligations and responsibilities. And then it became fun is sovereignty. Fun is the proof that I made it. Fun is anti-oppression. Fun is anti-depression. And a lot of things go into that thing called fun and which work then enters. And if I'm in a job where I don't feel alive, since I can't leave myself, I leave the job and I look for the next place that's going to make me feel alive.

In which case, on the other side of alive, is a feeling of flat, languishing, depressive state. And I count on my date night as the evening of the week that's going to kind of give meaning for all the other nights that I have to just kind of slog.

[00:24:12] **Her:** And that is why I will always disappoint him.

[00:24:15] **Esther Perel:** Well you will only disappoint him, if you take it on as a mission.

[00:24:18] **Her:** Yeah, which I have. This is actually, you mentioned how this all the definitions of fun kind of work enters through? His non-monogamy enters through that same lens. So I don't know if now is a good time to share your part of why you decided you wanted to explore as well.

[00:24:38] **Him:** Yeah. About a year ago. After she had been dating for about a year.

[00:24:44] **Esther Perel:** Do you know them? The other partners? Are they in her life or in your joint life?

[00:24:50] **Him:** I know once it's a serious partner.

[00:24:54] **Her:** I mean, you know about all of them.

[00:24:55] **Him:** I know about all of them, and I know them once it's serious too. Yeah. My my fear of dating me dating was, well, if I go have a sexual experience with someone, I'm so attached so easily, and so value touch so much that I'll leave the family. Now I don't want to be with her.

[00:25:23] **Her:** And he flat out told me that and my response was well, that's scares the shit out of me, but you've got to know if what your truth is. If you're, if this marriage is not what you are finding that fun and that satisfaction with, I want you to be able to be honest with yourself because you deserve to be happy. And I don't want to be the thing that's keeping you from that?

[00:25:46] **Esther Perel:** Why did you insert yourself?

[00:25:49] **Her:** I have taken that, I mean, that is a, it's a chronic issue.

[00:25:52] **Esther Perel:** Why do you insert yourself? Because we are not talking about fun is really what I think would, what more and more sensitive to what we're talking about is more how you deal with a certain sad, darker side in you.

[00:26:10] **Her:** Yes.

[00:26:13] **Esther Perel:** And fun has become the kind of codeword for the anti dark, the non dark. You know, I go, I meet another woman. I love to touch. It will ignite in me, the longing, the lonely, the empty, the aching for a certain connection. And it's going to make me then want to go there cause I'm going to fun is there. It has zero to do with you for a minute. So.

[00:26:44] **Her:** That's a relief.

[00:26:45] **Esther Perel:** I mean, of course he's saying it to you, you're the wife, et cetera, but it is not about you. This is actually a truth that he doesn't tell himself of. Hot or cold?

[00:27:02] **Him:** Hot.

[00:27:04] **Esther Perel:** Then what happened? Then you found a partner?

[00:27:07] **Him:** Then I decided to date.

[00:27:11] **Her:** This is actually what, we fought about in the airport.

[00:27:18] **Esther Perel:** *On their way to the session, they were stuck in the plane, on the tarmac for a few hours and they got into a big fight, so much so that they almost thought of getting off the plane and canceling the session altogether.*

[00:27:41] **Her:** You can tell the whole story, about the date, and how that made you feel.

[00:27:46] **Him:** There's one date that she came home from and she had what I remember as the first time she spent two consecutive nights away. And she came home and I was really excited to see her. And one of the first things she said was, I wish I had more time with him and I remember feeling let down and feeling hurt. And then I thought, okay, I can go date. I knew that it wasn't a good motivation. I knew that wasn't...

[00:28:23] **Her:** To defend myself on this, there was zero communication or expression of, I don't know that he knew it. I don't think you were being deceitful in any way. But, it hurt me deeply in the airport because he said, he said this, I haven't told you this, this is what I felt. I had no idea that he missed me or was excited to see me or that there was any sense of expectation around...

[00:28:48] **Esther Perel:** And you didn't express it because you felt it, but you wanted to see if she felt it too, and you were going to wait for her first?

[00:28:56] **Him:** Well, I don't remember. I don't remember why I didn't express the excitement. The disappointment didn't come out because that's conflict awakened. That's my go-to.

[00:29:04] **Esther Perel:** This was your fight on your way here?

[00:29:06] **Him:** That was a fight this week.

[00:29:08] **Her:** The rewriting of history, the revisionist history...

[00:29:11] **Him:** Like, I was sad that day and hurt and thought, I can go find someone who wants to have fun with me.

[00:29:20] **Esther Perel:** But may I just say so basically what made you finally come back and say to her, this wasn't at all? Like why now, a year later?

[00:29:31] **Him:** It's because it's because we were coming here. So you...

[00:29:34] **Her:** He's blaming you.

[00:29:36] **Esther Perel:** I could be guilty now? But say more, you meaning...

[00:29:44] **Him:** Well, I knew when we came here today and had to tell our update that we would best be served with the whole story.

[00:29:54] **Esther Perel:** What did she think until now that you got inspired by her and you said me too?

[00:30:00] **Her:** Yes.

[00:30:01] **Him:** Once I saw how we could maintain our relationship in non-monogamy. So that was most of the story...

[00:30:09] **Her:** But what pushed you over the edge was...

[00:30:12] **Him:** Not the whole story....

[00:30:14] **Esther Perel:** And then what happened?

[00:30:15] **Him:** I went to therapy for a couple of weeks because...

[00:30:19] **Esther Perel:** A couple weeks?

[00:30:20] **Him:** I was already in therapy. I continued therapy for a few weeks before, before deciding to date. I didn't want to go in dating for retaliation. Oh, she hurt my feelings, now I'm going to date.

[00:30:36] **Esther Perel:** But you didn't want to, but that was a piece of it.

[00:30:40] **Him:** That was a piece of it. And I worked with my therapist to find a good reason. I want to find someone, I don't have to drag out of the house for a date. I want to find someone that likes to socialize.

[00:30:57] **Esther Perel:** Here's the thing. I'm sorry to interrupt you. May I? That you want to find someone who wants to have fun, that you don't have to drag out of the house. And your wife here is also telling you that if you can be more steady in the responsibility and the work part of your relationship, she will feel less exhausted and will want to have more fun with you. So it's like she can't be your source of up when she is feeling responsible to not be your source of down.

[00:31:38] **Her:** He is, it is hard that he knows what this is like, but it's hard to live with someone who is chronically depressed to that degree. He is a...

[00:31:50] **Esther Perel:** "You are...."

[00:31:51] **Her:** You are a stream of gadgets and toys. It is a stream of stuff constantly. When we had no money we would still get in fights about, well, I want this gadget and I want this thing. And the only way I could make him feel loved was buying him stuff. And so I would. And nothing reciprocated necessarily, but it was genuinely a survival mechanism it felt like, to keep us going. I got to get this kid iPad and his gear, and he likes this new workout device and he just bought himself a kayak for the, and I don't care. Like, I don't know what the price tag looks like, but if this just goes towards the effort of fine, you're convinced this is going to be fun have it, it's not going to do shit.

[00:32:51] **Esther Perel:** *As the conversation unfolds and it becomes more and more real, it's clear that we're not talking about fun. We're talking about the sense of emptiness and the void that lies right under the surface, and the neglect, and the loneliness that he may have felt growing up. The reverberations of being an African-American man and the responsibility that she has felt towards him to lift him up, buying him toys and gadgets, being the primary breadwinner. And it's no surprise that she wants elsewhere as a place of fun for herself, because the fun she's trying to provide for him is a lot of heavy lifting.*

[00:33:46] **Her:** And the interesting thing is he's stated he's met some lovely ladies and gone and had fun. He's not with any of them. There's always something.

[00:33:59] **Esther Perel:** So I'm going to let him tell me that. It's his story.

[00:34:04] **Him:** So I've been on dates and dated two women, and both of them dumped me. So I would not say the reason that I am not currently dating someone is because they're not fun.

[00:34:22] **Esther Perel:** They're in the poly community as well?

[00:34:24] **Her:** They are.

[00:34:25] **Esther Perel:** They're not hoping that...

[00:34:27] **Him:** Correct, yeah,

[00:34:28] **Her:** No cowgirls.

[00:34:29] **Esther Perel:** No what?

[00:34:30] **Her:** Cowgirls, a monogamous woman who tries to convince a poly man to go monogamous with her.

[00:34:36] **Him:** Tries to rope him in. I've been on dates where I didn't find attraction and I've gone on dates where they didn't find attraction. And then I've been in two relationships. And I've, I could have a friend with benefits arrangement with a girl who told me she is not ready for a relationship right now. And I said, that's not enough for me.

[00:34:59] **Her:** You've had some depressive slumps about dating and how challenging it can be to make meaningful connections.

[00:35:08] **Him:** I do get discouraged between dates or when a date doesn't work out, that is really discouraging.

[00:35:16] **Esther Perel:** Like a job search?

[00:35:17] **Him:** Like a job search and it makes me question myself. Am I, so am I a good attorney? Am I a handsome man? Am I an attractive man? Doesn't seem to be the case. No one thinks so.

[00:35:39] **Esther Perel:** What I'm hearing from you is I don't really trust if I am smart, competent, handsome. And I carry that insecurity and I need other people, their response will confirm one way or the other.

[00:36:10] **Him:** Yes.

[00:36:12] **Esther Perel:** And what I sense from you is more the ongoing uncertainty and insecurity inside of you, which is why I think that your going along with the new arrangement is really incredible and difficult.

[00:36:30] **Her:** The new arrangement as in him dating?

[00:36:32] **Esther Perel:** As in the whole non-monogamy thing itself. When we first talked about it, it was this whole I'm a horse in the stable, and I'm one of many, and if I'm one of many, it devalues me. And you know, these are themes in your relationship that existed way before the transition that existed maybe way before you met.

[00:37:00] **Him:** Yes.

[00:37:00] **Her:** Yes.

[00:37:02] **Esther Perel:** You know, I'm thinking to myself, this man found refuge in what he called fun.

[00:37:12] **Him:** I had another free association. Fun is fair because...

[00:37:17] **Esther Perel:** I think we need to unpack that one because that one is painful and loaded.

[00:37:23] **Him:** Life's not fair. You tell your kid, eventually kids get hammered into them. Life's not fair. And it's not like I remember a certain thing happening, but when that message finally sunk in that, oh yeah, life really is unfair. Because there's a lot of work and there's a lot of monotony and there's just a lot of stuff to log through in life. But the playground is fair. There's rules to tag and everyone follows the rules and everyone runs around and plays and...

[00:38:01] **Esther Perel:** Whereas in life, even when you play the rules...

[00:38:05] **Him:** You might not get what you deserve.

[00:38:09] **Esther Perel:** Injustice is still there.

[00:38:12] **Her:** He's not angry as a human being. Cheat in a board game? Oh my God. It's genuinely bothers him. It's not funny. It's not amusing.

[00:38:22] **Him:** No it's not funny.

[00:38:26] **Esther Perel:** Because the one place that is meant to be fair is now being trampled. Tell me, what would you free associate, if we had another white board and it had the word life is unfair.

[00:38:43] **Him:** Sad.

[00:38:48] **Esther Perel:** You're giving him your hand. Cause you know, it's hard for him.

[00:38:53] **Him:** It's sad. It's depressing that that is the way things are.

[00:39:01] **Esther Perel:** Lay it out.

[00:39:03] **Him:** When you do the right thing, the right thing should happen to you. And it's sad that that's not the case. Some people get a leg up and some people get lucky and there's no rhyme or reason to it. And it's existential, and nihilistic.

Can I ask you something?

Mhm.

[00:39:26] **Esther Perel:** I remember your saying last time we met that you were the first.

[00:39:33] **Her:** Yeah, in our family.

[00:39:34] **Him:** Mhm.

[00:39:35] **Esther Perel:** And so you were the first to go to college, to graduate school, to have a house, to have a stable, or at least the structure of a marriage. And all those experiences belong to the, if you do everything right, you will be getting what?

[00:39:53] **Him:** The American dream. Do the right things, and then the right things happen to you. Even in religion, plays into it too. Do what God wants you to do. And then God will bless you, was at least the way we were raised. I did it and it didn't work.

[00:40:22] **Esther Perel:** That's when I began to question myself, maybe I'm not as smart as I think I am?

[00:40:28] **Him:** Yeah. That law school was the first time I thought I was smart, because I got good grades and people told me I was smart. And for three years, it was, oh yeah, you're definitely going to get a job. You're going to have your free pick of a job. And then to have it all not work out in my pick of a job, let alone find a job, meant...

[00:40:59] **Esther Perel:** The system is rigged.

[00:41:02] **Him:** The system is rigged. Am I competent in anything?

[00:41:09] **Her:** And then you got a job you wanted, this was an interesting development, I think. You applied for a job you wanted, you got the job you wanted.

[00:41:23] **Esther Perel:** But you didn't experience the fun you thought you would?

[00:41:25] **Him:** It wasn't as fun as I thought it was going to be.

[00:41:27] **Esther Perel:** And then? You quit?

[00:41:32] **Him:** And, couldn't keep up with it. Got too checked out.

[00:41:36] **Her:** He would fall asleep at work.

[00:41:39] **Esther Perel:** Couldn't keep up with it, meaning it was too hard? It was too demanding or? It was so disappointing that I dissociated?

[00:41:49] **Him:** Disassociated.

[00:41:50] **Her:** Absolutely.

[00:41:51] **Him:** And my disassociation made me lose the job.

[00:41:58] **Esther Perel:** So that became the fun date that didn't deliver.

[00:42:02] **Him:** Yes.

[00:42:06] **Esther Perel:** So, this fun what we call fun it's like a bit of a tyranny on you.

[00:42:16] **Him:** Yes.

[00:42:17] **Her:** Wait, how, so?

[00:42:19] **Esther Perel:** Hmm?

[00:42:20] **Her:** A tyranny.

[00:42:21] **Esther Perel:** Well, it's like in pursuit, in pursuit of this elusive thing, which he has when he has the fun or the sex of a certain level. But it's short and furtive. And so if you don't deal with this, you're not going to keep any job or any other partner because they all will be disappointments.

As he discusses the unfairness of life the fact that I'm talking to a Black American man who is telling me I did everything right, and I didn't get the reward for it has to be put within the broader racial context of his experience as a Black American man, but he doesn't name it like that. He doesn't frame it. And so I decide to wait to see if he will, or if somebody will. It's not passed on me that I'm a white European woman in this room with his Indian American wife and him as a Black American man. But he has learned to not talk about race. And the question here is who is going to bring this up because it is right in the center of the conversation and it is not being named.

[00:43:50] **Her:** His mother told me, you know she was a single mom, Black woman working two, three jobs. His father was not a contributing member of the household. So she's told me about what it was like for her trying to raise kids that are only a year apart.

[00:44:08] **Esther Perel:** Two?

[00:44:09] **Her:** Two kids. And so, you know, she would get home after the last job and plop them both in a playpen and cook, try to get the house ready and try to get them... So they entertained themselves. That has always stuck out to me as entertainment as a way of life. And as a way to make up for the lack of connection and the lack of, and no judgment whatsoever. I don't know how she did it, but I see some of this all very connected back.

[00:44:42] **Esther Perel:** And for you?

[00:44:44] **Him:** No.

[00:44:45] **Esther Perel:** You don't? You know, you have the gift of having a partner who knows you from adolescence. So she, she has a long view. It's only after we describe what fun means, and after we describe what life is unfair means, that we begin to get at some of the underpinnings of this. I think that the first thing that we are doing is we're filling some holes in your story.

[00:45:19] **Him:** Something that you said, you said that anger, one time, which in that fits. I'm not an angry guy. No one, no one who meets me would say that's an angry guy, but I do get angry and then I hide it and bury it and then it takes energy to hide it and bury it. And then all I want to do is go somewhere, do something where I don't have to expend that energy containing anger at the unfair system.

[00:45:59] **Esther Perel:** Right. But let me ask you something as a white Jewish European woman, I have very little understanding of what it means to be a Black man living, breathing in America. Is it even more dangerous to be angry?

[00:46:18] **Him:** Yeah. And I'm a larger black man. So I can't show anger. Absolutely not.

[00:46:27] **Esther Perel:** You know, there's an old view that I don't know if it's an old view, there's a view that says that depression is anger turned inwards.

Have you ever been in a group with other Black American men? That, this is a collective issue. This is not just yours.

[00:46:49] **Him:** That's a whole...

[00:46:50] **Her:** It's a can of worms.

[00:46:58] **Him:** You're about to start another couple hours of therapy.

[00:46:58] **Her:** Only Black guy in the class, grew up in a very white church. He is the guy who moved into our neighborhood and we were like, oh, you're one of the good ones. That has been...

[00:47:10] **Him:** So that, that is scary. That, the idea of going out and hanging out with other Black people is scary because on the few occasions that I have, I'm not accepted.

[00:47:24] **Esther Perel:** As Black enough?

[00:47:25] **Him:** As Black enough And that is deeply hurting. You don't know how it, what it is to be Black. So I don't even, I don't have the Black experience, I don't know what Black people like, I don't know what Black people do.

[00:47:39] **Her:** You still have lived experiences. You still have all of the burden that comes with it, but without a community to surround you.

[00:47:50] **Him:** I agree, it's not fair.

[00:47:52] **Her:** And it's okay to be angry about that.

[00:47:55] **Esther Perel:** Brené Brown has a beautiful distinction between fitting in and belonging. You don't want a group you fit in. You want a group that you'd be known to and the group you belong to is a group of people who have all kinds of mixed experiences. They don't belong to one place only. So the first session emphasized some of your understanding and validation for you, but also about what she was looking for. This one, if I can give myself permission to find safe places to express my anger and starting with her. There is a possibility that when I find the things I'm looking for, I will actually be able to appreciate them more because I have not invested them with godly deliveries. These two are connected. I wish I had more time for us to work on it more, but they are connected.

Unfortunately we are getting to the end of the session. And I so wished we had time now to delve into this core issue. It's just become abundantly clear. This is not just fun to cover up for depression or emptiness. This is fun as a strategy for anger management and the anger we're talking about is not just his own individual anger based on his history, but it is the anger that is experienced by so many Black American men. It has to do with race, has to do with racial trauma, which is even more compounded for him because I learned that he has spent his life as the only Black man in all white environments. Hence, why I suspect it took him so long to talk about race in the first place.

I want to give you the names of a couple of colleagues that are Black American therapists, men. And I want us to ask if they are currently running groups that will be a starting point for a safe group that we have to find a way to create its differences and its diversity from within. And that we take on whatever judgment or shaming takes place and that will create a container to address all, not all, but many of those difficult topics that we just named today. That will be one place to start. And with that, we just going to say stop because otherwise we could spend another couple hours here.

[00:51:20] **Her:** Thank you. Thank you so much for your time. It means a lot.

[00:51:26] **Esther Perel:** Same here. Same here

[00:51:42] **Jesse (Producer):** Esther Perel is the author of *Mating in Captivity* and *The State of Affairs*, and also the host of the podcast and 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 Julia Natt. Recorded by Noriko Okabe. Kristen 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 Lydia Polgreen, Colin Campbell, Clara Sankey, Ian Kerner, Alma, Courtney Hamilton, Nick Oxenhorn and Jack Saul.