

Esther Perel: Every season for "Where Should We Begin?" I receive thousands of applicants, and one of the most frustrating things is that I'm only going to be able to see ten couples. And I've been grappling with this. How can I connect with more of you? There are so many powerful questions, so many pain points that I would like to be able to at least address with you even if shortly. So this series is going to be different. It's you calling me with a very precise question, with your pain point, me calling you back, and together we think out loud. And we go from where should we begin to where can you start?

Her: Hi Esther, I'm reaching out because I really love my partner, and this is the first time I've been feeling kind of stuck and like, not sure how to move forward. The conflict is around that I know that I want to have kids and they aren't sure, which is okay. But when we first were dating, I was very clear that I knew that I wanted to have kids and that I wasn't really trying to get into a committed relationship where there wasn't that wasn't at least a possibility and it still is a possibility, but they don't seem any closer to figuring out if that's what they want. And I think part of it is I'm a little bit older than them close to five years older than them.

I'm in my thirties now, and they're just in a different stage of life. They're trying to figure out, you know, their career. They want to do some of the things, traveling and exploring, that I've gotten to do. Some other factors: I'm trans, so the dating world is pretty tough and don't want to necessarily go back into it. I also think that a lot of the people who are dating trans women aren't necessarily looking to have kids which might be a skewed perception, but like, I just don't want to find out like five years from now that they don't want to have kids after all.

And they can't really tell me that one way or another. Like, I would be happy to wait for several years if I thought that they were eventually going to get there, but I don't know that they're going to get there and I don't want to lose that much of my life before I try and start over with somebody.

I mean, my partner and I have been talking about possible options for us to consider like some kind of ethical non-monogamy structure for parenting, but I don't know what that would look like for our relationship. Anyway, I'm rambling a bit, but hopefully you have some idea of what I would like to talk about and let me know if this is something that you think you could help with. Thank you.

Esther Perel: Hello, hello.

Her: Hi.

Esther Perel: How are you?

Her: I'm nervous, but good.

Esther Perel: Shall I tell you that I'm nervous every time as well, because, first of all, I'm always so honored that someone thinks I want to bring one of the important questions of my life to this woman. That is really an honor. And I want to do right by you. So I want to ask you to just phrase the question and the essence of the question one more time, because it may also have evolved since you first connected with us.

Her: Yeah. Thank you. Well I think that there's a lot of different corners and angles to it, but the the basic essence of it is that I'm in a very committed loving relationship and the sort of current central conflict is that I know that I want and intend to have kids someday. And my partner is very not sure if that's what they want and it's not something that I need to happen right now, but it would be, it feels important to know if that's a direction that we're heading in, because I feel like I've had some sort of false starts in my life before. And, you know, there's additional barriers for me to getting finding a healthy relationship and starting a family. And so it's important to me to sort of know if I'm barking up the wrong tree, as much as I love this person. And at the same time, they, I think, are feel that there's a lot of pressure on them to know something that they don't know yet. And I, I really hear that and want to respect that, and also not sort of betray myself and like, the future that I feel certain I'm supposed to have. I guess that's where I'm feeling stuck.

Esther Perel: Can I ask you something?

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: What do you mean by false starts?

Her: I was in a four year relationship that culminated in a marriage and divorce shortly thereafter during which I was a step-mom for that time. And I really took to it and loved it. I had thought that that was going to be my family and that that was my child. So there's a lot of loss there for me.

Esther Perel: You have no contact anymore with the child?

Her: No. I mean, not really. I sometimes send postcards or presents on holidays, but it's a complicated, it's a very complicated situation, but no, I don't really, I don't have a meaningful relationship anymore. I don't have a parenting role for sure.

Esther Perel: When you say I want to have a family, I want to unpack that with you because there's many ways to family and family building and what, what is involved in the statement: I want to have a child. Is it, I want it to be mine, because when it wasn't mine, I co-parented a child, but lost all access to the child.

Her: Yes, yes.

Esther Perel: And therefore you believe that a biological link would correct that. I hear a number of different layers to the story here, and I want to make sure that I understand them.

Her: Yeah. What you just said resonates a lot. That feeling of having a parent child bonds and then losing it was the most painful thing that I felt in my life and it was not an amicable split up.

So yeah, I think definitely a big part of it. I mean, I know that there are other ways to have a child and I think. You know, all of them for me are complicated and costly, but I have some resistance to the idea of adoption, I think mainly because it involves, it would involve somebody judging my fitness as a parent.

That's yeah, I don't know. I, so I actually, I have. I have some, you know, genetic materials stored and it's possible to have a biologically related child, but I mean, that's not, I mean, that's not even really the question with my partner. It's more like whether we're going to parent together at all, regardless of the route we take.

Esther Perel: And whether you need to wait for your partner to say yes for you to be able to proceed, whether this becomes a joint decision. Must it be a joint decision? Is it something that you would only do if you do it together or would you consider co-parenting with someone else?

Her: So I've...

Esther Perel: I'm throwing things out.

Her: Yeah, no, I appreciate that. I've brought the idea of us staying a couple and me co-parenting with somebody else. I brought that up before and it wasn't like completely rejected, but then if I tried to talk about it in more concrete terms, concrete terms? Yes. Then it becomes it, that that conversation didn't go well. And we agreed that we weren't going to talk about it anymore without help. We're actually going to start seeing a couples therapist later today. So you had really good timing.

Esther Perel: I'm the prelude to the couples therapy?

Her: Yeah. You're, you can maybe help me know what direction to go in.

Esther Perel: I mean, you you've given a direction right now. You're beginning to edit the story, right? What are the possibilities? The possibilities are I wait for my partner to say, okay, I'm into this. I want this too. Let's go. Let's do this together. I say, this does not need to be a relationship, can be a romantic relationship that does not involve co-parenting. And I do a co-parenting agreement with someone else who wants to have a child.

Her: It's I mean, it's possible. I just, um, it just makes it so complicated. Yeah.

Esther Perel: Yes. It is different. It's maybe more complicated because it requires spelling things out and really being very clear and making very intentional agreements, but it is not necessarily more complicated if your partner says, no, this is not for me. Or if you need to make a decision between, do I stay with them or do I leave because of the possibility that we may not align.

Her: I'm afraid of a, how it would affect our relationship. I mean, we live together. I it's hard to imagine raising a child in a home that I share with my partner, with them not, I mean, I just don't think that would work. They would become responsible in a way that they may be not, are not prepared to be. And then I think also when I've talked about some of these ideas, they feel like I'm making contingency plans. That's a phrase they used. And I don't think that feels good to them either.

Esther Perel: And the meaning of contingency plans here is?

Her: Like, I'm just, I don't know, waiting for them to tell me yes or no. And then I'm going to just move forward with my life without them, I guess.

Esther Perel: I don't know if I want this with you, but I don't want you to go ahead and do this without me.

Her: Mmm. Yeah.

Esther Perel: That's a bit of a bind.

Her: A little bit.

Esther Perel: What I am concerned is that what starts out as a conversation and a negotiation about family formation, turns into a bit of a power struggle.

Her: I don't want that.

Esther Perel: Right. What you can do without me, that I will accept that I won't accept that you shouldn't do because I should be with me, but you can't do it with me until I want to do it with you. So if we're going to be creative, we need to be able to really spell out different storylines.

Her: It's scary. I come from a family, but my parents have been together my whole life. When we grew up in one house, I have siblings, we all got along. I just, in some ways, like my being trans was like the big departure from. The sort of script and that was scary, but it was necessary. And I I'm glad I, I transitioned, but I guess I don't,

Esther Perel: You don't want to upend the rest of the script.

Her: Yeah, like there's things in that script that I don't necessarily hate. Like I had a really happy childhood and I, yes, I sort of liked that it wasn't too complicated.

Esther Perel: Yes. Yes. Yes.

What is the scary?

Her: Just things getting messy and falling apart. I don't want things to fall apart again.

Esther Perel: Yeah. Okay. So, and that goes right back to the relationship that you had before.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: Right. So your family stands as a beautiful example. And the example it may be because of the norms that your family inhabited and because of your family's relationships with each other. And there's a part of you that now thinks the whole thing fell apart with my ex because the whole thing was structurally unsound to begin with.

Her: Yeah, it feels that way sometimes.

Esther Perel: Yes.

Her: But also I know, I think rationally that that's not true that some of it was just like the person, like, it wouldn't be like that with anybody necessarily.

Esther Perel: Okay. You do know that. But the loss was so painful, right? You got very attached to the child and maybe to your ex too. And you didn't want this to end. And so there's a part of you that wonders, if I go back to more traditional structures, maybe it would prevent from this kind of dissolution and fall out to happen again.

Her: Yeah. Yeah.

Esther Perel: Makes sense. May not be true, but makes sense, and I wish I could say to you that traditional structures are more solid, more reliable and less messy, but I could invite you to go have a couple of conversations with divorce lawyers that should clear you up.

Her: Yeah. Yeah. I know that's true.

Esther Perel: You know, the loss is really painful. And you're trying to find a way to prevent that from happening again. So there's two missions as I hear. There is one is how do I go about having a child, but the other one is how do I go about making sure that I don't lose a child again? And does it mean it's my sperm? Does it mean the conception, takes part in the context of my relationship, we carry the child, we give birth to the child and all these milestones will make it more clear that this is my child. But all in all, what I'm really wanting is not to have to go through this pain again.

Her: Yes.

Esther Perel: Yeah. I understand that.

Her: I feel like I know what I need to do. And I would love for them to be part of it. Obviously that's, that's what I want, but if they decide that that's not for them, I don't need them to be part of that with me. I want that, but I don't need that. So I'm really trying to walk that line of not putting that responsibility on them and also not having it be like an ultimatum, but I just, I don't know how to find that place.

Esther Perel: The ultimatum being, if you're not, if you don't join me, we will not stay together. Or if you don't join me, I will go ahead and find a way of doing this while we are continuing together too.

Her: I think that either of those feel like open to negotiation for me. What I feel a lot of resistance to is the idea of just let's wait and see.

Esther Perel: Yeah, because let's wait and see may feel to you that one more time, it's the other person's life that determines yours.

Her: Yes. Yes, that's it.

Esther Perel: And that, that had really painful consequences for you and you give yourself up in more ways than one and you were left with what you think is nothing.

Her: Yeah, not nothing. I mean, I...

Esther Perel: No, actually it's true. It's not nothing. You want to say? I should, I can correct myself. You're absolutely right.

Her: I, I mean, I still have those experiences and those memories and I always thought I'd want to have kids, but now I know, I know. And I'm good at it. And I'm supposed to be a mom.

Esther Perel: Yes. Yes, absolutely, it's exactly, it's actually what you left with is the conviction that this is exactly what you want, what you deserve to have and what you long for in your life.

Her: But I know that now, and I don't want, I don't need the pain for that lesson. I don't need that lesson again.

Esther Perel: Yes, yes, yes. It's so good that you said no, not nothing because you're right. You actually were left with one of the most important truths for you.

Her: And god it would be so simple if they said, yeah, I can see us going there someday. That sounds like what I would want for our future. And then I could just coast. I feel like that would be fine. Um, the idea, I mean it's about them and, and how much I value our relationship and how safe and supported I feel with them in particular.

And it's also about, I don't want to go back out there again. It's not easy dating as a trans woman and it's not from my experience is often the people who want to date me are the people who are looking for a partner who they aren't going to have kids with, if that makes sense.

Esther Perel: So you feel now tell me if that's, if that resonates, that you came out of your experience with your ex and the child with a clear sense that yes, you can be a mom, you should be a mom. You want to be a mom and you deserve to be a mom, but society hasn't caught up with you.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: Does your partner say no, not interested period? Does your partner say you can't force me or put this on me? I need to decide alone. I feel the pressure what's the dance in terms of...

Her: They'll say that that feels like a lot of pressure. They'll say that they don't want to feel like I'm just waiting around for them to catch up. But they won't, they don't say that they don't want to, or that they do. I mean, that's part of the issue for me is that if they said that they thought they would, that would be great. So

Esther Perel: the interesting thing here is that you may have a situation where your partner doesn't know.

What do they want? Partly because you're wanting is so central to them. So they're always in a reactive stance.

Her: Yeah, we've polarized a little.

Esther Perel: And so this may be also an issue of needing to create more space between the two of you so that they can think without having your thoughts, cloud their head all the time.

And then it becomes a bit of a battle for autonomy. The only way I know what I want is by not wanting what you want. The only way I know what is mine is when it's different from yours.

Her: How do I ease up the pressure without feeling like...

Esther Perel: It's not all your doing, by the way. It's not all you're doing. You need to be able to say, I want this without it instantly being a pressure. But at this point, you're right. It's become polarized. You can't say it without them instantly having to think that, what does that mean for me? What do I have to do? It's like, you say I'm hungry and the other person says, okay, I need to get up and cook?

Her: They, they actually feel that way, sometimes if I notice an issue around the house, they feel like I'm telling them to do something about it, right in that moment. And that's not usually what I mean at all.

Esther Perel: Okay. So that is couples therapy work. How do I express a feeling without experiencing a command, a demand, a criticism. If you are at a situation where you can't have a conversation about this anymore, because you say, I feel, and the other person says, and therefore, what must I do then you have a very good beginning for your therapy this afternoon, because then it's no longer about the topic itself. The dynamic has replaced the topic and there's a common issue.

Her: So you think if we use therapy to focus more on that general dynamic, then it might help with the more specific cases, even if they're more fraught. Yes.

Esther Perel: Yes I do. I mean, that would be my thinking. Okay. If I was the couples therapist in this instance, which I have often been, I would say whenever you get stuck around the topic in a relationship.

You always want to go look other places, what are the other topics that go through the same dance and when that is not there, how do these two people actually talk about things where they don't get stuck in this way? So you want to circumvent, you want to go around. So indeed, if, when you say I want to have a child and they say.

That puts pressure on me that I have to instantly respond to you because I feel responsible because I feel like you're not just telling me what you feel. You're telling me what I should do. And on, and on then I say, is that the case? If your

partner says I'm cold or I'm tired, or I'm hungry, do you instantly feel, that's a criticism of you, that that puts pressure, that you should do something or should have done something even.

Then we talking about, the nature of the connection and the closeness between the two of you and how can we make that a little bit looser, not to have less connection, but to have it less fraught because then the person can think. What is at stake for me in wanting or not wanting to have a child.

Is it about having a child? Is it about carrying a child? Is it about giving birth? Is it about being a parent? What is it that they are thinking about when they say I'm not sure I'm not ready. I don't want, this is pressure.

And so instead of you're instantly asking maybe what should I do? I think the best thing you do is you take a position of curiosity and you ask, tell me more. What do you mean? What is it for you? What do you imagine when you say this

and you invite them to just lay it out? So that they can become more clear the way that you came out with clarity from your previous relationship. At this point, when you talk, the main thing that they are doing is trying to get you off their back. They're managing you. They're not experiencing their own feelings and thoughts.

Her: Yeah. I mean, when we talk about what we want out of there, I would like clarity. And I think that they would like the freedom to not have clarity, if that makes sense.

Esther Perel: Yes. But the freedom to not have clarity, often produces clarity. You want assurance that's had the same, you want a predictability of the future.

That's totally understandable, but that's not the same. And in a sense, by doing that, you once again, put yourself at the mercy of the other person's story.

Her: Yeah,

Esther Perel: yeah, no need for that. Repeat.

Her: No, it's very counterintuitive to expect that clarity will arrive if.

Back off, but it makes sense when, when we talk about it like that, right.

Esther Perel: That's just. Because at this point you've gotten stuck. And the first thing is you need to get unstuck and that demands, flexibility and nimbleness around the conversation. And it's not around the topic it's around how we engage relationally.

Vis-a-vis the topic. The form in this moment is more important than the topic for right now that makes. You have two tracks, you have the couples therapy work, and then you have the possibility of speaking with someone who negotiates multiple ways of family creation and co-parenting agreements and the like, so that you have a sense of what are the possibilities.

You don't have to decide anything tomorrow. So I wish you a very good first couples therapy sessions. I hope this was helpful on the way to it.

Her: I think it was very helpful.

Esther Perel: Thank you. You're welcome. Thank you. And let me know.

So I'm looking for many ways to stay connected with you as I continue to help you develop greater confidence and competence in your relationships. This time it comes in the form of a game. "Where should we begin - a Game of Stories" is a game that helps you connect and reconnect, deal with the social atrophy that so many of us have experienced, and unlock the storyteller within. So gather your partner, your friends, or your date, grab a seat, pull a card and be my guest in sharing the stories that you rarely tell. Let's play along. [Estherperel.com/thegame](https://estherperel.com/thegame)