

I Need Her to See Me

Jesse (producer): Just a note before we start. Esther talks through instances of abuse and domestic violence with this next caller.

Her: Hi Esther, um, thank you so much for agreeing to answer my question. A bit of background on myself. So I am a young lady in my mid twenties. My mother was a victim of kidnapping and torture at the hands of a dictatorship state. And that's basically, um, affected our relationship in a number of ways. So I've been diagnosed with complex PTSD because of a myriad of things that happened during my childhood and afterwards. And my question to you really is how do I learn to live with the trauma and the hurt of my childhood, especially when I have a mother who is very difficult to deal with, we're currently not speaking. Um, we go through a cycle of me forgiving her, even though she hasn't apologized. And a few months down the line go through the same cycle of not speaking for months on end, and then I will decide to forgive her because of, you know, understanding her trauma. But there's never an acknowledgement of what has happened. Um, yeah, any help would be really, would be really amazing.

Esther Perel: Hello, hello.

Her: Hello, hi.

Esther Perel: I'm Esther. Um, there's a lot in your story and much more than we probably can address together in a brief conversation. So if you could organize it around a question for us, what would it be?

Her: My question really is how do I build a relationship with my mother? And also how do I stop transferring a lot of the trauma that is in our relationship to my other relationships. I find it very hard to enter into conflict with people because of how violent she has been throughout my life. So I, I find it very hard to, to be angry. It's not something I do very well at all. And that has led to me being in some very dangerous situations where I haven't been able to assert myself. I've kind of been a bit of a pushover. I just wonder how can I live with that?

Esther Perel: Tell me if I hear this correctly and we may need to select one question among the many, but that's okay. My relationship with my mother is fraught. One of the main experiences I had with her was to be at the receiving end of her wrath. I myself, have felt frozen by it. And I have a very difficult time when there is tension or conflict between me and my loved ones or my

friends. And I feel that I repeat an experience and a pattern that I had with her. And if I can address that, then maybe I also will be able to address her.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: I inserted a lot of my own thoughts in the summary, but tell me if I heard you well.

Her: Yeah, that's correct. Um, I think when I do finally set a boundary, it comes from a place of being fed up. I then funnily enough, start exhibiting that anger or that, um, or, you know, saying things that I don't really mean when I should've just said I was uncomfortable with something from the beginning and then I would have never gotten there.

Esther Perel: Right. So you take it, you take it and then at one point you explode.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: Let me ask you first, tell me a little bit about your mom and a little bit about you and your mom. So I have some context.

Her: Okay. Um, so my mum is honestly an amazing woman, an amazing advocate. So she, um, was one of the founding members of, uh, I'm going to obviously be vague, um, of a political party. In the global South, and then she was kidnapped and tortured quite a few times. And then we had to seek asylum in the UK. And because of my mother not really dealing with her trauma. sort of in the outside world, she was kind of revered as this amazing activist, um, very politically astute person, but inside the house, she was basically a functioning alcohol. She would drink a lot. And now that I'm kind of more versed within addiction and stuff like that, I should, I can see that a lot of the parts of her anger were probably coming from withdrawal. Um, so there were instances where, because I was very clumsy, I remember my mother then threw the plates at me. If I didn't eat, she would punch me in the stomach. Yeah, it was those kinds of things really.

Esther Perel: Would it be correct to say that what made you mother such a force of nature in the public world as an activist, a politician, et cetera, and the ways that she coped with it then became what made it more challenging for her to be a mom, to you?

Her: Yeah. Yeah

Esther Perel: Tell me, is there a shared narrative between your mom and you, do you both somewhat converge on the story or are there very different views in how the story is told?

Her: I, yeah, this is a very different story. Um, I remember being terrified of her because of the violence. And I remember mentioning it to my grandparents and when my grandparents brought it up to her, she cried and sort of said that I was characterizing her, like the people that had obviously kidnapped and brutalized her. So I don't think she has an idea of how much it still affects me in my adult life. So I do get scared of being in trouble. And this extends to even little things. Like I get scared of being troubled by job, even though I'm, I'm kind of an assistant manager. So why would I be afraid? Um, and when I bring that up to her, even just to broach the subject, she kind of says that I don't have a backbone or that you know, I just let people walk all over me. And then, so when I think about the times when we would be out for dinner and she'd be saying horrible berating things to me and I would be crying and she would carry on eating.

Esther Perel: This is total improvisation on my part, meaning I don't know your mother one bit, but I'm imagining that one side of her one part of her would just be horrified to think that she did to you, what was done to her and another side of her or another part of her may actually think that the way that she reacted was what allowed her to survive and that if she had ever caved the way that you described that you do, she wouldn't be around. So it's not just acute transfer. Your experience with her into other relationships, but she transfers the experience of her in her captivity also to you. There's transfer taking place on multiple levels. But if you said to her today that sometimes you caved or you let people boss you around or say things because fundamentally, you didn't know how to answer. You didn't feel that it was ever safe to answer and that in some way it became one way to survive. Or do you think you never chose any? It just was?

Her: Um, I think it's the former, I think definitely it has been one way to survive. In terms of the person that I am. I know what I'm good at.

Esther Perel: Which is?

Her: I'm a very, I'm a very efficient person. I'm good at planning. I'm good at problem solving, I think very quickly on my feet. Um, I'm one of the youngest managers in what I do, and that came from, um, the fact that, because my mother is a functioning alcoholic, even though she earned a lot of money sometimes, you know, bills, sometimes weren't paid on time.

Esther Perel: Alright, so you have a lifelong history of being a manager of messy situations?

Her: Yep.

Esther Perel: And have seen all the stuff that needs to be done that other people are not paying attention to. But what you're also saying is it's the relationship aspect, not the tasks. I'm excellent at tasks. I struggle more at the relationships and especially at feeling safe to put boundaries to put limits, to say no to, to speak up. If I anticipate strife and I, I instantly know or feel viscerally in my body that any conflict, any disagreement can escalate from zero to a hundred in a split second.

Her: Yeah. And I think it's very irrational. I feel like that in professional situations, because figures of authority, I associate those with people that can hurt me, even though it's very, it doesn't make any sense.

Esther Perel: But no, no, no. It makes plenty of sense. In the emotional transference vocabulary, it makes plenty of sense. If you're not vigilant and watching out and making sure that everything is in place, that you perfect, that you're not stepping out of the line, that nothing will cause this sudden plate that reaches your face and your traumatic memory carries that. And it, it makes perfect sense for it. It isn't, the first thing to know is that it is a trauma memory, but it has validity. It's not like you're just inventing something. And at the same time, there is also another part of you that needs to be able to let it know, no, no, this isn't happening right now. You can relax. It's a hand that you put on your own shoulder and that says all clear now. You know, you take your threat detector and you check around and you use your presence in the moment to reassure. The activation of the past. So give me an example of this, even from work recently where you could have done something like that.

Her: It's strange because I know I'm quite good at my job, but you know, as everybody does, they make mistakes. And on this particular day...

Esther Perel: You're supposed to make some too on your quota is lesser than the others?

Her: I think I'm very hard on myself. So yeah, the quota is much less than other people.

Esther Perel: I thought you would be, yes.

Her: Um, so instead of my immediate boss having to deal with it, um, his boss was around for some reason. So he caught the mistake, not my boss. So he called me in and I had a panic attack on the way there because I thought I was going to get into trouble.

Esther Perel: It's not just into trouble, you know, the way our traumatic memory speaks to us is that you literally in your body feel like you're going in for a beating. And then what happened?

Her: And then I kind of gathered myself together.

Esther Perel: How did you, how did you do that?

Her: My immediate boss brought me some water and then I just kind of calmed down a little bit. And then I came out of it feeling very silly because I've made all of this fuss over nothing. I didn't get fired. You know, they didn't even like put down any kind of like formal warning or whatever that was it.

Esther Perel: You were living at that moment in two time zones. In the present you were able to calm yourself, you, your boss was able to reassure you to give you some water, to comfort you, to prepare you, to let you know that no, you were not going in as your childhood memory would have said to get a beating. But the second time zone your entire body, where in your body do you feel it the most, by the way?

Her: Yeah, in my chest. Um, my, my head gets very hot.

Esther Perel: What kind of hot?

Her: Like a, like a throbbing hotness and my heart starts to beat fast, I think the last time me and my mother got confrontational face-to-face I actually left her in a restaurant because, cause she was telling me off for not asserting myself enough, ironically.

Esther Perel: And so you asserted yourself by leaving?

Her: Yeah. And then when I said, I didn't want to speak about it anymore. She then said, well, why aren't you getting angry? And I said, I don't want to get angry. I don't like being angry. So she carried on shouting at me. And I started crying. So then I left and it just brings me back to when I was a child, when that would happen at dinner, when I would be crying. And she would carry on eating

and berating me, but I couldn't go anywhere. I remember one time I actually wet myself because I couldn't move.

Esther Perel: Because, because when we are frozen with terror and we are feeling demeaned and degraded, sometimes we wet our pants. Little ones, older ones, boys, girls, everybody that is your body speaking. It's an extreme expression of fear and terror. But this time you were able to get up. What would happen, just very curious, if you said, Mom this is abusive, this is cruel. Stop it. You didn't like it either.

Her: Um, I have tried that before, and she's turned around and said that I'm very lucky. I haven't got through the things that she went through which I get.

Esther Perel: Yes, that's right.

Her: Which is very true. So it's kind of a way to shut me up a lot of the time. It was very hard coming from a kind of Black community, because it's always put on the child, like the child has to fix things. So I have my aunts and my uncles asking me why I'm not speaking to her and I can't tell them, because they just don't understand it.

Esther Perel: They won't understand, because culturally speaking, no matter what your mom does, you should always be respectful of her?

Her: (Crying) Yes. And also because of who my mom is. Like the last time we had a huge argument my aunt called me and told me not to put it on social media because people know who my mom is. Like instead of asking me how I am. It's like all that matters is her image, you know. And I'm very proud of her.

Esther Perel: Do you have a therapist?

Her: I did have for a while before the pandemic. Well, I do prefer face-to-face so it's been hard to have face-to-face sessions, unfortunately, but it is something that I am going to go back into.

Esther Perel: And would she ever join you for a session?

Her: I would want her to.

Esther Perel: And you simply said, you know, I think we could have an amazing relationship and we don't, and I would love to see how we can improve it.

Her: Yeah. I mean, I've mentioned therapy to her quite a few times, but she...

Esther Perel: But together as in, I want to work on our relationship.

Her: Okay, yeah.

Esther Perel: Rather than you have to go deal with your trauma. Sometimes when you send somebody to have to go deal with their trauma. There's also the feeling that, that the torturers won. You know, maybe they're not in captivity, but, but the whole experience lives inside of them. So an easier entry point is to just say, we have so much that we could get along with and we could have such a better relationship. I would love for it to be different. Would you? And if she says yes, and even if she says yes, but it's you, then you say, can you come and help me. Take, take her at it and just, um, okay. Whatever is me will be attended by me, but will you come with me because I need your help.

And then you say when that part of you comes out, when that vicious, degrading, violent part of you comes out. I don't recognize you, stop. Or I will move by basically saying we are not going to let this happen to us today. Because you will regret this mom, this will bring up lots of anger and shame inside of you for acting the way you do. And I am not going to let that happen to you, let alone to me and to us.

So there's a kind of a double management taking place at that moment, but since you're such an amazing manager. If you had a moment where you could authentically speak your truth to her, what is it you would want to say? All right. For that matter?

Her: Um, I would say that I see you. Yeah. I see her and I see even being a mixed race woman or Black woman, or a woman of color in this world is hard, especially when you're trying to do what's best for everybody else, but I understand her trauma and that I would never want to demean that or make her feel as though, you know, I, I don't appreciate everything that she did for me and my siblings and giving us an amazing life. But I also understand that for her to do that, she had to push that trauma aside. She had to get up and go to work every day, even though she was traumatized. I see her. I just want her to see me a little bit.

Esther Perel: Yes, yes, yes. I was waiting for that last line. Because you finally are asking for it. I see you, mom. I admire you. You're a force of nature. I understand you. You are remarkably empathetic. You're remarkable in your

ability to hold her up while at the same time, wanting for her to not any more put you down. And that is the invitation that you're going to go to her with.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: How are you doing right now?

Her: I'm okay. I feel better. I feel less heavy. I think I've gotten a lot of it out.

Esther Perel: Have you ever written a letter to your mom?

Her: No, I haven't.

Esther Perel: So I would like to invite you to write that letter. You just started it. I see you mom would, would be a beautiful opening line. And I want you to see me too now would be a beautiful closing line or they need to be somewhere in there.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: Because you have a lot to say and you can say it quite beautifully. And when you can do it, maybe in writing, when you're not in the midst of conflict with her or strife, she may be more receptive and you may be able to actually be more articulate. It's both ends. And it may be much deeper and a more authentic voice than just the embattled child. It's my view. This is not at all the only truth. I'm sure that each of us have different ways of looking at our relationship and our story. And that's, that's exactly as it is. We are two people, but a better relationship includes each of us being able to see and to recognize the way that the other person experienced it and tells the story. And this letter is an invitation.

Her: Yeah.

Esther Perel: You want to take a deep breath? Because this is just a very small nibble that we did today, but it's a place to start, or let me ask you, does it feel like it's a place to start?

Her: I do feel like it's a good place to start. I think. Because of the pandemic and everything that's been going on, I've been, I've kind of reverted into, well, you should be lucky that you have a job. You should be lucky that you've had both your parents. You should be lucky that...

Esther Perel: But the sentence that says you should be lucky usually is followed by and therefore you have nothing to complain about, nothing to ask for more, don't be such an entitled brat, take what you can get and shut up. Yeah, you are lucky. You're beautiful. You're grateful. It's all good. And yet that doesn't mean that therefore, you know, because you had breakfast, you not allowed to have dinner.

Her: Yeah, yeah. that's a good way to put it.

Esther Perel: In simple terms, I'm going to need to let you go. And if there's ever an opportunity for you to invite your mom into a conversation that we can have the three of us, that's my invitation.

Her: Thank you so much, Esther, thank you.

Esther Perel: Okay? All right. Be well.