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Psychotherapist *Esther Perel* wants to fix your love life, but first she needs to change how you think about love.

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Couples who seek help when in crisis come to idolize the therapist who guides them out of it. Through her books, podcast and talks, *Esther Perel* has come to occupy that position in the hearts of millions. *Pip Usher* meets the psychotherapist whose unconventional understanding of intimacy is saving relationships around the world.



*“Anybody who has lost someone knows that you can fall in love again.”*

“We have a new Olympus that we all want to climb and we don’t necessarily have the tools to climb it,” explains Antwerp-born psychotherapist Esther Perel in her trademark purr. The “Olympus” to which she refers encompasses the aspirations of modern-day relationships—on which Perel has emerged as a leading authority. In addition to her New York City private practice, her two bestselling books, *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence* (which has evolved into an online course, *Rekindling Desire*) and *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity* have endeared Perel to a global audience seeking guidance. Her latest foray is her most daring yet: *Where Should We Begin?* is a podcast that invites listeners into an unscripted therapy session between Perel and an anonymous couple in crisis. While their stories are singular, their struggles—with betrayal, desire and loss—offer an unflinching insight into the hurdles of contemporary intimacy. Here, Perel lays out the pitfalls and pressures that now come with romantic relationships, and presents her clear-eyed road map for coming “back to life” as a couple.

**PU:** *We seem to be in a paradoxical age where we’ve become increasingly connected yet more and more lonely. What’s been the impact of this shift upon our romantic relationships?* **EP:** We’ve never had more expectations from our romantic relationships than we do today. One could say that romanticism is a new religion and there’s a conflation between our relationship needs and our spiritual needs. As Jungian analyst Robert Johnson says, we’re looking to romantic love for what we used to look for in the realm of the divine, which is transcendence and meaning and purpose and ecstasy. We want everything that stability and commitment and trust and belonging and anchoring provide, but we want the same relationship to also provide us with awe and mystery and excitement and novelty. That combination—plus the traditional needs of a family—somebody to raise your kids with, sign your checks with, share family life with and go visit your parents with—is an amazingly long list. And it doesn’t get shorter, it actually keeps getting longer.

**PU:** *Why are we now attaching this lengthy laundry list of needs and desires to our relationship?* **EP:** We used to live within clearly defined structures. People had tight knots and the knots were difficult to undo and therefore everybody knew their place, their role and what was expected of them. Today, we’ve shifted from structure to network—and networks are loosely tied knots which you can come in and out of really easily. When you have

that kind of fragmentation and atomization, your partner becomes the bulwark against the vicissitudes of life. They become the balm against the increasing existential isolation. And my claim has always been that people need community. No one person can sustain this, and relationships often crumble under the weight of expectations. Were those failures? Maybe not—maybe they actually accomplished more than many, many relationships of the past—but the list of expectations was so big that it looks like they didn’t succeed.

**PU:** *What are the symptoms of a couple in trouble?* **EP:** Couples suffer because they are too enmeshed and in chronic friction, or because they are so far apart that the gap between them is too big. There’s either too much reactivity or too little. At these extremes, people will either feel like they’re suffocating—that they can’t take a step alone and they have no sovereignty and no sense of autonomy whatsoever without eliciting reactivity from the other person—or they will be so far apart that they feel completely disconnected.

**PU:** *How do you differentiate between a rocky period and a relationship that’s died?* **EP:** All people, like the moon, have intermittent eclipses. They forget or are somewhat distant, or they are a bit taken with other things that are demanding their full attention. They get pulled. But the difference between couples who have energy and are alive, versus couples who are dead, is that they catch themselves and acknowledge it. They reinfuse new energy, new attention, focus, presence and initiative into the relationship so that it revitalizes itself.

[A relationship has died] when curiosity is completely gone, when there is indifference, when there is complacency, when there is a chronic lack of appreciation and in turn when there is chronic criticism. It’s not just the apathy, it’s a deep lack of interest in the other person. People feel degraded when they are next to somebody who is utterly uninterested in them, and only interested in what they can provide. The functions have become more important than the people: the roles they inhabit, the things they take care of, the stuff they’re in charge of. The relationship becomes massively practical and there’s less of an interest in more existential questions. Who is this person whose heart is beating next to me? What’s happening to them? What are they about, what are we about, where are we going, what’s on your mind these days, what keeps you awake at night, what do you worry about, what brings you tremendous joy?

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**PU:** As a therapist, how do you help couples restore intimacy? **EP:** If I want this car to drive, I need gasoline in the tank. The gasoline can be fear of loss, fear of being alone—I don't care what it is, but I do need to feel that there is a motivation of some sort to improve things. It doesn't have to be because you're deeply in love with this person. The love will follow when you feel that you laugh more together, that you share more together, that you get along and you're interested in each other, that you don't just feel like you're some kind of cooking machine or bank dispenser.

The degree to which a couple can still come back to life, revive and potentially even thrive, is determined by how they respond to the intervention that you give them. For those that are too close, it's about creating a degree of separateness and sovereignty, and for those who are so far apart and indifferent to each other, it's about creating a sense of empathy and curiosity. The degree to which they can do it—or not—is what tells you how much space for change and growth there is in the relationship.

**PU:** What is the most damaging misconception about love? **EP:** This mandate of “the one and only.” Anybody who has lost someone knows that you can fall in love again. In the same way that we can love more than one child, we can love more than one person. After we mourn, and we grieve, there will be another person. And it will never be the same—it will be something else—but there isn't one person only.

**PU:** What about sex? **EP:** This kind of “swept away, suddenly I'm into it” spontaneity is an amazing myth. Committed sex is premeditated sex: It's willful, it's intentional, it's highly planned. If you wait for it to just happen, it won't. When you want to play tennis, you need to get your racket and ball, you need to reserve your court and you need to call somebody to play with. Nobody challenges the ritual of the preparation and the warm-up. Nobody suddenly just finds themselves on a court.

**PU:** How do you reconcile differing sex drives in a relationship? **EP:** You don't know if it's biological, hormonal, if there's a physiological component, if it's the context of life (“I'm exhausted, I have three young children”), if it's resentment (“You're not helping me”), if you're a selfish lover (“Last time you didn't ask me what I liked, of course I'm not interested”), if it's because they don't like their body therefore they have negative anticipation. Or if there are issues around lack of entitlement and the ability to be given to, to feel worthy of receiving, to experience pleasure. Discrepancy of desire is a symptom and, like every symptom, to understand it you have to look at the chronic condition. The chronic condition is: How do I relate to myself, how do I relate to you and how do we relate to each other?

**PU:** If a couple wants to share their erotic thoughts, how do they open that conversation? **EP:** A sexual fantasy articulates our deepest emotional needs that we bring to sex. That's the most important thing to understand: They are emotional scripts played out in the language of sex. I want to be ravished, I want to be irresistible, I want somebody who never says no to me. Or I want somebody who says “No, no, no” and finally says “Yes,” meaning I am somebody who is able to change your mind, I am able to feel so powerful, so heroic. Every fantasy can pretty much be translated—it's like an architecture of psychological details.

The erotic mind knows very well to detect censorship and judgment and if it feels misunderstood, it just will stay in hiding. It won't say, “I like this,” because it knows you will say, “Ugh.” Some couples are able to share their erotic imaginations and erotic musings with each other. And with others, they don't. They go through a set of motions but they don't share an inner experience, which is the difference between sex and eroticism. The erotic is what gives meaning to sex; it's the poetics of it.

Perel is the daughter of Holocaust survivors who both lost their entire families. She says she owes much of her perspective on relationships to them—and their determination to embrace life fully.

*“The erotic is what gives meaning to sex; it’s the poetics of it.”*

Perel's first viral article, "In Search of Erotic Intelligence," was published in 2002 as a response to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair.



**PU:** Are there ways to maintain desire for your partner even as you're going through all the demands of life together? **EP:** People need to understand that desire is not the only door through which you enter into a sexual interaction with your partner. Erotic couples understand that sometimes it's maintenance, sometimes it's beautiful high-production, sometimes it's arousal, sometimes it's willingness and sometimes it's desire. You don't always get turned on just because you're looking at your partner; your own awakening takes place in multiple different things that have to do with your fantasy life and curiosity. And you remain responsive. This is very important—it's why I say spontaneity is a myth. You get turned on by being responsive to someone who comes toward you. You don't have to be turned on before they've even started. You basically experience a responsiveness and, through the responsiveness, your desire and your arousal follow.

That's particularly important for women to understand because the idea is that if you don't initiate, you're not in the mood. Moods come. "I'm not hungry, but I saw you eat—and I'm sitting next to you and it smells really nice so I take a taste, but I'm not really hungry and I say I'm not hungry, but at the same time I'm tasting it, and then I take a little plate, and then I take a bigger piece." It's that willingness to enter into a much more ambiguous zone, rather than yea or nay, I'm in the mood or I'm not in the mood.

**PU:** You've challenged the belief that only unhappy people cheat by suggesting that an affair can be about recapturing a lost part of ourselves. Can

you tell me more? **EP:** Sometimes people realize that for the last 15 years all they've done is be parents and take care of the kids and they kind of just say, "This is the first time I can do something for myself and I don't know how to do this in the context of my family." These are not philanderers, these are not cheaters—these are people who are dealing with a sense of loss of who they once were, of what they once experienced, of what they hoped they could feel again. And they don't see home as a place for that.

Sometimes they are looking for that thing because there is a person next to them who has been basically unresponsive. They stand next to them, and lie next to them, and that person is just not responding. How many more years do they live like this? They just want to be touched, loved, kissed, adored, made love to, you name it. We're not talking about two months—we're talking about decades. Decades of sexual deserts. I think we have to understand the loneliness that people experience. It's not just that they're horny, it's way deeper. Erotic deadness is not just about not having sex. It's the loss of a whole dimension of oneself.

**PU:** Is it possible to have a rewarding relationship without sex? **EP:** For some people, sex is not really the place where they express themselves. It's not interesting to them. As long as both people are okay with it, then they have a perfectly rich relationship. I do think touch matters, though. Physicality matters, physical intimacy matters, but it doesn't always have to be sexual physical intimacy.