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Everywhere at Once

Esther Perel Is Becoming Therapy's Most Visible Presence

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PART 1

Ubiquity is a word that invites exaggeration. After all, how many things really exist everywhere at the same time? Light? Air? Texting-while-walking teenagers? But in the age of modern media, when certain people come along to exert an irresistible pull on the spotlight across platforms, there's something that might be called *cultural ubiquity*. Everywhere you look, every magazine you pick up, every time you check your social media, there they are. But how many people outside the realms of politics, entertainment, or the upper reaches of the business world achieve anything like it?

To be sure, in the therapy field, old-fashioned as it is in so many ways, no matter how many conference keynotes you deliver or workshops you give around the world or professional books you write, there's normally a modest limit to your visibility and media exposure. Sure, occasionally someone writes a breakout bestseller, makes an especially crowd-pleasing appearance on television or, for some reason, gets a zillion hits for a blog on the 10 best ways to combat stress. But all of that usually creates just a brief moment in the limelight, a quick foray into mini-celebrityhood, which gets noted by colleagues with a vague mix of curiosity and perhaps envy, before the amplified attention passes.

And then there's couples therapist Esther Perel, who in recent years has had as much claim to being the public face of psychotherapy as anyone in our field. Here's only a partial list of the publications in which Perel and her work have been featured: *The New Yorker, The Economist, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Psychology Today, Entertainment Weekly, Vogue, Cosmopolitan*, and *The Huffington Post*, which dubbed her a "sexual genius." You'll note the range of audiences included in this lineup, from mass-circulation publications to the most elite magazines—the kind that might not normally be expected to take a psychotherapist's reflections about the state of modern relationship all that seriously. In fact, this fall, *The Atlantic*, as highbrow a publication as they come, is set to run an essay by Perel on her favorite subject, the dilemmas and paradoxes of infidelity.

Beyond print journalism, there are her appearances on NPR's *Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!* and *This American Life*, in which Ira Glass waxed rhapsodic about her skill as an intense listener, and an endless list of television programs, including her bemused and hip turn sitting across from master late-night ironist Stephen Colbert. Perel is also becoming a fixture on the big-idea conference circuit, with appearances at the Aspen Institute, South by Southwest, Gwyneth Paltrow's GOOP Institute, Google, and of course, the TED stage, probably the most influential platform, on which her two talks have already been viewed by nearly 20 million people.

With the publication of her much-promoted new book, *The State of Affairs*, an almost surefire bestseller due out this October, and the recent launch of her Audible original series, *Where Should We Begin?*, based on interviews with people struggling with the dilemmas of modern couplehood, the drumbeat about Perel is just beginning. Her reach has already extended into the entertainment world as a consultant to Showtime's wildly popular, Golden Globe Award–winning show *The Affair*, advising on scripts and meeting with the actors to deepen their performances by providing insight into what's become her area of

expertise—the question of why even happy couples cheat. To put it plainly, Perel has not only lived out the dream of being both a celebrity therapist and, as far as journalists are concerned, perhaps our field's most prominent, certainly most quotable, public intellectual: she's reinvented it.

So what is she saying that's so intriguing to such a growing range of audiences, and what makes her stand out from all the other "relationship experts" that our field produces in such abundance?

Le Message

Perel, a Belgian immigrant, is something of a cultural outsider who burst onto the psychotherapy scene with the 2006 publication of her first book, the provocatively titled *Mating in Captivity*. In it, she posed, without the usual therapeutic equivocation, the deeply challenging question of whether sustained sexual excitement can ever truly coexist with the emotional satisfactions of long-term commitment. With her flair for making her themes sound large and intellectually edgy, she called the book her "exploration of the nature of erotic desire and its concomitant dilemmas in modern love."

From the start, a big part of Perel's appeal has been how at ease she is bringing the intimate, private conversations couples struggle to have about their sexual connection—or lack of it—to the most public of platforms. At the podium, Perel, whose friends pronounce her first name "Astaire," seems to embody female sexual wisdom with her exotic-sounding accent and palpable sense of joie de vivre. It doesn't hurt that she also knew how to dress for the part, with her rotation of fitted pants and skirts, sparkling jackets (you get the feeling she's never once donned a cotton shift or Birkenstocks), striking jewelry, crimson lipstick, and fiercely modern, asymmetrical haircuts that seem to take surprising new turns with every new appearance. When she's on stage, Perel not only takes a trained performer's delight in being the center of attention, but radiates a genuine empath's sense of connection with her rapt audiences. *Finally*, they seem to be thinking, *somebody's put into words what I've always been afraid to say myself*.

Perel's most distinctive gift may well be her ability to move so comfortably between the private realm of sexual forbidden desire and the lofty, intellectual domain of reflections on the broader context of history and culture. Her many fans have found this contextualizing of our most private musings both intellectually exciting and emotionally validating. Indeed, her specialty seems to be scaling up the embarrassing relationship frustrations that most of us keep mum about—the worrisome fact that I can't stop fantasizing about the curve of your cousin's calves, or my obsession with checking my ex's Instagram page after you've fallen asleep—into broader public conversations. But by encouraging an inquiry into the foundations of the relational templates within which we try to lead our lives, Perel helps people realize that what they may think of as their own perverse secrets are really a part of a much wider, richer conversation.

In Perel's world, it becomes possible to move back and forth between the idiosyncrasies of one's personal marital tangle and the historical roots of commitment in establishing marriage as a mercantile arrangement not necessarily based on love and fidelity. As she put it during one of her mega-viewed TED talks, in forging more fulfilling bonds in today's world, we need to recognize that this is the first time in history we're being asked to experience sexuality not as a means to having 14 children, but as a way to create connection and pleasure rooted in desire.

Perel argues that couples too often don't acknowledge that the flame of desire requires novelty and open space in which to fully light. If we're serious about making our emotional bonds with our partners more

sexually satisfying, she says, we need to learn how to create the right kind of presence mixed with separateness to keep kindling the shared spark if and when it begins to dim.

Perel's assuredness and excitement about the art of cultivating desire in long-term relationships has won her the attention of audiences around the world. She knows how to make them feel that if they're bold and willing enough, they can create larger, more satisfying lives than the ones they commonly see being lived out around them. Determined to be nonjudgmental, she encourages people to approach relationships with a spirit of discovery and exploration. Maybe, her work suggests, some of us can benefit from a discussion of our sexual boundaries. Monogamy is a practice, she says, and today it can no longer simply be assumed: it must be negotiated. Just saying, "I catch you and you're dead" isn't enough. In her free-thinking and disruptive way, Perel is willing to consider that reenvisioning monogamy might be the new frontier of modern American relationships, even as she's perfectly willing to accept that, for many people, if not most, more traditional marriage continues to work.

PART 2

La Critique

While many find Perel's perspective on sexuality, eroticism, and long-term commitment liberating, some prominent figures in the wider psychotherapy community have been sharply critical of her work. They point to the paucity of scientific data in her discussions of changing relationship patterns and the lack of theoretical rigor in her clinical approach. Especially worrisome to them is her challenge to the idea that closer emotional connection is what fosters better sex, or as she puts it, "The care, worry, protection, and responsibility that nurture love can, when brought too punctiliously into the bedroom, be antithetical to what ignites desire."

In response to the notion that even happy couples may cheat, her critics say that these couples may report that their relationships are loving and fine but may still not be truly and securely close to one another and hence vulnerable to infidelity. They also counter that when pressed, clients tell them that they hunger for sex *because* of the closeness and connection it brings them. The way these practitioners aim to get clients to solidify their love and their sex lives is by guiding them to create even greater safety through deeper emotional connection.

Influential couples researcher and therapist John Gottman has been highly critical of Perel's work. He minced no words when he wrote to an *Economist* journalist working on a Perel profile to say Perel had "very little clinical sensitivity, so her intuitions about people are almost always way off the mark." He cited a conference presentation in which she offered clinical suggestions that he found not just "misguided but unethical and abusive."

He also took issue with her on his blog by citing advice in her first book, which he says told couples not to cuddle and suggested that emotional connection "will stand in the way of good erotic connection." He referenced a study in which 70,000 people were asked about their sex lives. Only six percent of noncuddlers reported having a good sex life. Ultimately, he advised couples not to "avoid each other emotionally as Perel recommends."

Susan Johnson, the founder of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, is perhaps one of Perel's most impassioned critics, insisting that her approach flies in the face of 30 years of empirical findings about the crucial role of attachment in intimate relationships. "Her message fits well with the pop-culture idea that committed relationships are constraining and that monogamy is boring and uniform," says Johnson. "What may be most damaging is her idea that affairs are growth experiences in spite of the fact that there's no evidence of that. She doesn't seem to understand that people grow most fully in secure, loving relationships in which they're deeply invested and engaged."

At a time in which the data show that people are getting lonelier, more anxious, and more depressed, Johnson believes that Perel's clinical emphasis on encouraging 'freedom' and individual growth is deeply misleading. According to Johnson, "Perel never talks about the downside of nonmonogamy—like giving up real emotional intimacy, secure bonding, and the longing to really matter to your partner. She's just glorifying a less engaged, less committed approach to relationship. That has nothing to do with what couples need to do to build a healthy connection."

Noted couples therapist William Doherty, who's written widely about the importance of long-term commitment and the importance of moral issues in psychotherapy, has a different take on Perel and why her message has resonated so strongly. "Ever since Masters and Johnson, therapists have approached sex primarily as a set of techniques or communication skills," he says. "We've normalized it and taken the guilt out of it, but there's this sense that we've taken the magic and mystery and wonder out of it as well. Perel seems determined to put it back in."

When asked if he thinks her nonjudgmental approach can be harmful, he says, "I don't see her as an advocate for open marriage or as someone encouraging people to experiment with their relationship in dangerous ways. It's more that she thinks like an anthropologist as well as a therapist, and anthropologists don't like to judge cultural practices."

For her part, Perel has chosen not to respond directly to her critics. Instead, she insists that while emotional caretaking may be essential to intimacy, for many it's not an aphrodisiac. "Our emotional needs and our erotic needs are not always neatly aligned," she says, "and what makes us feel emotionally intimate isn't necessarily what excites us sexually." She thinks love and desire are often parallel narratives and not always intertwined.

Whatever her critics might think, she sees her work as a reenvisioning of "eroticism as a quality of aliveness and vibrancy." She adds, "My goal is not just to make people stay together. I want to make them feel that they have some joy when they wake up in the morning. You know? To not be dead is not the same as to be alive. That's definitely my own history and what I look at when I talk about the issue."

The way that she puts sexuality on par with intimacy in relationships might feel divergent to other couples therapists, but it could help explain why Perel is so popular with men—her practice often contains more of them than women, and they attend her talks in droves. She says she often finds herself the only woman in the room at entrepreneurial idea conferences, where, finding her approach less judgmental than most, men look to her for advice on relationships. "I've been told many times that my point of view on relationships is male friendly," she says. "The man buys the book and puts it on the woman's table. The man listens to my sessions. The man asks the questions at every talk I give."

Perel echoes the common claim that the therapy field is feminized, but she feels that's one of its riches. "The rest of the world doesn't make room for women," she notes. "Yet in the course of wanting to create a world where people get along better, in the course of wanting to create a world where sexuality is treated with respect and with reverence and with rights, it's absolutely clear to me that the lives of women will not change until men come along. And that means men have to be given the opportunity to experience a kind of reckoning with their identity."

Creating this kind of space for men is particularly meaningful for her. "When a woman talks to you about her relationship, it's important. It's personal. But she's often already said it to somebody else. When a man talks to you about his inner life, most of the time he's hearing himself say it for the first time."

La Grande Vie

Perel is the daughter of two Holocaust survivors, both the only surviving members of their families. When they met, her father had been in 14 labor camps and her mother nine. They came together on the day of liberation, walking on the road away from neighboring camps. Her mother had grown up in an educated Hassidic family with a long lineage of rabbis, while her father was from a tiny village of trade workers. They knew each other's families from trading before the war, and that inspired an initial trust in the aftermath of the tragic ordeal each had been through. So they kept talking, and wound up marrying each other.

Perel says she and her older brother were her family's symbols of revival. Her personal intensity and deep investment in weaving together such a large and varied social network around her, she believes, is rooted in the tragedy that formed the background of her upbringing. "I grew up feeling that my life had to be big," she says, "because in a way we felt we were living life for so many people who didn't survive. Average wasn't good enough."

Perel's Polish parents wound up settling in the ancient port city of Antwerp, where they opened a clothing store and lived above it in a working-class, Flemish neighborhood. It was at home that the young Esther became adept at five languages and a few dialects of the street. (She now speaks nine languages and holds therapy sessions in seven of them.) With no family of their own, Perel recalls the pleasure her parents took in bringing people together and making their apartment a social hub, where conversation flowed freely. As a teenager, she remembers impulsively inviting a group of a half-dozen hitchhikers, complete with their dirty backpacks, to come home with her for lunch, where her mother wound up not only feeding the entire group of complete strangers but offering them a place to stay for the night.

Her interest in being onstage goes back to being an adolescent in Belgium, where she studied theater at a conservatory. During her college years in Jerusalem, she performed interactive street theater and puppetry and sang for years in a bossa nova band. At the same time, she managed to work with Augusto Boal, the visionary Brazilian director of the Theatre of the Oppressed, helping stage big, discomforting, public enactments that highlighted society's tolerance of injustice, racism, and sexism.

And when she moved to New York, she aimed for the top, signing up to train with famed acting teacher Stella Adler, even while boldly knocking on the door of family therapy pioneer Salvador Minuchin, with no introduction, and asking him to let her observe his work. Unlicensed, with only a degree in expressive arts therapy and brief training as a family therapist, Perel's persistence wore down the initially reluctant Minuchin. He finally allowed her to stay, on the condition that she remain invisible. "I don't want to see

you and I don't want to hear you," he told her. That was until a refugee couple came to him for help and, remembering her multicultural interest, asked her to take them on. It was the start of a working relationship that would last for years. Today, she credits Minuchin with being one of her most important mentors.

While receiving her training as a family therapist and starting a lower Manhattan private practice catering to intercultural couples, she began to initiate dialogues with friends and colleagues that wove together the therapeutic themes she saw in sessions with wider reflections on cultural issues. The informal salons she convened in her apartment among the circle of luminaries in the New York cultural scene that gregarious Perel had come to know started attracting attention. Soon, she was asked to facilitate a series of public salons at the Skirball Center. 9/11 happened shortly after she'd gotten her plans in place, and Perel had mere days to make the series relevant for a stunned and grieving community. That very first gathering suddenly became a forum on vengeance and justice in the face of evil. Perel used her extensive social network to find the right experts to speak, introduced the theme for the evening, and facilitated the discussions. The conversational format and Perel were a hit, and the salons lived on for five years. Highlighted by the New York press as go-to cultural events, they became part of the city's attempt to support a post-9/11 revitalization of neighborhoods bordering on the World Trade Center.

It was in these public salons where Perel honed her flair for drawing people into Big Conversations with her ability to articulate questions that spark real dialogue, her willingness to challenge social taboos and speak the unspeakable, and her almost preternatural ability to scan a crowd and get them engaged in a shared exploration of even the most difficult topics. However, the key to Perel's conversational style is that she's always interested and has a visceral gift for making people feel that they're always interesting to her. She not only knows how to get past the noisy racket in our heads to see that our history, race, religion, and culture have shaped how we look at the world, but gets us to be interested in it as well.

Even as she was just getting her clinical practice off the ground, she ran a program at New York's 92nd Street Y about cultural identity, with a special focus on helping couples in mixed marriages handle racial, religious, and cultural differences. She was particularly fascinated with understanding Jewish intermarriage, which in only a few decades had risen in the US from 17 percent to the nearly 60 percent it is today. She also worked with many refugees and recent immigrants. It was a time, she says, when she became immersed in "the whole struggle between the ideology of modern love and the nature of tradition and communal life."

Perel's interest in the topic was particularly piqued when the Clinton–Lewinsky sex scandal hit the media. She became fascinated by the way Americans, seemingly so tolerant of multiple divorces, were so intolerant of infidelity. The rest of the world, she noticed, seemed to work in the reverse. Elsewhere, the family was to be preserved at all costs, and infidelity to be tolerated in service to the family unit. What, she wanted to know, was at the root of this stark cultural opposition?

Other questions about American sexuality and the taboos surrounding honest talk about sex began to nag at her. Why were there no public health policies concerning adolescent sexuality? Why did so few Americans educate young children about sex? In Europe, she told audiences, sex education could happen as early as age four, when children first begin to question death and the origins of life. It seemed clear to her that the prevalence of abstinence education and too-late high-school sex talks emphasizing dangers and disease were sending sex underground and resulting in not only more STDs and teen pregnancies in

the United States than in many other countries, but earlier onset of sexual activity than even "the most liberal Dutch." Where was the bigger perspective on this? Perel wondered.

She also wondered why the current zeitgeist in America was so unequivocal that infidelity is the worst thing that can happen in a marriage when plenty of couples have healed from it. Could it be that the American way of shaming the partners into leaving each other was an unhelpful response? Perel sees plenty of other kinds of cultural myopia and unhelpful misconceptions in our attitudes toward affairs. In one of her TED talks, she unpacks the myth that relationship happiness is an effective infidelity deterrent, noting that she sees plenty of happily married people in her practice who've cheated not out of a deep relationship problem, but rather out of a longing to rediscover lost parts of themselves and feel more alive. She zeroes in on this paradox and cautions "What I see is people who don't divorce because they're unhappy, but because they want to be *happier*. This a culture with a strong sense of entitlement.," she says.

Perel is popular with younger adults who've grown up with divorce, experienced what she calls "sexual nomadism" before marriage, and come to expect the myth-busting reality of a digital media that affirms our cultural need to look honestly at how we treat each other. They've also grown up with the alternative forms relationships can take, like the various permutations of nonmonogamy that have long been a part of the gay community. For Gen X, Millennials, and even younger adults, straight talk from a woman who can wax critically about unrealistic expectations for marriage and the need for relational accountability in digital dating has shown itself to have a deep appeal.

"In the field at this point, I would like to create a new conversation on the subject of trust and betrayal, intimate betrayal, and roaming desires, transgression, possessiveness, jealousy—all these things that are elicited through the lens of infidelity, because I believe that when you see how things go wrong, you can learn about how they could go better," Perel says. "*The State of Affairs* is actually a book for people who've never had any history with affairs. It gives them a sense of what to avoid, but it's not about fail-proofing your marriage." With an emphasis on her belief in the transformational power of enlightened conversation, she adds, "It's really more than that. It's about creating a thoughtful conversation around it." And she truly believes that if the conversations of individual couples can change, then the larger cultural conversation can, too.

Embracing the whirlwind that's become her life, Perel has no plans to step back. In fact, she seems to be ratcheting things up. She's got a newly powerful digital presence and a team of media-savvy employees to create a kind of online educational salon, where people with a range of perspectives and interests can interact with each other and engage in the sort of freewheeling exchange of ideas she seems to savor. But where next?

Be forewarned. For some time to come, whether or not you want more of Perel, you're likely to get it. The interest in her distinctive outlook and capacity for creating provocative conversations show no sign of slowing down. She may not have achieved ubiquity yet, but who knows? "It's going a mile a minute," she says. "And it's all beautiful."In the interview that follows, Perel traces the development of her approach and the wider response to her ideas about sexuality and intimacy.

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An Interview With Esther Perel

PSYCHOTHERAPY NETWORKER: In the decade since you wrote *Mating in Captivity*, you've achieved a remarkable degree of visibility, both within the profession and outside it. How do understand this widespread interest in your work?

ESTER PEREL: I suppose others would need to answer this, but if I had to venture a response, I'd say that my work coincides with a dramatic change in the importance of relationships in our society as a whole. As we've moved from the traditional to the romantic model—and now to the self-fulfillment model—never before have we expected more from our relationships.

In our secularized society, romantic love, and not religion, is where we seek meaning, transcendence, wholeness, and ecstasy. We have more freedom than ever in choosing relationships, but we're crippled by uncertainty and self-doubt. Our quest to find "the one" and the common struggles around allowing our sense of aliveness and vitality to exist within our intimate relationships have become central cultural preoccupations. So much has changed so rapidly that we're rewriting the relationship rulebook as we go.

I think there's widespread interest in my work because there's a hearty appetite for a salve for our existential loneliness. The way these yearnings and anxieties are currently addressed is through a model that promotes concrete one-size-fits-all solutions, leaving out the variability of the historical and cultural context. I see my approach as one that brings in that context and therefore speaks to the actual circumstances and experiences people are struggling with. My biggest contribution to the field isn't pointing out that these issues exist—a lot of people have identified them—but in offering a way to deal with them that bridges two moral systems, the rule-based one of the past and the empathy-based ethics of the now.

PN: You're not a researcher or a sociologist, and you certainly don't rely on numbers to back up your assertions. What gives your perspective any special validity?

PEREL: My history as someone who's always lived on the edge of polarities—speaking Yiddish and French (the shtetl and the cosmopolitan), living in orthodox Judaism and secularism, believing in the importance of accountability and self-fulfillment—seem well suited for the pertinent questions of the day. As somewhat of a cultural outsider, I've always been interested in mining the underlying assumptions of our expectations and beliefs, and so too the assumptions in the field of couple therapy. Many couples tell me, 'We love each other very much; we have no sex.' So I became interested in the nature of erotic desire in long-term relationships. Why does good sex so often fade even in couples who continue to love each other as much as ever? Why don't love and desire always flow together the way our theories about couples say they should?

My contribution comes in how I raise questions and get people to think about them, especially around the idea that sexual problems are always the consequence of relationship problems. I want people to think about the mystery of eroticism. Why is the forbidden so erotic? I don't mean the simple desire for sex, but desire as the quest for agency, aliveness, and vibrancy. How do we reconcile our fundamental human needs of security and adventure, commitment and freedom, intimacy and individuality? What's the relation between safety/security and aliveness?

Until we figure out the tension between those existential pulls, we'll keep getting stuck in patterns of behavior that either sacrifice our vitality and aliveness for the sake of our relationships or sacrifice our

relationships for our vitality in aliveness. And that will never work. People want both. So I think these themes have resonated with many people across the globe, especially with Millennials.

Many people have asked me why, if I believe in the strength of relationships, did I write a book about one of the worst things that can happen in one. The answer to this is simple. We learn the best lessons when things go wrong, when we're challenged, faced with adversity. In these moments, we're forced to look into ourselves and our relationships. To understand trust, you have to understand distrust. To understand fidelity, you have to understand infidelity.

PN: Certainly, lots of other therapists have talked about the challenge of addressing sexual issues in therapy. What's distinctive about your viewpoint?

PEREL: *Mating in Captivity* struck a nerve with readers because it focused on something that people recognized in their own lives but hadn't quite put into words: the fact that we ask the same person to provide safety and excitement, comfort and edge, continuity and surprise. We want our partner to be our best friend, trusted confidante, equal parent, intellectual mate, and passionate lover. In effect, we want one person today to give us what once an entire village used to provide. I normalized the fact that while it isn't impossible, it certainly isn't instinctive, nor is it intuitive. It's a tall order for a party of two, and the difficulty isn't only personal or pathological: it's existential.

I offered a different way of talking about sex, one that's not titillation or condemnation. Rather, I talked about sex being not just something you *do*, but a *place you go*. I talked about getting away from the genital model—the emphasis on penis and vagina—away from the *act* of sex, and toward the *poetics* of sex, the quality of the engagement, how it infuses us with a sense of aliveness, renewal, curiosity, meaning.

Except for a few important voices, like David Schnarch, Pat Love, and Michele Weiner-Davis, the couples field had basically avoided these topics. In all my training as a couples therapist, no one taught me about human sexuality. And you can't do couples therapy that really helps people achieve more intimacy without exploring the sexual dimension of human connection. Attachment and sexuality are each evolution-based, neuro-bio-psycho-social systems. Distinct though interrelated, they represent different ways for adults to connect with one another. As a rule, clinicians who focus on attachment have tended to pay less attention to sexuality, and vice versa. I sought to reconcile both. I explored love and desire, how they relate and how they conflict, for therein lies the mystery of eroticism.

Our therapeutic culture "solves" the conflict between the drabness of the familiar and the excitement of the unknown by advising clients to renounce their yearnings in favor of more rational and "adult" sexual agendas. Therapists typically encourage clients to really get to know their partners. But I often tell my clients that knowing isn't everything. Eroticism can draw its powerful pleasure from fascination with the hidden, the mysterious, the suggestive. Revealing less is not a norm of couple therapy. Many of the couples who come to therapy imagine that they know everything there is to know about their mate. In large part, I see my job as trying to highlight for them how little they've seen, urging them to recover their curiosity and catch a glimpse behind the walls that encircle the other.

PN: How did all these ideas about culture, sexuality, and relationships change your clinical work?

PEREL: When I work with couples, I don't have a technique or a method: I have an approach. Fundamental to my approach is helping couples understand how they're shaped by larger social and

cultural forces that guide our individual needs and become the scripts with which we interpret our experiences. How can you not talk about the consumer society in which we live when you hear couples say thing like, "I'm not getting my needs met. This isn't a good deal for me. This isn't what I signed up for"?

Doing that keeps the conversation from narrowing into *I want this and you want that. What's wrong with you that you don't want the same as me?* As therapists, we need to recognize that we've always experienced pain, joy, and fears, but the way we narrate and interpret our suffering and the meaning we give to our fears is shaped by the time and place where our dramas unfold. Your grandmother didn't have the opportunity to think about her choices in the way we do today. No one ever asked her if she enjoyed sex; it was just part of her marital duty. A happy marriage for her meant something quite different from how we evaluate ours today.

PN: A danger of the approach you're describing is that it can become too much of an intellectual exercise. How do you keep that from happening?

PEREL: The therapy I practice is experiential and aims to be transformational. Ideally, you can't leave my office the same way that you walked in. You come in with a story and need to leave with another, and for that you need a new experience. That means enactment. I'm an expressive arts therapist, and often use tools such as the empty chair, sculpting, puppets, role-reversals, poems, music. People get up, they move around, they touch.

Clearly, I'm not the right fit for everybody. Nobody is. But I have a good idea who I'm a good fit for. When a man starts to talk about how hard it is for him to receive sexually or emotionally, I know we're talking about certain definitions of masculinity. So I say, "You learned the societal scripts really well," and we usually laugh together. And then I say, "Do you think you have it in you to manage your own little insurrection, to become free from this? You think you could write your own bylaws for your sexuality with your partner or for your emotional exchange with your wife?" So it flows in that kind of a way.

The people who wind up coming to me want to free themselves. They want to feel more joy, feel more playful. They want to take risks. They want somebody to give them the permission and the tools to feel and act differently. That doesn't mean I advocate any particular way to be in relationship, but I'm willing to create a space for people to explore. I offer a place where people can come to talk about the stuff they often feel they can't talk about anywhere else.

I believe therapy should be a place that's very bold and free of judgment. I still do much of what Sal Minuchin taught me—kick and stroke. I'm not just there to say, "yes, yes, yes." I'm big on relational accountability, but I'm willing to let people step outside of the strict ways that dictate how to be married today. Statistics tell us more than half of marriages don't succeed. If Apple sold a product that fails 50 percent of the time, would you buy it?

I think we're still stuck in a one-size-fits-all conception of marriage. But what about a couple who really get along super well and love their family, and at the same time, haven't touched each other in six years? Strengthening the emotional closeness is often not sufficient, and many therapists know that. So what are their choices? That's the bread and butter of my practice. Should they divorce? Or should they wait until there's an affair? Because at some point, there will be an affair if one of the two people is dying inside.

PN: You clearly see yourself as being a truth-teller who refuses to accept the myths that pass for the received wisdom in our field. In the arena of sexuality, what's one of the most clinically limiting myths that's widely accepted?

PEREL: There are quite a few, but let's start with "women want intimacy, and men just want sex." Or the variant that women cheat for love, escaping loneliness, and mean cheat for sex, hungry for variety, escaping boredom. But here's what happens in my office when that kind of conversation gets started. She may say, "All he wants is sex." But maybe for him, sex is actually the gateway to his deepest emotional place. After sex, he can open up, not because he got laid, but because sex is his language. And I see the guy sitting there, and it's like somebody is explaining him to himself.

This is the story for many men: the only place they can be touched is sexually. They live in an environment in which the only way they can access their feelings is through the language of the body and through sexuality. So then I might say to the wife, "I think you and your partner are wanting the same thing. You're not nearly as far apart as you think, but you need to translate for each other." And I then I might contextualize it by saying, "It's not just your guy, it's guys in general."

PN: Let's say a couple comes to you because one partner has just discovered the other is having an affair. What's an example of how your approach might differ from that of a more conventional couples therapist?

PEREL: A lot of people come to me from conventional therapy because they're curious to understand what really happened at a deeper level. They resonate with the idea that their first marriage may be over, but a second one could be born out of it.As a therapist, I create a container for two very differentiated experiences. It's a dual perspective. Affairs are about hurt and betrayal, and they're also about longing and self-seeking. So I work with the consequences as well as with the meaning and motives—what I did to you, and what it meant to me.

Affairs are intimate betrayals, but in a relationship, betrayal comes in many forms, such as indifference, neglect, contempt, violence. I don't immediately see the adultery as the ultimate betrayal topping the hierarchy of wrongdoings. I don't grant moral superiority to someone just because they didn't cheat. Thus, I don't automatically think of infidelity as a deal breaker, but as a major crisis from which couples can learn and grow, and sometimes create a stronger more alive and resilient relationship.

Often when people are having an affair, it's not because they want to leave the person they're with as much as they want to leave the person they themselves have become. And it's not that they're looking for another person, but another self. But even happy people cheat, and affairs aren't always a symptom of something wrong in the marriage or in the individual.

So I'm willing to entertain the idea that good can come from an affair—which is far from saying affairs are good for your marriage. Many people grow from a life-threatening illness, but that doesn't mean that I'd recommend getting cancer as a path to growth.

PN: I imagine people are quite curious about how you personally address the issues you talk about so boldly in your work. What do you tell them about the rules you follow in your own marriage?

PEREL: You're right. I'm frequently asked to talk about my marriage, and I say, "If I talk about my relationship, I have to talk about things that belong to my partner, which he may not want me to share."

When my children come to live events, they have no interest in listening to me talk about my intimate life with their father.My professional life is about helping other people think about their lives, not about imitating mine. I have a lot of aspects of my life that I share with the public, like the fact that I'm the daughter of two sole survivors of Nazi concentration camps, which I guess puts me in close proximity with Eros and Thanatos. But what I do in my bedroom is something that belongs to my husband and me.

***

Rich Simon, PhD, is editor of *Psychotherapy Networker*. Lauren Dockett is senior writer for the *Networker*.

Tell us what you think about this article by emailing letters@psychnetworker.org.

QUESTIONNAIRE

C4(18)

Everywhere at Once

INSTRUCTIONS

- Read through the article and answer the multiple-choice questions provided below. There is only ONE answer to each question, except where indicated otherwise. The required pass rate is 70%.

Question 1: What type of therapist is Esther Perel?

- **A:** Counselling therapist
- **B:** Family therapist
- **C:** Clinical therapist
- **D:** Couples therapist

Question 2: In which one of the following publications have the work of Perel NOT been featured?

- **A:** Psychology Today
- **B:** The New York Times
- **C:** The Economist
- **D:** Playboy magazine
- **E:** The Wall Street Journal

Question 3: On which platform have two of Perel's talks already been viewed by nearly 20 million people?

- **A:** The TED stage
- **B:** The Aspen Institute
- **C:** The GOOP Institute

[Note: A Google search: perel ted talks provides excellent results]

Question 4: Is it TRUE or FALSE that Perel, in her first book, posed the question of whether sustained sexual excitement can ever truly coexist with the emotional satisfaction of a long-term commitment?

- **A:** TRUE
- **B:** FALSE

Question 5: A couple sends an email to you in which they briefly outline that the sexual "spark" and "excitement" in their marriage have been lost and wishes to start therapy. They, however, end the email with: "…….. or should we just accept that this is the fate of married couples?" You decide to send them a short email and would say all of the following, except …….?

- **A:** For the first time in history we are being asked to experience sexuality not as a means of having children, but as a way to create connection and pleasure rooted in desire
- **B:** The flame of desire requires novelty and open space in which to fully light
- **C:** For many people, if not for most, the traditional marriage does not work anymore

Question 6: Perel's specialty seems to be scaling up which one of the following?

- **A:** Our embarrassing relationship frustrations
- **B:** Our embarrassing family frustrations
- **C:** Our embarrassing marriage frustrations
- **D:** All of the above

Question 7: Prominent figures in the psychotherapy community have been sharply critical of Perel's work and cited which of the following? [Note: More than one answer may be correct]

- **A:** The paucity of scientific data in her discussions of changing relationship patterns
- **B:** The lack of theoretical rigor in her clinical approach
- **C:** Clients, when pressed, say that they hunger for sex *because* of the closeness and connection it brings them
- **D:** A lack of clinical sensitivity

Question 8: In a study in which 70 000 people were asked about their sex lives, what percentage of noncuddlers reported having a good sex life?

- **A:** 40%
- **B:** 65%
- **C:** 16%
- **D:** 6%

Question 9: What idea of Perel's does Susan Johnson, founder of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, find to be potentially the most damaging?

- **A:** Affairs are growth experiences
- **B:** Committed relationships are constraining
- **C:** Monogamy is boring and uniform
- **D:** None of the above

Question 10: One of your male clients, during a session, mentions Perel's "opinion" on monogamy, i.e. that it is OK not to be monogamous in marriage, and asks you what you think. You answer by quoting the position of Susan Johnson. Which one of the following about the downside of nonmonogamy is NOT Johnson's opinion?

- **A:** Giving up real emotional intimacy
- **B:** Secure bonding
- **C:** Longing to really matter to your partner
- **D:** Relational instability

Question 11: Is it TRUE that Perel says that "When a man talks to you about his inner life, most of the time he's hearing himself say it for the first time"

A: YES
B: NO

Question 12: Responding to the question why, if she believes in the strength of relationships, she wrote a book about one of the worst things that can go wrong, her answer contained all of the following except ……?

A: Couples learn the best lessons when challenged
B: To understand trust, one has to understand distrust
C: To understand fidelity, one has to understand infidelity
D: To understand temptation, one needs to succumb to seduction

Question 13: Which one of the following statements was NOT made by Perel in her interview?

A: When a man starts to talk about how hard it is for him to receive sexually or emotionally, I know we are talking about certain definitions of masculinity
B: Although I qualified in arts therapy, I seldom use it during my sessions
C: The people who wind up coming to me want to free themselves – they want to feel more joy …. they want to take risks

Question 14: According to Perel, which one of the following is a clinical myth?

A: Women want intimacy and men just want sex
B: Women do not cheat for love
C: Men cheat to escape loneliness
D: None of the above

Question 15: Is it TRUE that affairs are intimate betrayals, but that in a relationship, betrayal comes in many forms, such as indifference, neglect, contempt, and violence

A: YES
B: NO

END

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ANSWER SHEET

C4 (18)

Everywhere At Once

	A	B	C	D	E		A	B	C	D	E
1						**9**					
2						**10**					
3						**11**					
4						**12**					
5						**13**					
6						**14**					
7						**15**					
8											

I hereby declare that the completion of this document is my own effort without any assistance.

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