

Jesse: What you are about to hear is a classic *Esther Calling*, a one-time intervention phone call recorded remotely from two points somewhere in the world.

Him: Hi Esther. I just have a question for you today about setting boundaries in friendships. And if setting those boundaries might mean the end of a friendship. So two friends of mine are in a relationship and have been for a long time, as long as I have known them. And they have what I would call a dysfunctional relationship and that when it's good, it's great. They go through these really difficult lows. And because I am friends with both of them, I end up getting both sides of the story quite often, and it can be incredibly draining and I want to set in place boundaries that say, listen, I'm not your therapist. I'm not your relationship counselor. I don't want to talk about those things, but I also don't want to lose the intimacy of our friendship. It feels like it's an either or kind of situation, I think. So that is that. Thank you for your help.

Esther Perel: So you have two dear friends who are in a relationship together, that relationship goes through all kinds of crisis. They both come to you. They confide in you. They both want you to see their side or to ally with them. You find yourself triangulated and in a bind and with a conflict around loyalty. And you would like either to be able to tell them. I cannot be thrown in the middle like this because I cherish you both and I will not be the arbiter of your feud. Or you would like to find a way to hear what they each have to say, but not let it get to you in the way that it does.

Him: A little bit from column a, and a little bit from column B. Yeah, that would be cause it is the thing of, I do have very strong relationships with both of them. And I do want to be a comfort to them and I want to be, you know, if they're experiencing difficulty that they can both come to me, but I think it is the case of it, I'm very empathetic person. So I do come away from it feeling very strongly, I think. Yeah.

Esther Perel: What enters you and how does it enter you?

Him: Frustration and not knowing what to do. And it's kind of, because sometimes I almost want to like throttle them and scream at them because I'm getting it from both sides. So I kind of know what each one of them wants, but then if I'm to really impart what the other one has said to me, then I'm just becoming this like, go between that I'm like, why don't you have this conversation amongst yourselves, and not with me.

Esther Perel: Is this a first for you, first time you find yourself in such a triangle?

Him: Not really.

Esther Perel: Tell me.

Him: So I have kind of always in most of my friend groups kind of growing up and recently as well, I tend to be kind of like the confidant role. So if someone is experiencing quite a difficult time, very often, if it is with someone else that I know as well, they do feel like that they can come to me because they feel that one they'll be listened to. And that two, it won't be divulged to the other party or to the other side.

Esther Perel: Tell me, did you grow up with triangles? Are you familiar with this intense geometry of relationships?

Him: Not hugely. My parents are both still married. And they have been for, I think it's their 35th wedding anniversary this year. So it wouldn't have been a huge amount of let's say discord there in that way. What I kind of always would have been maybe a bit of a go between for them in some ways as well, and not, there was certain things I could talk with with my mother that I wouldn't. Necessarily talk with my father and kind of vice versa. So there would have been those kinds of personal relationships.

Esther Perel: Meaning that they each come to you to talk with you about certain things that they cannot talk with each other.

Him: Yes.

Esther Perel: Yeah. That's not what you said, you know?

Him: Okay.

Esther Perel: Do you know what you said?

Him: No, not really, I suppose.

Esther Perel: It's the things that I cannot talk with them about. And so I talk with each one separately, but in fact, what I understood you meant is that they each have their share of things that they can't tell each other. And so you have been recruited long time ago to be the sounding board, the air, the emphatic one, the nonjudgmental one, the confidential one, the confidante, so to speak. The one that you can trust and you have been the alleviator of the tensions and the places that they can't go with each other. So you have long standing resume of

being a negotiator, a mediator a facilitator, a peacemaker, a go between a conflict resolution person. Your friends must be really lucky.

Him: I'll have to update my resume for the next job application.

Esther Perel: Yes, I always, I would, you know, I always think we have an unofficial resume and I would definitely include that on your unofficial resume. This is a tremendous skill that you can bring to all environments. But what you're telling me is that in this instance, it pains you and maybe because, you're not able to solve it or to make it better, and so it stays with you and you see their pain and their hurt and their anger, and you wish that they could just do something, but neither of them is doing anything because they each want the other person to do something.

Him: Yeah, yeah, very much.

Esther Perel: And have you said any of that to them? Do they know how challenging this is for you?

Him: They do partially. So, what tends to be the pattern is that like a plan is made to do something. And on the day that the plan comes up they have had a fight or tensions are high, so they cancel, or they back out and that kind of affects things. So I was talking to one of them on the day that this happened the last time, and I kind of said, just so you know, I'm at a point with, I want to make plans with you both less together because of this. And I kind of can't be part of it anymore in that way. And I got these kinds of messages from both, they're almost like tiptoeing to like come back and be like, Hey, how are you? In that way, if they were acknowledging they had done wrong, but not necessarily addressing us.

Esther Perel: And you have a confidant of your own?

Him: I do. I have a long-term partner of seven years.

Esther Perel: Okay. And you confide about that to your partner?

Him: Yes. Yeah.

Esther Perel: And is your partner involved in the rapture of relational discord as well?

Him: Nope. He's firmly outside of... it's because he has seen the effect that it

can have on me.

Esther Perel: So he's good boundary.

Him: Yes. Yes. Very good boundaries.

Esther Perel: And he provides a boundary for you? He's able sometimes to kind of hold you back from plunging in?

Him: Yes. Yes, he is.

Esther Perel: Okay. And you let him know how useful and helpful that is to you?

Him: Yes, I do. Yeah.

Esther Perel: Okay. So what is the urge that makes it hard for you to not take it on because it penetrates your skin. So there's something that draws you in, in the way that these two people are having it out with each other. And that is about you. That is not about them. What's your mission? What drives you that may or may not be conscious for that matter?

Him: I think what drives me in this context with them is that when the times are good, they're so good. Um, because they like, they're passionate people, I guess. So...

Esther Perel: You're talking about them and I'm asking you a quick, I get it, they're heaven and hell, they go up and down. They go from, you know, from bliss to, to distress, but you are affected by that. You respond to it as if it's happening to you. That's the issue of the boundary, is that what's happening to them happens to you. You can't even resist going in. You were in. It's visceral.

Him: I think I want to be kept and I find, I think why I have occupied this confidant role so often in my past has been because it makes me integral to someone.

Esther Perel: Yeah.

Him: So they turn to me and then I feel important and I feel useful.

Esther Perel: And, and I feel needed. And if you need me and I'm useful and

I'm important than you don't leave me.

Him: Yeah, exactly.

Esther Perel: Because underneath the need to be helpful and to be involved, there is a bigger need that is to make sure that I don't get abandoned.

Him: Yeah. Yeah, that is and that's kind of difficult to...

Esther Perel: Just take it in for a sec.

Him: It's it's a difficult feeling because I don't know where that element of not wanting to be abandoned comes from, because I feel like I haven't been significantly abandoned in my life, let's say.

Esther Perel: No, you can't. You made yourself too indispensable.

Him: It was good survival mechanism.

Esther Perel: But I can imagine. And you tell me if any of this resonates, because it's really I'm fishing with a broad net, we just met. But sometimes the little boy who becomes the confidante to his beloved parents is privy to their discord, is privy to their tensions, and worries that that may have consequences for their relationship. And so he becomes a marvelous diplomat and he makes himself indispensable and he thinks as long as they come to me, nothing bad will happen to me, not just to them, to you.

And that becomes such second nature. That no, you don't even feel the fear of abandonment because it's covered up with your instrumentality, with your empathy, with your facilitation skills, but you went straight there and you, I think you're right on the mark. I will be important. I will be needed. But why does it matter for me to be so needed? Because if I'm needed, you won't leave me or you won't leave each other for that matter, which has consequences for me.

Him: Yeah. And I think in this little microcosm what's been happening with the friends, they have become such close friends, especially living nearby over the pandemic and everything and especially as I've gotten older and you know, your networks, you're not around surrounded by people all the time. That because they're both such strong friends, I don't want to lose them. And I know they love each other. And I know they're well suited in that way, but if they were

to dissolve for whatever reason, part of me would think I didn't do enough to help them. And I would then feel responsible for losing this really great friendship that I've managed to find in my late twenties, which I'm talking like towards my deathbed. But, um, it does feel significant. They feel like significant people in my life that will be there for a long time.

Esther Perel: That is beautiful. And they should be significant. That doesn't mean that you have to take on responsibilities that don't belong to you. You're important, but not that important. If it doesn't work out for them, it's because of whatever is happening between them. And you can continue your friendship with them, even though it demands navigating. It's a complicated dance, but we've done that forever.

So you be a good friend. But being their best friend and wanting them in your life and realizing your circle has shrunk and you really don't want to lose them doesn't mean that you become responsible for their relationship, which in your mind means for them being a couple. It's a bit grandiose, it's a responsibility that doesn't belong to you. Can you imagine a close connection that does not mean taking responsibility for a relationship that should actually take responsibility for itself?

Him: I can. I, I'm just not sure what that would look like

Esther Perel: When I listened to you both, when I see you in your fights, it pains me. Sometimes I wish I could do something, but I feel helpless. And I think you need help. You are stuck in a cycle of blame and defense and explosions and bliss and hell and I'm okay listening. I don't, I welcome you coming to me, but my role is going to be to listen and not to take it on. And in a way take on that which you don't, because your relationship is like a distribution center where everybody gets the package the other one doesn't want to carry.

So I'm going to close my facilities. I'm a friend, I'm not a drop off center. But this, you say to yourself, of course, more than you say to them. And I think that this also would be a great chat with your partner, because it seems that this is the first time that you have a glimpse into why you get so ensnared. And you've learned something about you.

Him: Yeah, definitely. I don't think I kind of had made that connection to my parents before in that same way, I was kind of aware of the confidant role, but I didn't know where it had come from. So kind of seeing it in that way of it was forged in the flames of family life, uh, is something to definitely think more about, I think for sure.

Esther Perel: Do you feel it in your body when they talk to you and you start to feel like stuck?

Him: I do? Yeah. It's like, it's like a hot current up through like my chest that kind of gets to the throat. Yeah. And it's funny I think, it's in those situations that I douse the fire with the bucket of water by being that confidant, because that makes me feel like I can be the observer. I can remove myself. I can put up the wall against emotions in the moment with the two of them or individually, whatever. And then when I leave that situation and then the wall comes down, all the tension hasn't gone away. It's just been waiting at the other side of the wall and then it all just rushes in and hits me after the fact. Yeah.

Esther Perel: Right. Okay. So you have a place to start. Put it in your own words. What's the first thing you want to try to do differently or to pay attention to?

Him: The first thing I want to pay attention to is my own reactions and my body, when these situations happen, and look for those signs. And rather than not vocalizing that and sitting and taking all of this and trying to help and trying to fix, I'm just going to be there and just going to let things happen to a certain degree. And then if it becomes too much, if the feeling is becoming too strong, I'll know to say, I'm just here to listen. I'm not here to fix.

Esther Perel: Yep. You don't need to wait that long. That's the only thing I would suggest. When you feel that contraction and constriction to your chest and you put your hands on your chest and you identify it with, oh, I know that fear, I know that tension, that grip. Um, you can let them know it because when people fight, here's something I want to leave you with, often when people fight in front of a friend or in front of others, they fight like they have nothing to lose. Their anger emboldens them. They can say things they think have no consequences. And what's happening in your body is that you're registering the pain, the hurt, the impending loss, the scars of the slings. And that's when your chest goes really tight, you're absorbing that which they are denying. So you need to basically, if you can, give it back to them where it belongs, let it be where it needs to be, so that they can feel the breath and the whole rage of what's happening to them.

And the reason you respond so well when they're going into the positive swing again, is because it takes care of your anxiety and you can finally breathe again. So you are completely regulated by their swings up and down, up and down, and that becomes your internal, reality up and down a bit. And the boundary you're asking me is how do I maintain a boundary where whatever

ups and downs they go through is not something that I'm going through. When they knocked their foot, I don't have to say ay! It's not your danger. It's the memory of the danger that a little boy often experienced, but it's not the danger of today.

Him: That actually feels very freeing to hear that.

Esther Perel: Yeah, you can tell him we're not home anymore. We don't have, this is not the same. This is not mom and dad. I don't need to, you know, gather all the internal troops. Is this a good start?

Him: Yeah. It's a fantastic start, it really is. Thank you.

Esther Perel: You're welcome.

Jesse: This was a classic *Esther Calling*, a one-time intervention phone call recorded remotely from two points somewhere in the world. If you have a question you'd like to explore with Esther, could be answered in a 40 or a 50 minute phone call, send her a voice message, and Esther might just call you. Send your questions to producer@estherperel.com.

Where Should We Begin? with Esther Perel is produced by Magnificent Noise. We're part of the Vox Media Podcast Network in partnership with New York Magazine and The Cut. Our production staff includes Eric Nuzum, Destry Sibley, Sabrina Farhi, Kristin Mueller, and Julia Natt. Original Music and additional production by Paul Schneider. And the executive producers of Where Should We Begin? are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We'd also like to thank Courtney Hamilton, Mary Alice Miller, and Jack Saul.