

Esther Calling- Still Single at 40

Him: Hi Esther, I'm pushing 40. I turned 40 in about six months. And to this day I've never had a relationship that's gone beyond four or five months. At first, like in my twenties, thirties, I thought this is cool. I'm just kind of drifting through life, coasting about, it's all good. But lately over the last few years, it's really began to concern me.

Um, especially as I began to feel that I actually want a relationship, um, three, four months into the relationship, whatever, I, I just hit this wall. I get anxious. I began to withdraw. She will basically call me out at some point, and eventually the relationship just ends because I just can't communicate what it is I'm going through and what's making me anxious.

I don't know what to do. Why can't I get past this point of a relationship and it's really upsetting to me. Thank you.

Hi.

Esther Perel: Hello, hello. This is Esther and I read and listened to your message, but, uh, ask me your question again.

Him: Um, well, I guess the question is, as I'm, as I'm pushing forward to, um, in about six months, I do find myself growing increasingly concerned of that, I still to this day, haven't had a relationship that's gone beyond four, maybe five months.

So the question is, why is that? Why am I unable to, I mean, should I be concerned?

Esther Perel: And you mean all relationships? You mean romantic relationships, friendships as well?

Him: I'm talking strictly romantic relationships, yeah.

Esther Perel: You have longstanding friendships.

Him: Yeah, definitely. Great friendships. I have friends who I've been with for, we've been best friends for well over two decades.

Esther Perel: And can I just ask out of curiosity, do you ever wonder how come I can have this wonderfully long lasting friendships, and, uh, and I don't freeze and I don't shut down and I don't run away. You know, what's different?

Him: I, I mean, I do ask myself, absolutely. And I guess the simplest way of putting it is I just feel, I can't be my authentic self in a romantic relationship.

My friends have commented quite often how I can be very charming off the bat. I mean, if I like someone I'll just, you know, act on that. But, um, within, within a few months, yeah. You know, I lose all interests or maybe they do. And I get super anxious, it's one of the other, I look back on those relationships and I feel that I was unable to be my authentic self. I just wasn't being me. I was putting on constantly.

Esther Perel: Because I was protecting myself against what?

Him: Oh, yeah. Uh, against judgment against being seen as boring or miserable or a project they have to take on. And of course, I, I say how I'm actually feeling about this and the other, um, I don't want to be judged for it. And I do feel like I have to show the sunnier side.

Esther Perel: And what, how does it manifest?

Him: You mean within the relationship or?

Esther Perel: Mhm.

Him: Well, like I say, it's usually one of two things. It's either me constantly being anxious that they're not into me as much as I want them to be. And, um, I just desperately try to figure out a way to get them to like me and to come across cool. And I'd become very latch-ey and quite needy, and I've definitely chased a few people off as a result. So they've just in one way or another, they just basically dumped me in whatever way they do that, ghosting whatever, or the flip side. Um, I become passive and I withdraw. I no longer look forward to seeing them.

I can't really be bothered and I begin to resent them for, for whatever things. Um, oh, and, and of course, I guess the main thing is, um, I lose interest in sex. I literally can't have sex anymore, which makes me feel terribly guilty because they get worried. They think it's them. I assure them it's not them, but then they want to know what is it?

I don't have an answer. It just gets worse and worse and worse.

Esther Perel: I mean you're doing a beautiful job at describing it, right. I either become the pursuer and I become needy and I depend on them and I want their attention, but I don't feel that I deserve it, that I'm lovable, that I'm worthy of it. And so I start to feel very small and they feel very big and I push them away because I come on so hungry.

And on the other side I, withdraw. And I'm the one who becomes passive. No, I don't ghost them. I just make it so that they end up leaving because it's so uninteresting because I give them something and I become avoidant and yes. And sexual disinterest and probably matched by sexual lack of performance, go along with that, so that I make the point in multiple ways. And neither of them is what I want.

And I suppose you're telling me, I don't really know where this comes from or why this become so intense, but the nice thing by turning 40 is that I finally begin to realize that this is me. And that this list goes with me and that the pattern has repeated itself enough times that I now know that it is not because there's something missing in the other person.

Him: Exactly.

Esther Perel: Right? Which is what you probably thought for the first 10 years.

Him: Yeah, yeah.

Esther Perel: Uh, you know, the constant factor here is me and maybe I should take a look at myself and what happens to me that I become so, um, either immersed and at the mercy of, or fleeing because, uh, overwhelmed, and both are actually fears of, you know, they're the same fear from two sides.

They're not that different. They, they, they manifest, one in the pursuit and the other in the withdrawal, but they're actually two sides of the same fear and of the same struggle you have around your attachment to these people. And why not with friends, because for some reason the only relationships that mirror each other are the ones that we have with our early caregivers or parents and the ones that we have with our romantic partners.

Somehow we managed to not repeat that when we have with our friends. So many times people say, but I have longstanding friendships. Why don't I get that there? Because the stakes never feel that high. I never feel like my sense of

lovability and self-worth is underlined in this way. So tell me a little bit about the early relationships that you had with your caregivers or parents? Who was in your life, who was there for you, who was not there for you?

Him: So my parents got divorced when I was, uh, 12, 13. Um, it was a terrible divorce, just an absolute car crash.

Esther Perel: In what sense?

Him: My, my father was under immense pressure from a new business venture that was going wrong and he was getting very stressed out, um, basically, and they decided to separate because they just, there was just too much arguing at home.

And then my mum went to see him one day. I think it was a morning, and I had discovered what actually happened years later. But what happened was she discovered him in bed with another woman, um, and then came home in bits, which I remember vividly. Um, so a four person household became three, me and my mum, my sister, just like that.

And my father's always been around. We have a close relationship, at least now we do, it wasn't always that way.

Esther Perel: You're number one or number two?

Him: I'm number two. I'm the youngest brother. Um, we saw him kind of like on a weekend basis. And I remember there were really staid affairs when he would just take me and my sister out for lunches, the coffees, you know, you're making an effort to obviously keep in touch, which, which, which is great, but they, when I look back, they were very awkward, uncomfortable, at first because he never once, even to this day, talked about what the fuck happened. He never, he, he...

Esther Perel: Did you ask?

Him: So my sister was the, was the vocal one. She kind of she was sort of the campaigner on, on both of our behalfs. She was the one who would like to try and ask and try and understand. And my role was passive. I would just sit there. The few times my sister tried to bring it up, I would just sit there and just watch them kind of having it, have it out. But you know, that was 20 years ago we've both come a long way since and have a great relationship with him now. But

you still haven't asked the question? I don't think I once asked him or have asked him ever what happens, no, literally not once.

Esther Perel: So I think it's more than just what happened. I think that there's a conversation with your dad about. You know dad, this story that went on 20 years back, it still has a hold on my life. I feel lonely, I've been trying to understand how that impacted me, what that did to me. And I would love for us to have a chance to talk about this.

This is not a recrimination. This is not a blame session. I just need to understand, because here I am close to 40, I finally switched from thinking about all what was missing in the women I was meeting to realizing that the story was inside of me.

Him: Yeah. Yeah.

Esther Perel: What makes you laugh?

Him: Uh, I always laugh when I get nervous.

Esther Perel: Okay, it's good!

Him: I'm terrible with these feelings. I'm always laughing. Um,

Esther Perel: My, my guess I may be completely off here, but my sense is that you tell me when you withdraw, which one is the story that replays your mother and which one replays your dad? The withdrawal or the pursuit?

Him: As in which one is my mother, this, this, or the other? Is that what you mean?

Esther Perel: Yeah. When you hold on and you become all needy dependent and please, please when you cling, which, which story do you replay when you cling and which story do you replay when you flee?

Him: Well, my feeling is that, um, when I'm clinging, that's definitely me replaying trying to get validation from my dad. I know it was my mum who pointed out to me that, um, until recently, anyway, the women that I, that I seem to be most drawn to were the stern ones. And I didn't see this, I did not see this common thing and it just may, just hit me hard. Like it made total sense. She was right. So I feel that's, that's my dad.

Um, I guess that my mum, I don't know why it's harder to talk about my mom. I guess my mom and I are very close. I haven't really thought about it like that. Um, but I guess...

Esther Perel: What is the feeling that makes you withdraw? You start to withdraw when, and you lose sexual interest when?

Him: Yeah, when I feel trapped. I feel contained.

Esther Perel: And I feel trapped and contained when I feel? That's not a feeling by the way, trapped and contained. What is the feeling when you feel trapped and contained?

Him: Scared. I feel scared.

Esther Perel: And I'm scared of?

Him: Being seen for all my ridiculous ugliness, is what is, what is. Being seen for this mess, who hasn't got an effing clue, what he's doing. Um, who is who is sad quite a lot of the time, actually fuck. I mean, I agree constantly angry. I feel that I feel, um, and I'm just worried about being seen as a bit of a headcase being seen as, uh, unsure of himself and uncertain and weak and all that.

Esther Perel: A human being!

Him: Basically.

Esther Perel: Tell me something. What happened to your mom after your dad left?

Him: Okay. Um, my mum was miserable for a long time, she was fucking angry and resentful and that bastard this, and how can he that? And, you know, I recall her being, directly looking at me and telling me I have to do something about it. I can't remember to this day what she needed me to do exactly. But she was telling me like, I have to do something about this, but he's not doing this and he's not doing that.

And I felt like I never measured up to whatever it is I was supposed to do to, to help her. And she was just on the edge. She had breakdowns and I, myself, I felt trapped, yeah. And I got angry at her. I was behaving like a brat. I'm always behaving like a little shit who didn't want to know about her misery.

And I hated that sense. You know, I hated it when I come home from school and she's anything but happy. And I just want to put distance between myself. I'm that, you know, I don't want to know because if it's too close to the fucking pain, you know, I don't want to know that shit. And.

I just didn't want to know.

Esther Perel: Tell me, don't laugh when you want to cry.

Him: I can't help it.

Esther Perel: Cause you went through a lot and you were a 12 year old with your mom and your sister, and you felt at the same time terrible for your mom. And at the same time you wanted her to stop feeling terrible period. And you were overwhelmed. And you couldn't get her out of it. And every time you meet a woman now, and you start to feel responsible for her and you start to feel close enough to know how she feels, the entrapment fear comes right back, and what better way to flee and to re-enact it also, then to lose instant sexual interests.

Him: Yeah. It's the quickest way. Yeah.

Esther Perel: So here you are with your mom who is basically taking up a lot of the space with her experience and her sadness and her rage and her drama. And you don't know what to do because it's too much for a little boy to be able to, um, make his mommy happy,

the way he was hoping that she would be. Because if she was happy, then he didn't have to worry. And then he D he could actually think about his own life. And so becoming a brat and a shit is the way that a teenager tries to create a boundary so that he can deal with his own life. And he pretends he doesn't care, but in fact, he cares so much.

Him: Yeah, it's just so just sounds so obvious when you say it this way.

Esther Perel: This is new to you?

Him: Some of it is new to me. Um, it seems very obvious. But I've never heard it really put back to me that way before.

Esther Perel: What's the thing that touches you the most?

Him: You, you, you said responsibility and the sense of fleeing and that really, yeah, because the thing you said about how I just want to make my own boundaries. I want my own life, actually. I don't want anything to do with this shit, but at the same time I do care deeply. And it's that kind of tussle and that's exactly it. That's exactly it. And, um, when you said that translates to fleeing, I feel that.

Esther Perel: Yeah, you don't flee cause you don't care. You don't flee cause you're cold. You flee because you don't know how to get close without instantly feeling the burden of caretaking and responsibility. Where does that reach you?

Him: I don't know how to ask the questions to be honest.

Esther Perel: It's okay. You can let it sit.

Him: But I'm kind of thinking. Yeah, I'm just sort of like, nodding to myself, like, yeah. And no wonder I was so angry and I still get angry, I honest to God sometimes it's so I feel so ashamed of it afterwards, but I can regress, as a 39 year old man, I can regress like that back into my childhood state, just like a click of a finger. I am shouting at her and I just feel so ashamed about that because that's your mom.

Esther Perel: And because you don't know of another way at this point to create some distance or some separateness so that you, without having to have a yelling match. And so it did, it feels very regressive. It feels very young. Because part of you doesn't know how to be close without also feeling the burden of responsibility.

And that happens with her and that happens with the women. And that's why she's perceptive that you may be going out with more stern women or more aloof women, because you're, I think your romantic, unconscious things that these women will be less needy. And you won't have to be so responsible for them, which may not always be the case. And that's not always the case, but that's how it appears at the beginning.

Him: None of that, that is so spot on. Um, I just came out of a relationship very recently and again, surprise, surprise four months, thereabouts and the funny thing is this person was quite offish to begin with, and a bit stern, a bit dismissive, and it just drove me wild.

And I had to get to the bottom of this, and then I won this person over. But then once they kind of came into the fold as it were, and we actually began to have

this great time together, it didn't take long for me to do the opposite. And then them expressing that closeness with me and I began to withdraw and this person saying, what the hell is wrong with you? Cause you're the one who was chasing me, mr. You know, like what the hell? And I don't know what to say. I'm just cool. I'm just like hands up. Yeah. I don't know. I don't know what just happened there.

Esther Perel: Well, what happened is that there's an overlap and it's easier to pursue some more. Who is holding back because then they don't overwhelm you. And there is no reenactment of this dance that you have with your mom. And what will help you hopefully have different relationships in your adult life is when you are able to disentangle. And when you see it happening, that's when you're going to have conversations inside of you between the 12 year old and the adult. Because some of this is fiction, meaning these women don't maybe need the kind of responsibility that you think they do. But you get this entire internal world activated at that moment. And it's about closing the gap between the 12 year old and the 40 year old, when it comes to closeness.

Him: I just can't believe how accurate that feels. Without diminishing the work of my therapist, who's a wonderful, wonderful therapist. The reason I went to this person in the first place is pretty much for this thing. And I feel like this is it like it just, this is it.

I mean, I actually feel good about this because it's, it's like a massive knot has come undone and it's caused me so much distress and anger and sleepless nights. Just being so fed up with myself for so long. And I just can't believe you're able to articulate it. Like that's what it is.

Esther Perel: We have articulated it.

Him: We have.

Esther Perel: Not I. We have articulated it because if it, if it hits the spot is because you're right there already. I could have said this to you 10 years ago and it would land on deaf ears. So it's always a meeting between what I say and what you're able to hear. And so that, to me says that the gap is beginning to close.

You could even go back to the woman you just left and just say, I had a real reckoning and I understood something and I owe you an apology. If you still interested.

Him: I can, I mean, we're still in touch after all that. I think she'd be very receptive to that,

Esther Perel: I feel she would be, yeah. So, um, that's the, that's the more you bring that to her and you ground the experience with her in the present, and then you say, look, I'm just beginning to disentangle this, but I know this had nothing to do with it. Here is what I've understood in the meantime. And if you choose that path, let me know. I'm very curious where that would go

Him: if I reach out to her?

Esther Perel: Yeah.

Him: Okay, I probably will do that. That for me will be a little easier than the one about my dad but I'll definitely...

Esther Perel: Oh, your dad, I'm putting that one in the deck as well, but I'm going to leave you there.

Him: Esther, thank you so much.

Esther Perel: You're welcome. Thank you.

Him: I'm so grateful.

Esther Perel: My pleasure. Bye-bye.

Him: Take care.