

ESTHER PEREL

Teaches Relational Intelligence



Table of Contents

03 Meet Esther Perel

As a practicing therapist and in-demand public thinker, Esther has vivified countless relationships—at work and at home

06 Milestones on the Road to Relational Intelligence

The realms that psychologists explore and the conditions that therapists address are the same ones that humans have mulled over for millennia

09 Key Terms

The psychotherapeutic lexicon is vast; these definitions will acquaint you with some crucial concepts discussed in class

10 Cognitive Distortions

Learn about a few reflexive tendencies, from catastrophizing to totalistic thinking

PART I

Me, You, and Us

12 Start With Self-Awareness

Want better relationships?
Get to know yourself first

13 ASSIGNMENT

Build Your Relational Résumé

Unlike a traditional résumé, this one can help you understand what you carry with you, wherever you go

15 The Neuroscience of Relatedness

A diagram highlighting the brain regions that researchers have found to be hotbeds of relational processing

17 Drawing Relational Boundaries

Your boundaries can be rigid, weak, or flexible, and they're constantly subject to change

19 ASSIGNMENT

What Does Power Mean to You?

Fill in the blanks and sharpen your sense of how this elusive force shapes your life

PART II

The Ecology of Conflict

22 Difficult Conversation Checklist

Broaching heavy topics is tough, but it doesn't have to be debilitating

23 Hidden Depths of Conflict

What are you really fighting about?

25 The Flight/Flee Melee

According to Esther, conflict between two people can be analyzed using three combinations of two archetypes

26 So You've Been Criticized

Whenever you're receiving harsh feedback, these steps can help you move from hurt to understanding

33 Essential Practices

Thought exercises straight from Esther to use for building relational intelligence

35 Learn More

Esther's key works, plus an extensive reading list that she curated just for you

PART III

Healing and Health

28 3 Tips for Clearer Conversations

A few simple techniques that can help ensure that everyone is heard

29 Miscommunication in Action

Why we get one another wrong, and what we can do about it

31 Building and Rebuilding Trust

Things to consider when you're cultivating a relationship—or trying to salvage one

32 ASSIGNMENT

Practice Not-So-Small Talk

Inviting connection, one story at a time





MEET YOUR INSTRUCTOR

Esther Perel

As a practicing therapist and in-demand public thinker, she has vivified countless relationships—at work and at home



When you think about your career, no doubt many words come to mind—but is erotic one of them? According to Esther Perel, the Belgian-born psychotherapist, author, speaker, and podcast host whose relationship insights have reached millions the world over, it should be.

For Esther, eroticism is “a quality of aliveness, of vibrancy, of vitality, a life force” that’s just as relevant to your work life as it is to your love life. Bringing eroticism into all areas of

human existence is at the heart of her work. And because virtually everyone lives in a matrix of personal, professional, and transactional relationships, the erotic charge of those relationships is integrally tied to the pursuit of a meaningful life.

For more than three decades, Esther has worked with couples and families and made substantial contributions to the field of modern sexuality. Workplace dynamics have loomed large in her clinical work from the beginning, and she has explored the

subject as a speaker, a workshop facilitator, and a consultant to some of the world’s biggest companies. The forces that shape relationships, she has found, are the same regardless of context. As she says at the outset of her class, “Between individuals, between couples, groups, nations—relationships are relationships.”

Beginnings

Esther’s expansive sense of the erotic, and her fascination with relationships in all their complexity, can be

traced back to relationships of her own. Both of her parents were survivors of Nazi concentration camps. After World War II, they settled in Belgium, where Esther was born in 1958. Growing up, she watched her parents embrace life even in the wake of unthinkable trauma.

She earned a bachelor's degree in educational psychology, French literature, and linguistics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, and once she crossed the Atlantic, a master's degree in expressive arts therapies from Lesley University in Massachusetts. In 1984, she opened her private practice as a therapist in New York. (In addition to her many high-profile speaking engagements and consulting jobs, she still sees patients twice a week.) Early on, she was particularly interested in couples and families with multiple cultural, racial, and religious identities. Eventually, her gift for illuminating the ever-evolving conventions of sexuality came to the forefront.

Unlocking & Rethinking

With her first book, *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*, published in 2006, Esther entered the mainstream as an incisive public thinker. Thanks in large part to that bestselling book and her wildly popular 2013 TED Talk, "The Secret to Desire in a Long-Term Relationship" (facilitated by the American non-profit TED, known for its viral videos on technology, entertainment, and design), Esther became a leading voice in the field of sexuality. Her second book, 2017's *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*, brought new levels of attention—especially its thesis that adulterous episodes within committed relationships



might not be the deal breakers they're so often made out to be. A second TED Talk followed, as did Esther's first podcast, *Where Should We Begin?*, which features one-off therapy sessions with real couples. Esther easily could have stayed in this lane, but with the 2017 launch of *How's Work?*, her second podcast, she used the talk-therapy format to explore workplace dynamics. Startup founders, sex workers, lobbyists, hairdressers—the show revealed that no matter the job, everyone shows up to work bearing a unique relational history. (Esther also calls these relational résumés. You can create your own on page 13.)

Aliveness

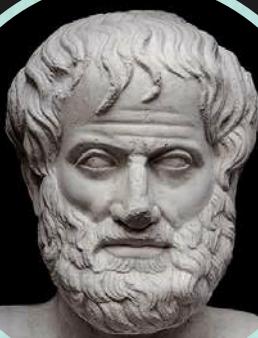
With her class, Esther aims to help you move toward more meaningful rela-

tionships at your job, at home, and wherever else life takes you. You'll work on cultivating self-awareness, creating healthy boundaries, and leveling up your communication skills; you'll also learn how to approach conflict empathetically, broach difficult topics, and regroup after you've been criticized. If you ever feel stuck in your romantic relationship (or lack thereof) or career, you're in the right place.

The work is both complex and exquisitely simple. So take Esther's advice and get ready to "look at the important relationships in your life, personal and professional, and ask yourself, 'How do I experience joy and meaning in my relationships, alive- ness and vitality in my connections?'"

Milestones on the Road to Relational Intelligence

The field of psychotherapy has existed for fewer than 150 years, but the realms that psychologists explore and the conditions that therapists address are the same ones that humans have mulled over for millennia



4th and 5th Centuries BCE

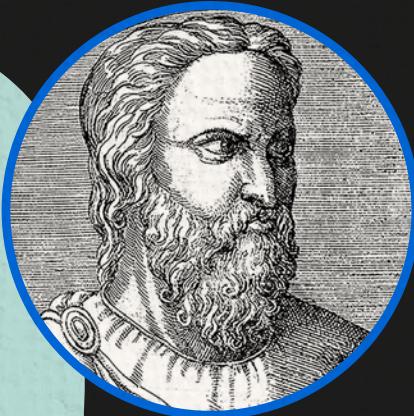
The ancient Greek stoics—philosophers who prize virtue, reason, and existential inquiry—are among the first in the Western world to pathologize the human mind. Athenian thinker **Plato** attributes melancholia, mania, and depression to an incongruence between the rational soul, located in the brain, and the irrational soul, which resides in the chest. Plato's protégé **Aristotle** surmises that philosophical discussion can help heal afflicted individuals—a forerunner to psychotherapy, which revolves around conversation between a mental health professional and a patient.

200 BCE–500 CE

Ancient matters of the mind are hardly restricted to the Mediterranean. For seven hundred years, great Hindu written works are produced under the name **Patanjali**. (Scholars disagree on who wrote what using this byline.) One of Patanjali's major contributions to psychology is a model of the mind: Separated into four concentric parts, it consists of an outermost social self, a physical self, a psychological self, and, at the core, a cognitive apparatus. Patanjali also identifies six psychological “foes,” including lust, greed, and pride—an idea that will echo more than two millennia later in Sigmund Freud's conception of the id.

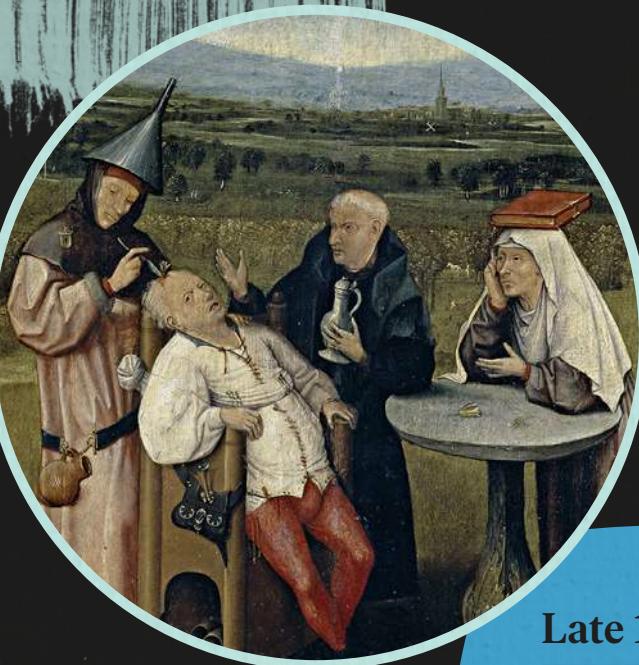
2nd Century CE

Greek physician **Aretaeus of Cappadocia** is the first Western thinker to articulate symptoms associated with what's now known as agitated depression, a condition characterized by irritability, outbursts, anxious body movements, and other symptoms. His reasoning doesn't quite reflect modern medicine's understanding of the disorder: Aretaeus claims that depression comes from the soul's energy cooling down, which in turn could disturb one's black bile—one of four fluids (or so the thinking goes) fueling the human constitution. Yet his description of depression is easily recognizable: "The melancholic isolates himself.... He curses life and wishes for death. He wakes up suddenly and is seized by a great tiredness."



13th Century

Bartholomaeus Anglicus, an English scholar and clergyman and the author of the widely popular nineteen-volume *De Proprietatibus Rerum* [On the properties of things], describes herbal and surgical treatments for depression (the latter is limited to bleeding), as well as musical therapy, dietary changes, and herbal medicine. Generally, Europeans of the Middle Ages endure a regression of scientific developments in psychology: Mental illness (like the weather, coincidences, and other facts of life) is often seen as the devil's work.

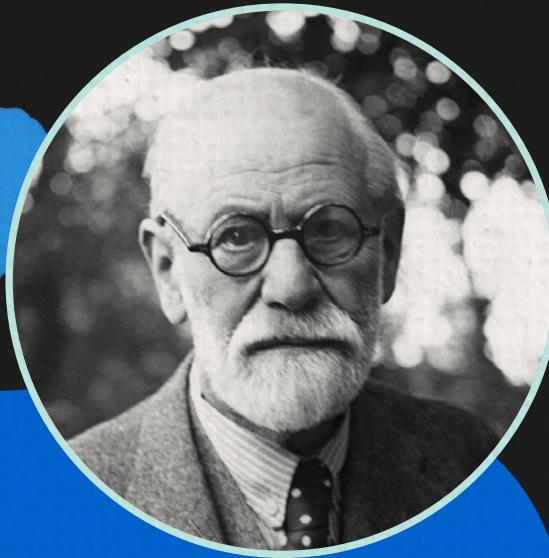


Late 15th Century

With his painting *The Cure of Folly (Extraction of the Stone of Madness)*, Dutch master **Hieronymus Bosch** depicts a medical procedure known as trepanation—the drilling of holes into the skull to treat mental illness (as well as epilepsy and other conditions). The method has been in use for most of the common era and would be endorsed by prominent thinkers through the seventeenth century, losing steam only in the 1800s.

Late 1800s

In 1879, German physiologist **Wilhelm Wundt** opens the world's first psychological laboratory, in Leipzig. There, experiments that are often aided by students shape the estimated fifty-three thousand pages of research he writes over the course of his scientific career. Separately, in Vienna, Austrian physician **Josef Breuer** begins to develop a so-called talking cure for his patient **Bertha Pappenheim**, who is diagnosed with "hysteria"—a later-disproved condition that allegedly leaves women in states of frenzy. Although he ultimately abandons his ideas, Breuer's protégé—Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud—sees the nucleus of psychotherapy. He launches the field by copublishing the book *Studies on Hysteria* with Breuer in 1895.



20th Century

Sigmund Freud, in his 1923 paper, "The Ego and the Id," posits that the human personality has three chief components: the unconscious, pleasure-seeking id; the conscious, reality-based ego; and the transcendent, moral superego. Through the subsequent decades, a number of psychoanalytic theories emerge that are directly influenced by Freud's. Among the most prominent are ego psychology, which involves balancing ego and the demands of reality; object relations theory, which emphasizes humanity's reliance on relationships; and self psychology, which explains motivation in terms of self-esteem and self-cohesion. It's during this century that a shift happens in the field of psychology, from Freud's emphasis on the unconscious to a focus on the self and how it is shaped by one's development, relationships, and external circumstances.

Present

The twentieth-century theories of psychology inform the development of psychodynamic therapy, a form of talk therapy (in which **Esther** is trained) that explores unconscious stirrings by identifying them and seeking out their root causes, typically through once- or twice-weekly meetings. Psychodynamic therapy also centers the relationship between client and therapist, whose discussions can be uniquely free-form. This therapy posits that when the client's mind is allowed to wander, it will naturally gravitate toward themes that can lead to fruitful analysis. By acting upon the conclusions made during therapy sessions, those in treatment are better equipped to address sources of discontent.

KEY TERMS

The psychotherapeutic lexicon is vast, but learning even a few definitions will set you on the right path. Start with these concepts

Empathy

This complex term, whose Greek roots translate to “in-feeling,” means the ability to understand and even vicariously experience the inner lives of others. “Empathy is that ability to put ourselves in another person’s shoes—the counterforce, if you want, of self-awareness,” Esther says. Through empathy, we can become more conscientious members of relationships.

Equity

In the context of Esther’s class, equity is the appropriate distribution of power within a system. It requires an understanding as to how power is defined and who holds it: Is it the higher earner? The one who makes decisions? Does one person’s accrual of power come at another’s expense? Once power is understood by all parties, it can be shared according to each participant’s needs and responsibilities. (This is distinct from *equality*, where the same amount of power is afforded to every participant.) In the workplace, equity exists when an employee possesses the autonomy to do their job—not that of their boss.

Eroticism

This term stems from Eros, the name of the Greek god of love and sexual desire. It’s typically used to describe those urges, but Esther sees it as the degree to which a person, couple, or group feels a sense of aliveness, vitality, and generativity. The central agents of eros are our imagination, curiosity, and playfulness; it thrives on mystery and ritual. Esther’s conception of the term is informed by ancient Greek philosophy and Jewish mysticism, as well as the work of Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Mexican poet Octavio Paz, and French theorist Roland Barthes.

Psychodynamic therapy

A form of talk therapy that seeks to uncover the root causes of troubling emotions through regular sessions with a therapist. The sessions are characterized by a close relationship between the therapist and the patient and the embrace of free-form conversation. During these sessions, therapists focus on how patients express their feelings, noting themes or patterns that surface and guiding patients to discuss subjects they seem to be avoiding.

Psycholinguistics

A field of study that deals with the systems that allow humans to communicate, using a psychological lens. Speech and language development, and how individuals interpret speech, are the dual cruxes of the discipline. For Esther, psycholinguistics is integral to issues of miscommunication: Because verbal expression and interpretation are shaped by background and identity, you might instinctually communicate more directly or indirectly than your counterpart. To head off potential misunderstandings, she urges you to “be aware that communication is highly influenced by cultural differences, by gender specificities and messages, by generational elements.”

Relational intelligence

The capacity to absorb, follow, and react to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Unlike the popular term *emotional intelligence*, this one implies that virtually all emotions occur within familial, societal, and cultural systems. As you develop relational intelligence, your ability to deeply understand your dynamics with others will increase—and so will the opportunity to navigate them more effectively.

Self-awareness

The degree to which you recognize the motivations and external forces behind your actions, as well as the impact of those actions. Esther sees it as both the counterforce to and the antecedent of empathy. “Self-knowledge is also what gives you a sense of looking at others and being able to understand them,” she says. “Do you need to understand yourself in order to understand others? My answer is yes.”

Tragic optimism

Unlike toxic positivity, which demands that adherents remain sanguine no matter the dreadful circumstances that surround them, tragic optimism offers an approach that's both affirmative and clear-eyed. Coined by Austrian psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and author Viktor E. Frankl (whose survival of the Nazi concentration camps led to his landmark book *Man's Search for Meaning*), the term suggests that people can search for meaning in tragedy without trying to ignore its gravity.

Unconscious bias

The beliefs you harbor about another individual or group without realizing it. This often shows up in basic communication: The association a word or phrase carries for one person may be different for another. "Sometimes you have meanings that you are not aware of that are implied in what you're saying," Esther says. The bias can lie with the speaker, the listener, or both. According to Mahzarin R. Banaji, a Harvard professor and coauthor of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, unconscious bias has more to do with what she calls "the thumbprint of the culture" than individual proclivities.

6 COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

When your interpretation of an external event leads to an exaggerated (and often negative) view of yourself or someone else, you're in the realm of cognitive distortions: a group of reflexive tendencies first codified by the founders of cognitive behavioral therapy

1. CATASTROPHIZING

Something goes wrong, and you leap to the worst possible conclusions. Perhaps a plan faces a mild disruption: You and a friend arrive at a busy restaurant only to discover that the wait is too long for your appetites. *What if we can't find anywhere to eat*, a panicked voice in your head asks. *What if every other restaurant is just as busy? What if this upsets my friend enough that we never make plans again?* Catastrophizing leads every possible outcome into dire straits.

2. CONFIRMATION BIAS

The tendency to see what one is expecting to see, overlooking or dismissing details that run counter to internal narratives. Confirmation bias is particularly relevant when it reinforces pre-existing negative feelings. To challenge those biases, Esther suggests a special tracking day, when you look for "everything the other person does—your manager, your colleague, your partner—that you felt was attentive, and caring, and warm towards you. You will begin to see how we miss those because we are so focused on finding the ones that we expect to see."

3. FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The habit of tying one's own behavior to a complex combination of internal and external conditions, while seeing others' behaviors as characteristic and

essential. Example: If you're late to an event, you might recognize that forces outside your control, such as traffic, contributed to your tardiness; when someone else is late, you decide that they're inherently flaky.

4. PERSONALIZATION

Convincing yourself that you're to blame for an event that was beyond your control: *The entire birthday party went wrong because I wasn't fun that night.* Another form of personalization is the belief that you have been intentionally excluded or mistreated, when in reality you're projecting onto a situation that has little, perhaps nothing, to do with you.

5. "SHOULD" STATEMENTS

If you tell yourself that you need to make changes to your life, then fall into a cycle of guilt because you've failed to make those changes, you may be experiencing this cognitive distortion. Rather than feeling spurred into action, contemplating what you *should* be doing only serves as a reminder of the gulf separating you from the person you'd like to be. "Should" thinking can extend far beyond the self, resulting in the assumption that other people—and even the entire human race—should behave in ways that conform to your beliefs.

6. TOTALISTIC THINKING

Defining other people in absolute terms: They're always defiant, or they're never compassionate. By thinking in this way, you don't only paint others with a broad brush (possibly relying on embellished moments from your own experiences with them), but you also present your perception as objectively true.

PART I

Me, You, and Us

Work on deepening your sense of self and cultivating empathy for intimate partners, family, and colleagues



START WITH SELF-AWARENESS

Want better relationships? Get to know yourself first

At the core of relational intelligence is self-awareness: a clear conception of your own behaviors, the impulses behind them, and the life experiences and cultural forces that have shaped them. If that sounds simple, consider that a strong command of one's own history can, in some cases, be a barrier to self-awareness. "Sometimes the stories that we tell about ourselves also have the risk of becoming rigid, repetitious, narrow, reductionistic," Esther says. Similarly, too much self-reflection can come at the expense of empathy. The key is to develop a sense of self that is deeply rooted, adaptable to shifting circumstances, and open to other people in all their complexity.

Toward that end, Esther suggests that you draw up a private document she calls a relational résumé. Much in the same way that a tradi-

tional résumé lists education, work experience, skills, and professional accolades, a relational résumé covers the bonds that have shaped the person you are today—the parental dynamics you absorbed as a child, the friendships you fostered in school, and the romantic partners you've loved and, as the case may be, lost. It should, in Esther's words, tell "the story of all the other lessons of life, the other experiences that we have accumulated."

A relational résumé can help you understand how your past continues to inform your present, including the way you communicate, handle conflict, weigh trust against risk, and establish boundaries. On the following pages, you'll build your own, digging deep into your psyche to reveal what you carry with you wherever you go.

"In relationships, you have one constant factor, and that's you."

—ESTHER



ASSIGNMENT

Build Your Relational Résumé

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Get settled with a notepad or a dictation app, and answer the questions below.
2. Complete the template on the next page, drawing from those answers. Under “education,” summarize three formative experiences from your childhood. Under “connections,” list two or three of the most significant relationships in your life, and briefly describe how they have shaped your present. Under “experience,” write in three to five landmark accomplishments and challenges from your adult years.
3. Fill the “objective” box with a sentence that sums up your approach to relationships and how you might want to change it.

FAMILY HISTORY

- Were your parents (one or both) born abroad?
 - If so, did they come alone, with family, or as part of a community?
 - How did the experience of resettling affect their sense of self?
- Were relationships viewed as central or peripheral in your family?
- Was the metaphorical door of your childhood home typically open or closed?
- How would you describe the way your parents related to each other, their elders, and their community?
- How about your grandparents—how did they relate to each other, their elders, the authorities around them, and their community?
 - Did those dynamics ever shift?
- What changed as the generations of your family progressed? (Think child-rearing, views on authority, and gender roles.)

SECURITY/FREEDOM

- Coming out of childhood, were you more in need of connection and protection or freedom and individuality?
 - How did those needs influence the choices you made?

- Were you raised to value autonomy over loyalty, or vice versa? (Keep in mind that everyone contains both values to varying degrees.)
 - What were some of the messages, experiences, values, attitudes, and beliefs that supported this orientation?
 - Has the orientation ever changed?

RELATIONSHIPS

- What expectations do you bring into new relationships?
 - Are they the same regardless of the other member(s) of the relationship?
- Do you tend to enter relationships cautiously or assertively?
- How has your approach to relationships changed over the years?

LIFE STORIES

- What is a story you've told one too many times about yourself?
- What is a story you'd like to let go?
- If you could break up with a part of yourself, what part would it be?

OBJECTIVE

EDUCATION

CONNECTIONS

EXPERIENCE

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF RELATEDNESS

As far as the brain is concerned, empathy is a group effort. This diagram highlights 6 regions that researchers have found to be hotbeds of relational processing

Sparking Our Circuitry

Our ability to empathize with the physical suffering of others comes through a “pain matrix,” a network of brain regions that processes those sensations whether they’re experienced directly or observed in others. This network is believed to be divided into two circuits: One processes pain psychologically, while the other maps pain onto the corresponding part of the observer’s body. In 2011, scientists at the University of Southern California studied the ability of humans to wield this system, even when watching pain inflicted on body parts they themselves didn’t possess. A group of women were shown videos of someone receiving painful injections in various parts of their body. The **somatosensory cortices**¹, which triangulate pain, lit up; so did an emotion-processing region called the **insula**². One woman, born without limbs, experienced empathetic reactions across her pain matrix—including in the secondary somatosensory cortex—even in response to clips depicting arms and legs. The study raised some profound questions regarding the capacity of humans with markedly different characteristics to empathize with one another.

The Power of Pranks

For a 2009 study conducted by a team of scholars from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Virginia, 128 children were given novelty cans of “nuts,” which ejected springs when opened, and instructed to prank their parents. The researchers were able to trigger reactions in the **left frontopolar cortex**³ and the **dorsolateral prefrontal cortex**⁴: front sections of the brain speculated to be behind the processing of complex emotions and abstractions. Kids in the test group with high levels of empathic concern—the ability to feel second-hand pain by relating to another’s experience—showed greater cortex flashes than the group of kids with lower empathic concern.

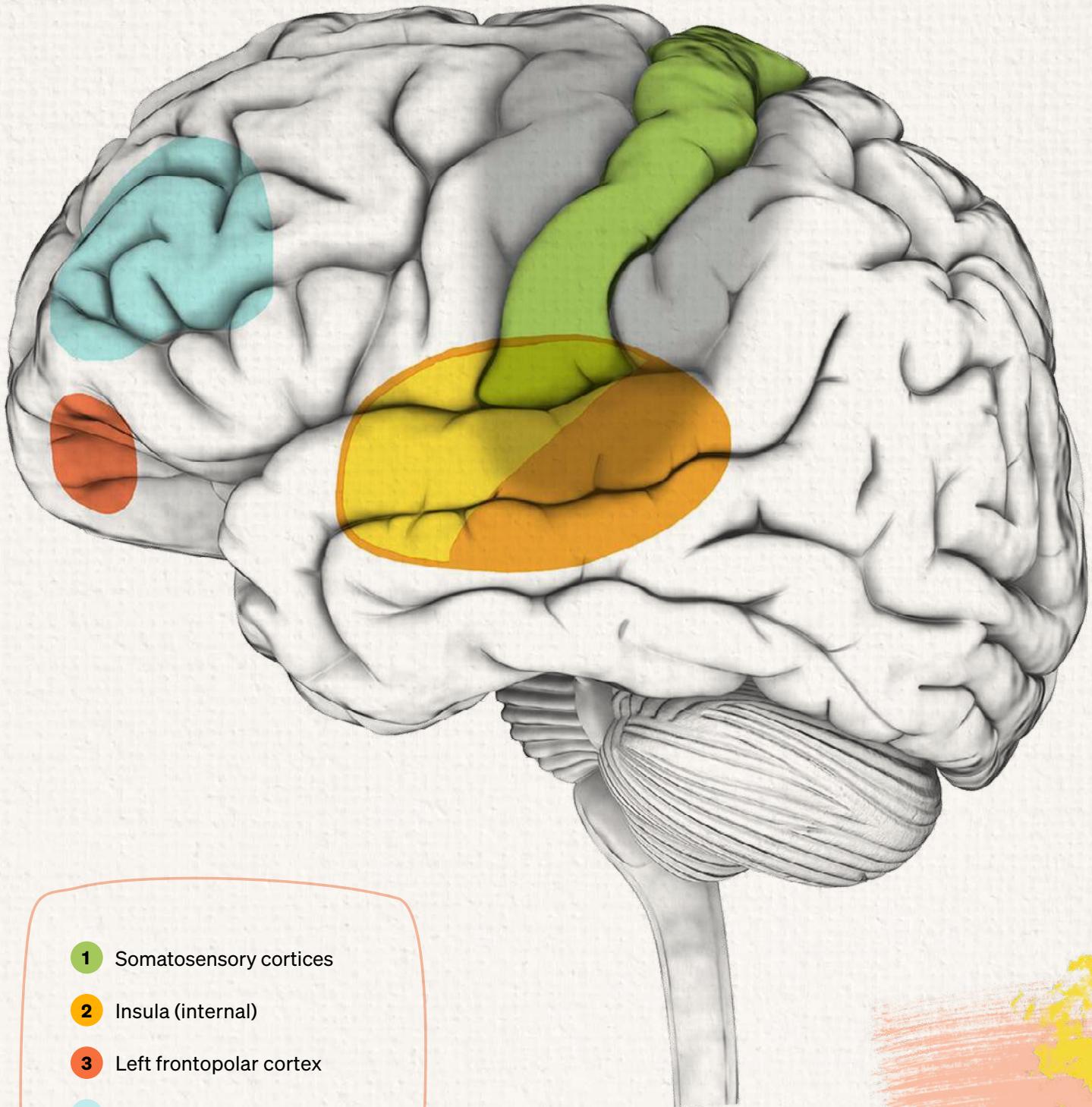
Empathy's Origin

Empathy affects numerous areas of the brain, but in 2012 scientists at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York were able to pinpoint the wellspring from which empathy flows: the **anterior insular cortex**⁵, located along the lateral sulcus (a fissure that runs into the center of the brain). By showing patients images of people in pain, the team found that participants who had suffered damage to their

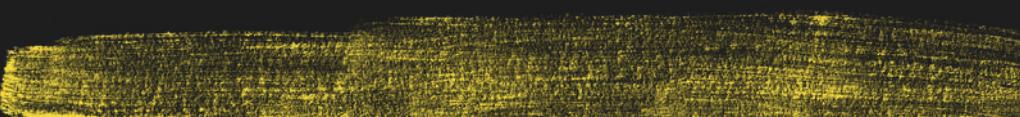
anterior insular cortices exhibited the lowest levels of empathetic processing. The team predicted that its finding would eventually lead to better treatments for neurological disorders that disrupt empathetic responses.

Wandering Minds

For a paper published in 2020, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles instructed subjects to let their minds wander and then scanned them with functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, which tracks blood flow through the brain. Even when subjects weren’t prompted to feel empathetic, those who scored higher on a post-scan written empathy test showed greater levels of activity throughout the **somatotmotor network**⁶, which is associated with empathy. These results allowed researchers to draw a correlation between resting levels of somatomotor network activity and empathetic tendencies. By widening the ways to measure empathy, the study potentially reduced the need for relatively conventional tests, which can be difficult to administer to individuals with disorders such as schizophrenia.



- 1 Somatosensory cortices
- 2 Insula (internal)
- 3 Left frontopolar cortex
- 4 Dorsolateral prefrontal cortex
- 5 Anterior insular cortex (internal)
- 6 Somatomotor network



Drawing Relational Boundaries

They can be rigid, permeable, or flexible, and they're constantly subject to change

Healthy relationships require well-established boundaries: the beliefs and behaviors by which individuals, couples, and groups “delineate what is shared and what is separate, public or private, where we connect and where we diverge,” in Esther’s words. But unlike physical boundaries, psychological ones can be hard to spot.

One high-profile attempt to map out personal boundaries came from Ernest Hartmann, an Austrian American psychiatrist and the author of the 2011 book *Boundaries: A New Way to Look at the World*. Hartmann envisioned boundaries on a thick-to-thin spectrum; in the 1980s, he developed an extensive Boundary Questionnaire and found that thinner-skinned people were more likely to study art or music and work as fashion models, and that the thicker-skinned could be found in the legal profession, in sales, and serving as naval officers. For

Hartmann and subsequent researchers, people with thinner boundaries tend to be more sensitive and open to new experiences, while those whose boundaries are relatively thick are more likely to be stoic and suspicious of the unfamiliar.

Boundaries can be described through their permeability: the degree to which they regulate information, resources, and interactions, and the extent to which they can allow influences and events to be integrated into the person or relationship. One common misconception is that they prevent people from connecting. According to Esther, healthy boundaries are essential to creating and maintaining durable relationships. (In class, she compares healthy boundaries to skin, which admits nutrients and keeps out pathogens.) In fact, the clarity that comes with well-established boundaries can help couples get closer to each other. And

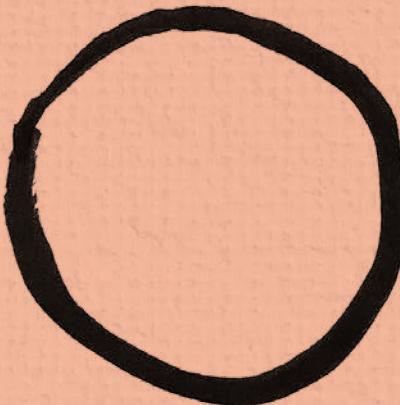
in keeping with Esther’s belief that “relationships are relationships” regardless of context, the same rule applies in the workplace.

On page 18, you’ll find descriptions of the three boundary types discussed in class. Read them over and pay attention to what resonates with you. Keep in mind that boundaries are relative and that most people employ a mix: You might have permeable boundaries at work, rigid boundaries with certain members of your family, and flexible boundaries in your closest friendships. And all of them can change.

RIGID

INDIVIDUALS: You are walled off. You find closeness intrusive or potentially hurtful, and you may feel you need to hold on to your boundaries with white knuckles to protect against threat. You keep others at a distance—or cut them off completely. You lean toward staunch self-reliance, you push back at input from others, and you are reluctant to ask for help.

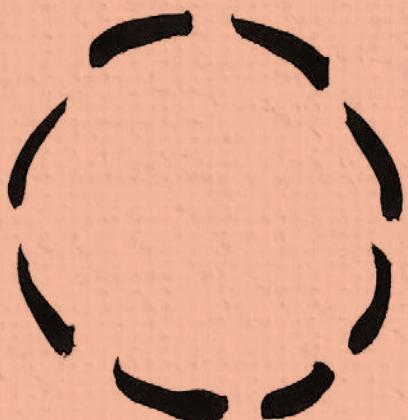
RELATIONSHIPS: A rigid boundary in a relationship cannot bend. At best, it divides; at worst, it breaks. Relationships with rigid boundaries struggle to allow outsiders in or out; they enable people to be self-directed but also disconnected. Rigid boundaries can create too much space between partners or family members, and they can lead to so-called silos at work.



PERMEABLE

INDIVIDUALS: People with permeable boundaries experience high permeability. They can be severely affected by external circumstances, like the trials and tribulations of other people. They might reveal too much about themselves to others, and their fear of rejection and dependence on outside opinions can lead to burnout. They lose their self-direction and struggle to hold on to themselves in the presence of another.

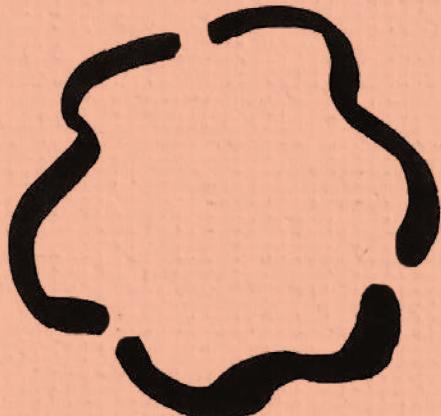
RELATIONSHIPS: When partners are “too fused,” Esther says, “whatever happens to one person triggers a reaction in the other.” One partner may take too much responsibility for the emotions and the actions of the other; alternatively, when one person feels something, they expect the other to do something about it. A relationship can also be porous to the outside world: You can sense a relationship like this might be forming if, for example, you begin having fights with your partner about how others perceive you as a couple.



FLEXIBLE

INDIVIDUALS: Because people in this category consciously choose what to let in and what to reject, they are more likely to remain mentally and emotionally stable, even in trying circumstances. And because of their level of comfort with themselves, they’re able to share personal information in a way that’s situationally appropriate, refraining from over- or under-sharing. Crucially, they can also communicate their needs and desires while accepting “no” for an answer.

RELATIONSHIPS: Couples with flexible boundaries enjoy a balance between independence and communion. Individual growth is encouraged, not stymied, and stimuli from outside the relationship—like other relationships or opinions—are considered and, if the couple deems it appropriate, allowed in.



ASSIGNMENT

What Does Power Mean to You?

Fill in the blanks and sharpen your sense of how this elusive force shapes your life

Esther has an expansive—you might say counterintuitive—view of power. She sees, for example, how people who consider themselves powerless in romantic, familial, or group settings could actually hold all the cards. Sometimes they're tantrum-prone children; sometimes they're struggling partners who refuse to seek help. The throughline: When people need something that you can provide, withhold, or take away, whether it's material resources or household tranquility, you have power.

Esther also points out that power can be generative or destructive. Studies have proved that power without empathy and accountability can

lead to rash and egomaniacal behavior, wreaking havoc on couples, businesses, and larger social structures. Conversely, people who come to power with a preexisting concern for others might find that their increasing influence allows their empathetic tendencies to come full bloom. As with boundaries, power is relative: The way you perceive it depends in large part on the family and culture in which you were brought up.

By filling in the blanks on page 20 (and completing the related thought exercise on page 33), you can sharpen your sense of the power dynamics around you—and the powers you already possess.

- When I consider the word power, I think of these words and phrases:
.....
.....
- Growing up, I was taught to authority.
- The most powerful person in my family is my because
- In my intimate relationships, I typically feel like I have power than my partner.
- I think it's when someone has more power than another person in a relationship.
- I feel about needing to rely on others.
- My relationship with demonstrates a power over (oppressive, dominant, exploitative) dynamic.
- My relationship with demonstrates a power to (generative, inviting, active, collaborative) dynamic.
- Here's one way I have used money as an instrument of power in a relationship:
.....
.....
- I feel in leadership roles.
- I feel about the amount of power I have at my job.
- I feel powerful when I
- I feel powerless when I

PART II

The Ecology of Conflict

From bickering to break-ups, learn how to make confrontation less destructive and more productive

THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATION CHECKLIST

Broaching heavy topics is tough, but it doesn't have to be debilitating

Being alive means having difficult conversations, whether you're a manager giving a mixed performance review or a romantic partner bringing the relationship to an end. More quotidian exchanges can be hard to initiate, too—like telling a stranger on the subway to stop manspreading or asking a coworker to reconsider their Slack etiquette.

It's not always possible to prevent these conversations from ending in tears (either yours or someone else's), but there are ways to ensure that the exchange is more civil, kind, and compassionate. Use this checklist the next time you're preparing to broach a tectonic topic or reveal something delicate about yourself.

Look Within

Start by asking yourself the questions Esther lists off in class: "What am I intensely aware of as I prepare to have this conversation?" If you're about to say something that could arouse feelings of vulnerability, ask, "Why do I want to say this? What do I hope will happen? How do I want you to respond? And what would happen if I did not say it?"

Expect Awkwardness

Criticism can sting, or it can leave a permanent mark; either way, it tends to take you out of your comfort zone. And just as you have the right to speak your truth, your conversational counterpoint has the right to say, "Wow, this is painful, or "This is intense," or "This is unexpected," or "This is hard to swallow." If it's hard for you to say, it may be difficult for them to hear.

Lead With Positives

At the outset of the conversation, consider telling the other person everything you've loved about working or otherwise spending time with them. Yes, they will likely be waiting for the other shoe to drop, but starting with genuine praise can make your counterpart more receptive to the criticism to come.

Reflect and Connect

Both parties have surely survived some painful conversations. Explain that this one is uncomfortable for you as well, and let the other person know that you've been on the other side of the table, absorbing someone else's difficult feedback.

Consider Contact

If you're speaking to a romantic partner or someone with whom you've established a habit of consensual physical contact, think about placing a hand on their knee or shoulder. Physical touch lowers your heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormone levels.

Extend

Time can slow down or speed up during a painful exchange, making it difficult for the other person to say what they want to say. Make it clear to them that there will be other opportunities to explore anything they weren't able to say in the moment.

Consider the Context

You may be interacting with someone from another culture who has different ideas about criticism. Some might think you're being too gentle, while others might think you're being unduly harsh. Keep in mind everything you know about the other person as you choose your words.

Manage Your Expectations

When it comes to someone else's reaction to criticism, Esther says, "You can influence it, you can shape it; you can't control it." Try to prepare yourself for a gamut of reactions—and know that ultimately their reaction is out of your hands. Likewise, if you're revealing something about yourself, keep in mind that your counterpart might not respond the way you want them to.

The Hidden Depths of Conflict

What are you really fighting about?

A certain amount of conflict is essential to the well-being of a couple or group. But how can you avoid toxic, relationship-destroying fights? Is it even possible to disagree in a way that ultimately lowers the temperature and allows for resolution and healing?

As Esther sees it, the key to healthy conflict is understanding what you're really fighting about—identifying the essential and frequently unspoken hurt that lies beneath

the conflict. She cites American psychology professor and marriage expert Howard Markman, who explores the "hidden issues" beneath superficial skirmishes in his 1994 book *Fighting for Your Marriage*, coauthored with Scott Stanley and Susan Blumberg. The book identifies several such issues; Esther boils it down to three. Beneath them, according to Markman et al, lies a single, terminal layer: the need to feel that we matter.

Power & Priorities

Fights rooted in these issues tend to be about which participant has more agency, or which one is less reliant on the other. In many relationships, the person who says "no" has the power, according to *Fighting for Your Marriage*. The same goes for someone who withdraws from serious conversations about the relationship. Other experts claim that the person who cares the least in a relationship—or who is the most adept at feigning indifference—exerts the most power.

UNDERLYING QUESTIONS

- Do your priorities and opinions matter more than mine?
- Who gets to make decisions?
- Do you get to do things that aren't available to me?

Closeness & Connection

Intimacy and trust are foundational aspects of a healthy relationship, and so it's no wonder that conflicts can easily spiral out of control when one partner feels as if their tether to the other is fraying. Many marriage therapists believe that closeness and connection are related to how well a couple argues: When both partners agree to fight fair—by staying calm, focused, and receptive—conflict can actually deepen their connection.

UNDERLYING QUESTIONS

- Do you have my back?
- Can I rely on you?
- Do you think about me when we're apart?

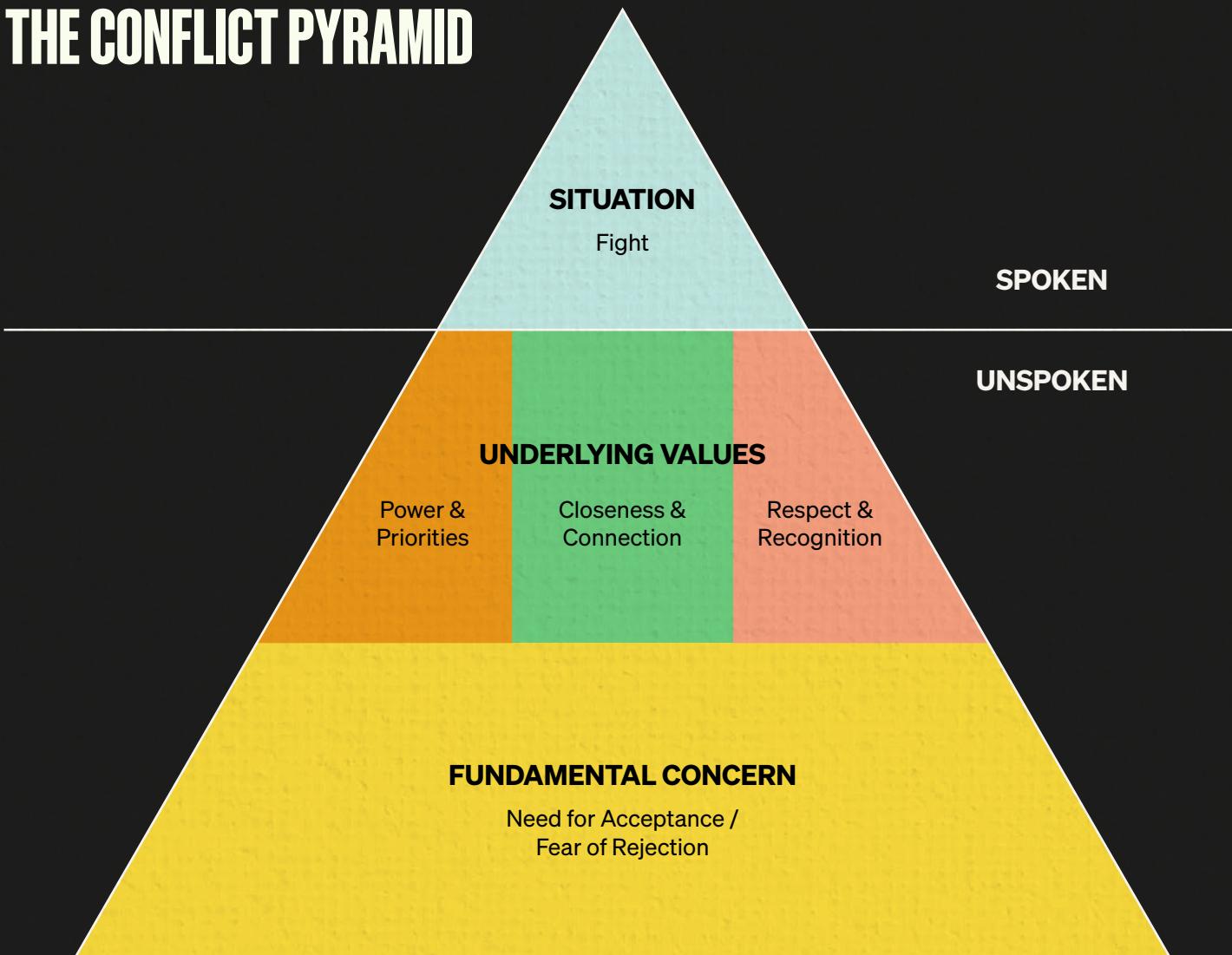
Respect & Recognition

At work, people want to feel affirmed for their individual contributions, and they can feel hurt when those contributions go unacknowledged. Likewise, successful marriages require a baseline of mutual validation in order to function properly. Without these crucial ingredients, fights can easily turn ugly, with one or both counterparts trying to insist upon their own basic legitimacy.

UNDERLYING QUESTIONS

- Am I valued as a person?
- Is my work appreciated?
- Do you think my opinions are legitimate?

THE CONFLICT PYRAMID



OVERALL SITUATIONAL ECOLOGY

Esther sees conflict not as a point on a graph (i.e., a static and contained incident), but as a curve ascending from a disagreement to an explosion. And when two people enter into conflict, they bring with them the conflictual mores they've absorbed throughout their lives. Fights can spiral out of con-

trol because the participants have different relationships with anger based on their backgrounds. Think of your partner or a close friend with whom you've argued: Were they taught to plunge into fights or avoid them like the plague? The more you know about your counterpart's history, the better your odds of discussing difficult topics without that curve going vertical.

THE FIGHT/FLEE MELEE

According to Esther, conflict between two people can be analyzed using three combinations of two archetypes. Perhaps one (or more) of them sounds familiar to you



Fight/Flee

Fighters are insistent. If the fleer (also known as the withdrawer or the avoider) says, “I don’t want to talk right now,” a fighter might follow them through the house. These folks have a hard time stopping until a topic has been thoroughly discussed. With a fleer, however, their strategy doesn’t work: The more they are pursued, the more they feel overwhelmed and crave distance. But it’s not only up to the fighter to lower the temperature. If a fleer is uncomfortable engaging in the moment, they have a responsibility to reengage later, so that they don’t put their partner in the position of waiting for a resolution that never comes. Postponing indefinitely will only worsen the fighter’s desperation.

Fight/Fight

Two fighters often fight in a way that Esther warns against: “kitchen sinking,” or bringing up events from months or years ago rather than staying working on the initial disagreement. In other words, a two-fighter confrontation escalates quickly and is difficult to resolve. Each participant spends the fight attacking or counter-attacking, even during moments that could be used for healing. Rather than building a pile of dirty dishes, Esther says, “pick a dish and stick to it.” Identify the specific issue you want to discuss, and focus on listening.

Flee/Flee

Another dysfunctional dynamic can occur when both partners shrink from conflict. A flee/flee pair may appear calm, but tensions can fester under the surface for days (or weeks, or even years) without resolution. Sometimes, after a prolonged period, one partner may tell a joke or propose an outing, temporarily easing tensions while failing to address or resolve the underlying issue. If this dynamic sounds familiar to you, see if you can surmount your desire to bury difficult emotions and instead move toward the conflict. Asking things like, “Can we chat about this now?” can prevent resentments from calcifying and allow for calm, productive conversations.

“What you want to say is something that invites the person into a dialogue.... ‘Please come toward me as I’m coming toward you.’”

—ESTHER

1. ASK FOR MORE

Instead of interrupting someone mid-sentence to say, “I don’t want to hear any more,” try waiting till they’re done and asking, “Is there more?” You’ll give the other person an opportunity to provide you with additional context, and you might even dispel some anger.

2. REFLECT

Let’s say you’re being admonished for some slapdash communication habits. You might respond, “What I’m hearing is that after I didn’t respond to your third text, you thought that I was rejecting you and decided I didn’t like you anymore. Did I get that right?” By summarizing what the other person is saying and venturing a guess as to the underlying emotions, you’ll make them feel better understood—and if you’re wrong, they’ll have an opportunity to correct you.

7. CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT

As you may have read in the “Difficult Conversation Checklist” (page 22), factoring in the cultural, relational, and personal background of your counterpart, whether you’re giving or receiving criticism, is crucial. If you know very little about your counterpart, simply remind yourself that the criticism is inevitably shaped by their relational résumé (page 13).

So You’ve Been Criticized

Whenever you’re receiving harsh feedback, these 7 steps can help you move from hurt to understanding

6. FIND WHAT’S TRUE

If you heard something amid the criticism that suggested an opportunity to grow, focus on that. Process the parts that feel true to you—without shaming or beating yourself up.

5. FILTER

If someone is dumping on you, try to respond calmly and without defensiveness. Then: Shake it off! Vent to a friend or go for a run. Don’t let poisonous, mean-spirited criticism seep into your consciousness.

3. TAKE YOUR TIME

You have the right to say, “Let me sit with this,” and then get back to them with a cooler head. The words “this is hard for me to hear” can also help calm and ground you. As Esther says, “Listening doesn’t instantly mean responding.”

4. EMPATHIZE

Sometimes people just need to be given the space to vent and think out loud. Their criticism could come from a place of exasperation with life itself. In that case, you can respond with some basic empathy: “I get it; that really sucks. Tell me more.”

PART III

Healing and Health

Clear communication, well-grounded trust, provocative stories—it's time to bring more eroticism into your life

3 TIPS FOR CLEARER CONVERSATIONS

The path between you and your intended audience (and vice versa) is strewn with peril, from unspoken biases to nuance-shredding technology. Here are a few simple techniques that can help ensure that everyone is heard

1. Make the Call

When it comes to clear communication, a strong case can be made that talk beats text any day. (Researchers who study mediated communication generally agree that the way different people interpret the same emoji can vary dramatically.) For Esther, “communication takes place at so many levels. Part of me is uttering words. Part of me is uttering sounds with an accent. Part of me is communicating with my hands.... Part of you is listening to me from a host of different settings I can’t even begin to imagine.”

So when clear communication really matters and a face-to-face encounter isn’t possible, Esther’s advice is simple: Pick up the phone. Communication is flattened by technologies like texting and instant messaging, as anyone who’s ever tried to express irony in these formats can attest. Hearing the emotion in someone’s voice, however, is priceless—and it might help you resolve conflicts much more efficiently than those supposedly time-saving technologies.

2. Check In

Take a minute to think about your current well-being. Did you eat a decent breakfast? Did you stay up reading the news until 2 a.m.? Is your back as knotty as a dog’s rope toy? All of these things may be affecting the way you communicate—and the same can be said about the person on the other side of the table. If you’re not getting the reaction you expected in a given conversation (especially one involving difficult feedback), resist the urge to repeat yourself ad nauseam. Instead, pause and ask your counterpart, “What did you hear me say?”

If it sounds like the vulnerable thing to do, that’s because it is. And if you inquire—earnestly, with genuine curiosity—about how you’re being perceived, the other person will likely open up. No need to repeat yourself or succumb to anxiety about whether you said something the “right” way. Simply ask the question and really pay attention to the answer.

3. Listen, Don’t Solve

It can be hard to listen to someone’s problems and not immediately offer solutions. What’s your purpose as a friend, a romantic partner, or a valued colleague if not to give advice, right? But when you jump into action rather than listen—because listening feels too passive or because you urgently want their pain to go away—you can end up doing more harm than good.

People need the time and space to process their emotions. Effective listening—receiving and reflecting information in a way that validates the speaker’s perspective, even if you disagree—is an act of love. It’s enough on its own. You don’t need a solution (and perhaps there isn’t one). By holding space for someone in a vulnerable moment and validating their emotions, you’re providing much more than someone who interrupts with their own ideas.

MISCOMMUNICATION IN ACTION

Why we get one another wrong, and what we can do about it

You don't need to play a game of telephone for meanings to be misconstrued, motivations to be distorted, and facts to be fumbled. The consequences are both personal and financial: In a 2022 poll of American business leaders, 72 percent said their teams struggled to communicate effectively over the past year, and 82 percent were concerned about communication in remote or hybrid working environments. These leaders estimated that teams lose the equivalent of nearly an entire workday each week due to poor communication.

But such anxieties go far beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Between any speaker and listener, information must traverse what Esther describes as “the land of expectations, the land of assumptions, the land of interpretations, [and] the land of misunderstandings about the meaning of words.” Don’t despair: This labyrinthine journey needn’t end in broken hearts or tanking revenues. Esther likens miscommunication to fluffing a note when learning a new instrument, and she urges you to think of improving your communication as a process of attunement—of both hearing and playing a note accurately through trial and error.

Here are three common ways our signals can get crossed and how to get them straightened out.

Inference

This tendency involves drawing conclusions, based on logic and available evidence, to fill in the gaps of our understanding. But while inferences can help us make sense of what we’re hearing, they can also lead to misunderstandings, especially in relationships involving someone who’s highly sensitive to criticism. Even the most innocuous comments can come across as insulting to someone who’s been conditioned to read between the lines and assume the worst.

You did
an incredible
job today.

Oh, so I usually
do a terrible job?

WHAT WENT WRONG: In this case, the responder’s relational history is likely distorting their perception of what seems like genuine praise. If they don’t feel the speaker has always been honest with them, or if they were hurt by some devious behavior in the past, they might infer that the compliment is actually backhanded.

HOW TO MAKE IT RIGHT: Ensure that your tone and body language reflect the positive words you’re saying. More broadly, consider giving consistent praise to someone whose internal monologue tends to be self-critical.

Overexplaining

An attempt to be helpful or ensure that you're understood can come across as patronizing. If someone has ever shot you a look as you've given them instructions, you may have overexplained.

Great, let's set a meeting for tomorrow. Do you know how to do that? First, you're going to want to open Google Calendar and then click the '+' button, then type in a title for the meeting. Make sure you're paying attention to time zones—some people forget this! Oh, and remember to...

Does this person think I've never used a computer before?

WHAT WENT WRONG: While under-explaining can lead to confusion, its opposite can make people feel infantilized.

HOW TO MAKE IT RIGHT: You don't need to say things multiple times or drill down on every single step, especially if you're working with someone you trust. Instead, ask yourself: What does this person absolutely need to know, and how can I use the clearest possible language to explain myself? You can also check in with the other person before plunging into an exhaustive explanation.

Cultural Miscommunication

The cultural items on one's relational résumé often factor into garbled conversations. Consider the following exchange: The speaker comes from a culture that values understatement and irony, while the listener's culture prizes direct speech and unapologetic self-esteem.

That is...an original point of view.

They love my idea!

WHAT WENT WRONG: In many parts of the world, society places social harmony at the center of cultural life. "The focus is not on you stating your thoughts but on intuiting how other people are feeling about the situation at the moment," Esther says. In others, individuality is a central characteristic. These and countless other cultural tendencies end up on people's relational résumés—and can easily get overlooked in virtually any type of relationship.

HOW TO MAKE IT RIGHT: In order to pick up on subtext with coworkers from across the globe, first identify and acknowledge differences in your styles of communication, perhaps by chatting about the cultural differences they've experienced at your workplace. Note that, depending on where someone is from, their culture may also be more or less comfortable with interrupting, a hierarchical division of labor, and blunt criticism.

Building and Rebuilding Trust

4 things to consider when you're cultivating a relationship—or trying to salvage one

Trust is one of those elemental concepts that can get more complicated the more you think about it. Esther asks, “Is it a feeling? Is it a condition? Is it an outcome? Is it a state? What is trust?” Support from a friend during difficult times, the sense of security a romantic partner can offer, a “trust fall” into the arms of your teammates—all of these exemplify trust. It can be sensed in the body, felt in the heart, encoded in the brain, and braided into the soul. In making itself so powerfully felt across so many states of being, trust also leaves a big impression when it’s absent. Esther has some insights on how to build it, and how to recover it when it’s been lost.

1. The Trust/Risk Equation

By trusting someone, you’re inevitably taking a risk: You believe enough in the person to hand them some responsibility, and you allow the possibility of betrayal, disappointment, and hurt. A big question here is whether you see trust as a prerequisite to risk, or vice versa. “On the spectrum between trust and risk,” Esther says, “do you see yourself as someone who needs to trust first, or do you see yourself more as someone who is more quick at taking risks?” Striking that balance depends on the individual, but by asking yourself these questions, you

may discover that your level of trust doesn’t align with your own best interests. For example, “If you are a person who finds yourself too often instantly trusting people—you open your house to them, you open your heart to them, you open your wallet to them...you’re trusting too soon.”

2. Micro Risks

Striking the balance between risk and trust presents a catch-22: To take big risks, you need existing trust—but how can you develop trust, which often requires some degree of familiarity with the other party, without taking risks? For one, don’t bite off more than you can chew. “In a relationship, there are certain small steps that we take that actually confirm or disconfirm the development of trust,” she says. By taking so-called micro risks with someone, you can gauge how much trust to invest in them without overexposing yourself if things go wrong. Bear in mind, though, that what may count as a micro risk for one person could be an overwhelming experience for another.

3. Acceptance

“Ruptures exist in relationships all the time,” Esther says. Those ruptures can be forgettable—a pang of resentment caused by a housemate’s unwashed dishes, for example. But a trespass on the scale of a secret romantic affair or

the embezzlement of company funds “breaks the entire worldview” of the people on the receiving end. Meaningful and even lasting relationships are subject to such moments, and accepting that fact can be good for everyone involved. What’s up to the individual is setting a sustainable level of trust violation.

4. Cracked Plates

Imagine a serious breach of trust. Once the dust settles, Esther says, “the question is always asked: ‘Can you repair trust that is broken?’” What helps to answer that question is to ground yourself in reality: Who are you now, and how have your past relationships conditioned you to respond to these moments? It then becomes possible to decide: Do the cracks in the relationship render it unusable, or is the relationship worth mending? Using the metaphor of a dropped but mended plate, Esther vividly evokes a relationship that has survived a violation of trust: “You will always see the crack, but you can use the plate for a whole lifetime.” Of course, sometimes the plate shatters beyond repair—but trust, Esther says, “is quite malleable for some of us.”

ASSIGNMENT

Practice Not-So-Small Talk

Inviting connection, one story at a time

"A good question is an invitation," Esther says. These invitations don't assume; they warmly inquire. They can be probing, playful, provocative, philosophical—sometimes all at once. Often, they shift the power to the recipient. "Where should we begin?" is one that Esther has long employed.

Good questions can lead to greater intimacy within an existing relationship, and they can help you cultivate closeness with folks you don't know so well—like potential clients, new coworkers, and acquaintances who could become friends or lovers. They can also be like a splash of cold water to the face, invigorating the system and prompting fresh insights.

Here are fourteen questions and prompts—both work friendly and decidedly not—adapted from Esther's card game, *Where Should We Begin? A Game of Stories* (learn more at game.EsterPerel.com). Stories are bridges that connect us to other people, and a game is a playful container that allows us to take risks with the stories we tell. So read on, and let the stories begin.

SAFE FOR WORK

- What's a dream you've never shared?
- What's a rule you secretly love to break?
- What keeps you awake at night?
- "I can't believe I got away with..."
- What's a lie that you're tempted to tell about yourself?
- What's a text message you fantasize about receiving?
- Who's someone who doesn't know how much they've impacted your life?

NOT SAFE FOR WORK

- What's the worst date you've ever been on?
- Who taught you the most about love?
- What first comes to mind when you hear the word *forbidden*?
- "I wish someone had told me _____ about sex."
- "My guilty pleasure is..."
- What's your most embarrassing sexual mishap?
- What did you learn about love from your parents?

A dream I've
never shared ...

Where Should
We Begin?

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES



Esther's relational intelligence thought exercises

Self-Awareness

(See "Build Your Relational Résumé" on page 13.)

Boundaries

How would you describe the boundaries in your relationships with your partner, your coworkers, your friends, and your boss? Were the boundaries around your family unit permeable, flexible, or rigid? How so?

Ask yourself: "Do I see myself, at this moment in my life, as someone who could loosen or strengthen my boundaries a little? Is it about opening up and therefore allowing things to enter, or is it about creating more of a container, more of a boundary, so that I can protect what is inside and keep certain things on the outside?"

Circle back to your partner or the partners you've picked over time. Is there good complementarity? Is this a place that helps you do the thing or things that you need to do in your own experience of growth, or is this an environment that strengthens your defenses or coping strategies?

Power Dynamics

Take a little scan of the important relationships in your life, and ask yourself, "What is my experience of power in my relationships? Do I feel that I have agency, power, initiative, action? Do I have the ability to express myself freely? Do I feel that I'm often at the hands of other people and their power over me? Have I switched back and forth? And what has

caused those changes?" Look at the connections between power and dependence, between power and trust, between power and betrayals. Write the stories down. Get a bit of a profile. This is going to give you a host of information about how you have experienced power—the power of others and your own.

The Roles You Play

Ask yourself, "What roles do I play in my life—peacemaker, diplomat, truth teller, cheerleader, responsible one, disciplinarian, caregiver, provider, group therapist, icebreaker, planner, anchor?" And now ask yourself, "Is there a good diversity of roles?" Do you find that certain roles don't make sense anymore? Is there a change that you would like to create vis-à-vis those roles? Is there a role that you wish you could play more or less often?

There is a lot of power in knowing the roles that you play, so really take your time to examine with whom you play which roles, how you've come to play them, and how you feel about the roles you play. Were you assigned these roles? Did you take them on? Did you stumble into them? What do you think would happen if you didn't play your part? What would be the consequences of change?

You may find out that you have been playing a role for a long time that you don't want to play anymore. If so, take this as information, and consider making some decisions. You

may realize that you have been living with an inauthentic sense of yourself because you were doing things that no longer feed you, meet you, represent you. In that sense, you're in the wrong role. To change a relationship often means to change the role you play in the relationship.

Difficult Conversations

Think of one to three difficult conversations that you have had or need to have—including conversations with yourself. Ask yourself: What stands in the way? What am I intensely aware of as I'm about to have this conversation?

Conflict

Think of a significant conflict you've experienced. What is the one thing that you wish you had not said? What is one conflictual situation that you wish you could do differently? And what happens to you in your interactions with others when they are like you and when they are on the other side of you? Remember that underneath conflict lie three dominant themes: power, trust, and value.

Effective Listening

Think of a situation where you did not feel heard, where you felt that the quality of listening of the person or the people you were talking to was poor. What happened? What did you do? What did you say? What did you not say? And how did they react?

Now think about a situation where

you wished you had listened better, where you didn't pay attention, or you cut the other person off, or you counter-argued, or you went on the defensive, or you went ballistic. What was that like for you afterward? What do you think happened with the other person, and what did it do to the relationship?

If you can regroup with the person with whom the exchange happened, go to the next level and discuss it with them. Did you accurately guess what happened to them, or is their experience different from what you imagined? Are they able to understand what it's like for you when you don't feel heard or when you don't listen to them?

Trust and Risk

On the spectrum between trust and risk, do you see yourself as someone who needs to trust first and then take risks, or is the act of engaging with risk what builds your trust? Take time to reflect, and then consider discussing with those closest to you.

What are some risks that you wish you would take? What are the trust issues that stand in the way? What do you imagine would happen?

What's your fear?

Try a small step. Don't wait until you're not afraid to do it. Go with the fear; let it lead you. It is understandable, normal, and common. You're doing it while you are afraid because it's only in the doing and in the positive experience of it that the fear will diminish.

Take the Lead

Gather a group of acquaintances (around a dinner table, perhaps), and ask everyone to respond to some broad, open-ended prompts. Go to

the "Not-so-Small Talk" assignment on page 32 for examples, or come up with prompts of your own. You're encouraged to try this exercise with people you know well.

Make One Change

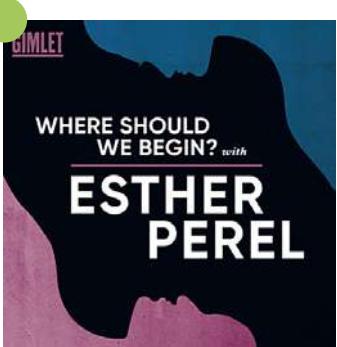
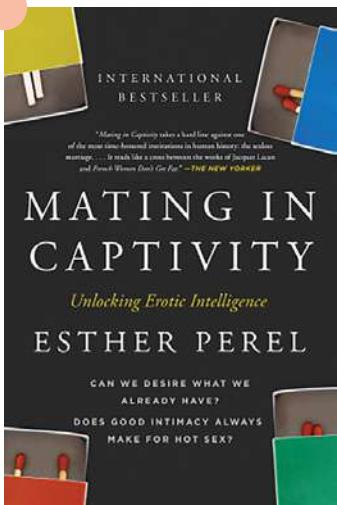
Imagine a line on the floor, and ask yourself some questions about your relationships. Examples: "How do I feel about my relationships?" "How do I feel about how I engage with relationships?" "How do I feel about my relationships today?" On one end, the relationships feel good, integrated; you might think, "I feel like I handle them well. They're an important part of my life. They're satisfying. They're meaningful, juicy, et cetera." At the other end, picture the relationships that seem dismal, difficult, and painful.

What's one change you would like to make? For those of you who need small risks, do a micro step (refer to "Establishing and Reestablishing Trust" on page 31). If you feel you're ready for a big step, a big risk, go for it. Again: What's one change that you would like to make on the continuum toward more meaningful and satisfying relationships? Now go do it.



LEARN MORE

Esther's key works, plus an extensive reading list that she curated just for you



Esther's Books

- The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity** (2017)
Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence (2006)

Esther's Podcasts

- How's Work?*** (launched 2019)
Where Should We Begin? (launched 2017)
- *Episodes of *How's Work?* excerpted in class
Season 2, Episode 10: "We Sell Happiness but We're Miserable"
Season 2, Episode 5: "Couples Therapy With My Boss"
Season 1, Episode 1: "The Break-Up"

Esther's TED Talks

- "Rethinking Infidelity...A Talk for Anyone Who Has Ever Loved" (2015)
"The Secret to Desire in a Long-Term Relationship" (2013)

Esther's South by Southwest Talks

- "What Business Leaders Can Learn About Workplace Dynamics From Couples Therapy" (2019)
"Modern Love and Relationships" (2018)

Esther's Game

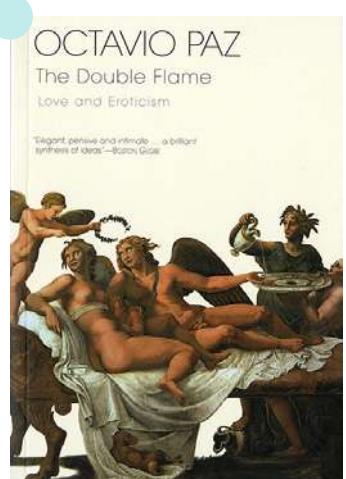
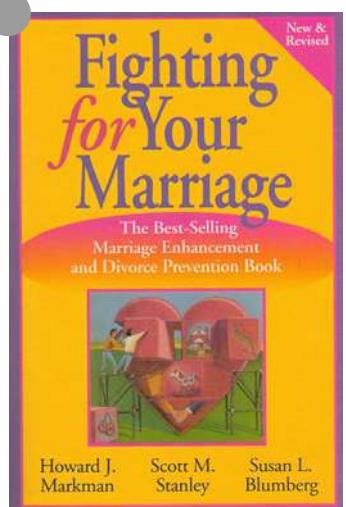
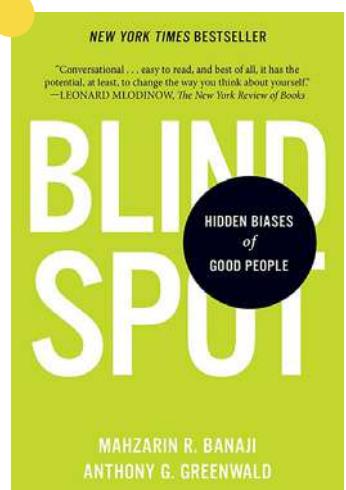
- Where Should We Begin? A Game of Stories** (2021)

Recommended Reading

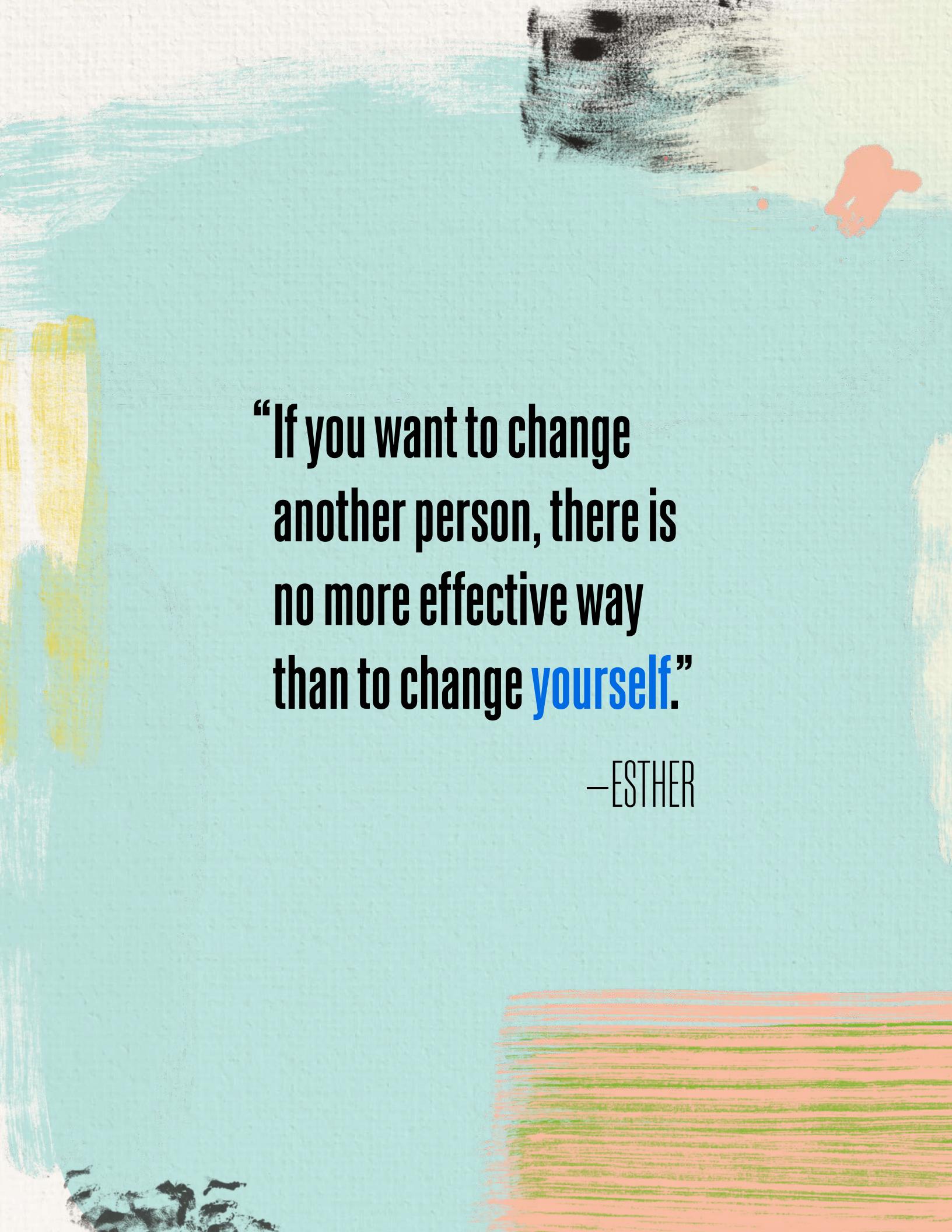
- Us: Getting Past You and Me to Build a More Loving Relationship** by Terrence Real (2022)
The Distance Cure: A History of Teletherapy by Hannah Zeavin (2021)
Baby Bomb: A Relationship Survival Guide for New Parents by Kara Hoppe and Stan Tatkin (2021)
So Tell Me About the Last Time You Had Sex: Laying Bare and Learning to Repair Our Love Lives by Ian Kerner (2021)
Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski (2020)
This Too Shall Pass: Stories of Change, Crisis and Hopeful Beginnings by Julia Samuel (2020)
Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma and Consensual Nonmonogamy by Jessica Fern (2020)
When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress by Gabor Maté (2019)
Grief Works: Stories of Life, Death, and Surviving by Julia Samuel (2019)
How to Fix a Broken Heart by Guy Winch (illustrations by Henn Kim; 2018)

- Better Sex Through Mindfulness: How Women Can Cultivate Desire** by Lori A. Brotto (2018)
- Why Won't You Apologize? Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts** by Harriet Lerner (2017)
- Who Can You Trust? How Technology Brought Us Together and Why It Might Drive Us Apart** by Rachel Botsman (2017)
- The All-or-Nothing Marriage: How the Best Marriages Work** by Eli J. Finkel (2017)
- Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change and Thrive in Work and Life** by Susan David (2016)
- Sacred Stress: A Radically Different Approach to Using Life's Challenges for Positive Change** by George R. Faller and Heather Wright (2016)
- The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma** by Bessel van der Kolk (2014)
- Emotional First Aid: Practical Strategies for Treating Failure, Rejection, Guilt, and Other Everyday Psychological Injuries** by Guy Winch (2013)
- Collective Trauma, Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster** by Jack Saul (2013)
- Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People** by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald (2013)
- The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples** by John M. Gottman (2011)
- Boundaries: A New Way to Look at the World** by Ernest Hartmann (2011)

- Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find—and Keep—Love** by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller (2010)
- Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow** by Elizabeth Lesser (2004)
- Tell Me No Lies: How to Stop Lying to Your Partner—and Yourself—in the 4 Stages of Marriage** by Ellyn Bader and Peter T. Pearson with Judith D. Schwartz (2001)
- The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are** by Daniel J. Siegel (1999)
- Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion** by Marshall B. Rosenberg (1999)
- We Love Each Other, But... A Leading Couples Therapist Shares the Simple Secrets That Will Help Save Your Relationship** by Ellen Wachtel (1999)
- The Erotic Mind: Unlocking the Inner Sources of Sexual Passion and Fulfillment** by Jack Morin (1996)
- Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving Lasting Love** by Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg (1994)
- The Double Flame: Love and Eros** by Octavio Paz (1993)
- You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation** by Deborah Tannen (1990)
- A Lover's Discourse: Fragments** by Roland Barthes (1978)
- Man's Search for Meaning** by Viktor E. Frankl (1946)







**“If you want to change
another person, there is
no more effective way
than to change yourself.”**

—ESTHER

Credits

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The Gossip (1922)

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Industry (1934)

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Friends (1944)

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A Prince and His Consort (ca. 1790)

Purchase and partial gift from the
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and Sackler Galleries

Buddy System (1973), Space Friends (1971), and Space Push (1972) by Tom O'Hara

Courtesy the Smithsonian Institution;
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Untitled painting by Georgia Mills Jessup

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