

**Culture Call Life & Arts**

## Esther Perel shares tips for coping in a pandemic

The psychotherapist and host of the hit podcast 'Where Should We Begin?' on mental health during coronavirus



Esther Perel, psychotherapist and presenter of 'Where Should We Begin?' © Marc Patrick/BFA/REX/Shutterstock

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Esther Perel is an unusual psychotherapist. She gives people tools to understand their psychology, of course. She also offers the insights of a sociologist, providing big-picture analysis on how cultural shifts affect us, and of a life coach, giving direct and practical advice for everyday problems. Her podcast series *Where Should We Begin?* invites its millions of listeners into real couples' therapy sessions; it has now pivoted, like most things in this new reality, to help couples struggling in quarantine.

Perel is a useful person to speak to at a time like this, to help put our fears and emotions around coronavirus into a broader context and give us strategies to cope. This week I spoke with her for an episode of the FT's culture podcast [Culture Call](#), which I co-host. Below are some of her key points, but I recommend you listen. You can hear the full conversation on [FT.com](#), [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), [Acast](#) or wherever you get your podcasts.

## One of the hardest things about this crisis, Perel says, has been its speed

In order to achieve “traumatic growth” — in which traumatic experiences cause us to “rearrange our priorities and restore a new sense of meaning or purpose” — we normally require things to happen in stages: “There is a warning stage, a planning stage, the actual onslaught and the aftermath. Even with war, you see it coming. You know there are armies being called in.” With coronavirus, Perel points out, there was no “warning stage” (or at least, many didn’t recognise it as such): we simply went straight into the “planning” and the “onslaught” stage.

## Also difficult is the prolonged uncertainty

“That’s what’s making people so rattled,” says Perel. We can’t tell ourselves, “if I hunker down, the tsunami will pass,” because we don’t know how long it will last. She explains that “We need to find ways to modulate our fears. It’s normal to be anxious, but we have to make sure that we don’t become panicked.” Perel advises that we don’t spend all day watching the crisis unfold on TV — and to remember to find laughter, pleasure and social support (more on that below).

## In times of crisis, our dormant memories and skills are activated

In our conversation, Perel and I discuss how different people make sense of this feeling of lack of safety. Perel explains that people who have experienced chaos, scarcity or loss “have tremendous skills at this moment. They know this world.” Others may know it from their heritage.

We discuss inherited trauma — Perel’s parents were Auschwitz survivors and [my grandparents](#) survived the Armenian genocide — and how these histories can give us an epigenetic reservoir of resilience that we can pass from generation to generation. “This is an amazing time to tell stories to your children about the life of their ancestors, their families, what their grandparents went through,” she says. “They have been through other crises and survived.”

## Social support will help more than anything else

Perel recommends creating “community support and resilience” — which might mean putting other adults on the phone with your kids when they’re not listening to you (“We are much more resourceful when it’s not our own children”), or calling friends you haven’t spoken to in years. She also suggests you talk while doing things: “Talk while you’re cooking or while you’re taking a walk. Then it feels like you are living with other people rather than stopping your life to go check in with people, and freezing yourself at the screen.”

Perel also recommends that when you do talk to friends, make sure it's not only about the pandemic; she's in a movie club and finds it a necessary escape from discussing the news.

## To help others, acknowledge the fear

Self-blame and anger are normal. They stem from, as Perel puts it, “a culture in which people think that they are responsible for their destiny.” We believe we alone are responsible for our successes — and our failures. That makes the feelings common in this time, of powerlessness and failure, difficult to accept.

### Culture Call podcasts



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“It throws people into states of depression and despair — or rage, impulsivity and irritability,” Perel says. “But underneath is the feeling of helplessness. The sadness, the loss, the grief, the inability to protect and provide for the people you love.”

One way to help another who is blaming themselves is to let them acknowledge the sadness or fear under the anger. Remind them how they would treat a friend who just lost their job: with compassion, not blame.

## To help yourself, do a stress test

In times like these, Perel recommends asking yourself every day: “How am I feeling? Then, name it. Not just, ‘I feel uncomfortable.’ Where do I feel it in my body? ‘I feel a tight chest’.” This can be helpful, especially for people who don't always have words for their feelings. She also recommends a technique therapists use with children to manage anger: identifying whether you're in the green, orange or red zone. Green is neutral, calm; orange is anxious and revved up; red means you're ready to explode.

When you're in orange or red, it's useful to know what will help you regulate your mood. Some people need to burst the energy (try going for a run, or a cold shower) while others need stillness and quiet (try taking a series of deep breaths). “If you live with people and you are in red, you can tell them, ‘I'm in the red zone, stay away from me,’” Perel recommends, “And isolate yourself, if need be, in a space for 20 minutes.”

## And finally — wherever you can, try to find pleasure in the midst of crisis

“It’s OK to celebrate life in the midst of this pandemic,” Perel insists. “People have done it for centuries. It’s what has kept the human spirit going.” We can feel guilty about enjoying aspects of quarantine but, as she puts it, “It actually is essential. Because the more you have, the more you can give to somebody who has less. You will have more energy, and you can be more generous and compassionate towards others. And that chain will hold us.”

*Listen to the full interview at [ft.com/culture-call](https://www.ft.com/culture-call)*

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