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Helen Walters: Hi Esther Perel, thank you so much for joining us and I want to get right to it. So we're more than a year into this pandemic now. And I think one constant, whether we're really acknowledging it or not, has been heightened stress levels, shall we say. So I'm sure you've seen this in your practice and in your work. And I'm curious, what are you recommending to people who are coming to you wanting to know how to regulate stress effectively?

00:35

Esther Perel: So, hello, Helen, here it is. You know, we're living in a time of existential anguish, of isolation, of universal grief, economic insecurity, prolonged uncertainty. And we have a tendency to call all this feelings stress. But stress is multidimensional. Researchers Susan David and Elissa Epel emphasize the importance of having to break it down into parts so that they become manageable. We have despair. We have anxiety, exhaustion, sadness, anger, irritability. All these feelings are part of stress. And when they are named and framed, we can better regulate them and deal with them. Prolonged uncertainty at this moment is that notion that we are uncertain, but we also don't know how long this will last. This is not your typical disaster where you have a warning and a planning and an onslaught and a post. We are in it and we don't know for how long. We experience a sense of ambiguous loss where things are gone but still there, and it really prevents a sense of mourning. Buildings are standing. They are physically present, the office buildings, but they are emotionally hollow. Family members are in nursing homes or in other countries. They are emotionally, psychologically very, very close to us, but they are physically absent.

02:08

And that sense of ambiguous loss is most exemplified in what we are experiencing at this moment as the loss of Eros. And the pandemic gripped the world. And then the pendulum that swings between freedom and security has snapped off its hinge. There is a constant, extreme emphasis on safety and it cordons off. We avoid the spaces where we can experience happenstance, chance encounters, mystery, surprise, all those elements of Eros that create a sense of aliveness and vibrancy in our lives. That is the place where creativity and curiosity also meet.

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So what are some of the things that people can do once we understand stress in this way is to create routines and rituals and boundaries. Routines to separate the different activities, the different roles and responsibilities that we inhabit, rituals because they create sacred time and sacred space and boundaries, because they create delineation, demarcation, borders, and those are really necessary for us to experience a sense of groundedness and structure.

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And the second thing that really helps with stress as well is actually to create space for Eros. There's a reason people at this moment are seeing plants grow, seeing bread rise, creating things, making things out of nothing. Because when you see life emerge in front of you or something change in front of you, it functions as an antidote to deadness and to stress.

03:57

HW: It's true. I can't tell you how many of my friends have adopted puppies in this time. Everyone's a dog owner.

04:06

EP: You know, we usually thrive on this casual sharing of personal stories with coworkers or going to a place for lunch that we hadn't gone to and wanted to explore or talking to a kind stranger on the commute. All of these enlivening moments of our lives, surprise moments of our lives, are currently not there. So the puppy, it really gives us all of that, you know, a pet amongst us. So not just any pet, you know, an animal, a child. Those are natural sources of surprise and mystery and spontaneity. They bring the Eros right in front of us.

04:43

HW: I love that because I think it's such a good analysis of where we are and what we've all been experiencing. I think the flip side of this almost is there's basically no such thing as control. Right? And so I'm curious, you know, for those of us who used to have a life that we understood in some ways -- so we had the office, we had the home, we had these places where we could go and we kind of understood how the world was structured -- with the collapse of those roles and the collapse of those boundaries, how do you regain a sense of yourself in this new world and what are your tips for kind of establishing the boundaries, like these new boundaries?

05:26

EP: We are not working from home, we are working with home and we are sometimes sitting on one chair. I was doing a session for "How's Work?" with a newsroom, and one of the people was talking about how she has a new baby. She sits at home, she's nursing. She's the mother. She's the colleague. She's the manager. She's the reporter. She's the spouse. She's the daughter of. She's the friend. She has all those roles coming together, merged in one place, ever without having to leave her dining room table. And the mute button is basically her only boundary left between one world and the other. So what has she lost? She lost the sense of community, of collective support that she gets at work, the ability to commiserate. She lost being a woman who is a mother who

goes to work and is a working mother because now she's actually working and mothering at the same time, the whole day in the same place. That's a very different experience.

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And for her and every working parent at this moment, it is essential to communicate boundaries with partners. We were talking yesterday -- and with colleagues as well. We were talking yesterday. Your child came into the room and basically you notified, I am home, I am alone, my son is here and he may show up. And indeed he did. And there is something very different when we don't try to hide our multiple realities, but we actually integrate them in the midst of the situations that we are in.

07:03

Carving out a special sacred space, physical space to delineate the separations, I think at this point is extremely important. That involves, you know, even changing clothes. We are usually very localized people and we change, we move to another place. We have a ritual of preparing the things that we need to put in our bag, to go to the gym, to go to the restaurant, to go to see friends or family. None of these markers are currently there to give us that embodied sense of experience. We are exhausted, basically. We use the word a lot, but we don't always attribute exactly where that exhaustion is coming from and it comes from the loss of these delineations and demarcations, these boundaries that are very, very grounding to us.

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HW: I don't know if you saw that video of the dad who was on telly with the BBC and his kid came in and then another kid came in. He kind of strong-armed the kid out of the way. And I think what's beautiful about this is that we have, you know, I think that we are all learning how to roll with this. And, you know, now my son will come and join a meeting and everyone's just like waves and is like, "Hi Jack," and, you know, and then he gets bored and wanders off again. And that's kind of, you know, in a way, I think that's a really beautiful outcome. I mean, it's a very lucky outcome because I'm very lucky to be able to work at home and have that kind of fortunate aspect of my life. But I just think it's a beautiful outcome.

08:32

EP: But you know, what's also very striking is that you're not trying to hide it and to whisk him away. In a way I think, you know, we are integrating your home life, your reality as a mother alone at home with your child who is also working as part of our conversation. And I think that this for me reflects a very interesting change in this moment, which is a kind of an anti-small talk. You know, people are literally speaking about the things that they usually try to keep

outside of the office door. We usually bring our whole self to work. Right now, we are bringing our whole work to our personal world and that merging is creating a very different set of conversations as well. And those conversations are part of the collective resilience that helps us deal with the loss of control, the prolonged uncertainty and all the other stressors that we mentioned.

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HW: So how does this affect our ability to feel productive? I'm curious about that feeling of, like -- at the end of the day I just did a really -- I nailed that project, so I did that really well. And I feel really good about that. I'm going to close the door and I'm going to leave and I'm going to go home again.

09:47

EP: I'm going to frame this a little differently. Zygmunt Bauman, the sociologist, basically made this very, very apt observation. In abnormal circumstances, when people have abnormal responses, that is actually normal. So this notion of wanting to continue to be how we used to be is one of the things that we need to release. We -- this is a time where we try to face our uncertainty by being even more productive. And so we end up working seven days instead of understanding that what really will help us get through this is a sense of mass mutual reliance, a deep sense of interdependence that we are in a shared experience and that collectively we need to go through this. That in itself will help us remain productive, but not the amount of hours that we are putting in or the notion that we have an outcome that is as good as it would have been if none of this was happening because it is happening. We can't pretend that none of this is happening.

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And I think that when we are able to acknowledge our reality and then respond accordingly, it actually A -- makes us more productive, B -- makes us less stressful and C -- maintains our sense of connection, which ultimately is our greatest source of resilience for dealing with this kind of situation.

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HW: What are you hearing from managers about how they're dealing with this in terms of their people and their organizations and how are you helping them?

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EP: So what I hear from managers are the same stresses that we've just mentioned, is a new emphasis on not just on relationships and the importance of relational intelligence in the workplace, but of mental health and wellness, of an integration of an entire emotional vocabulary that involves empathy and trust and psychological safety, at the same time as we are discussing performance indicators. What I bring to the conversation is really how do you create these anti-small talk exchanges, conversations with a team, and every team has a different culture for that. But it is about helping people, inviting people to talk about how the big events that are happening at this point in the world are also manifesting in their personal lives.

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And I give them the example of my own startup, of EPGM, where we on Friday have literally shrunk the length of the meeting and have taken a much longer time to check in with each other, about self-care, about the divisions that take place in our own families, about what have been the resources that have been most useful. But it has become really a resource pool that has deepened the connections and that has also fostered the resilience and has had very clear effects on the productivity. So I shared that with the companies that I work with and talk about stress and boundaries and communications so that it helps people understand what they are going through, but particularly that this is a shared collective experience they're going through and not just something that is happening to them alone.

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Acute stress or pandemics fracture and create divisions because uncertainty leads people to want to confront the loss of their sense of mastery and certainty. And so it often invites a kind of polarization about the worldview itself. To create a shared vocabulary counters all of that. And that is primarily what I do at this moment when I work with companies or cofounders or managers, is to -- what you were saying before, it's to name it, to frame it, to distill it, and then to be creative in how to respond to it.

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HW: I'm curious for your thoughts about what does this mean for the future of work and how we should prepare for it.

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EP: Look, there's a lot of discussions about the future of work that centers on the remote versus in-person and all of those things. I think for me, what this pandemic has really taught us is that

relational intelligence is not just a soft skill for the workplace, that mental health is really at the center at this moment of how we show up at work. Work is a place today where we seek belonging, purpose, development, and way beyond just putting food on the table. It is an identity economy. And those fundamental existential needs that people are bringing in, psychological needs that people are bringing to work are part of how we are going to redefine the future of the workplace.

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There are tendencies to talk about it in relation to technology, to AI, and all those things are really important. But because of the technology, because of the AI, because of all the loss of the human touch, the conversation about how we maintain humanity, how we maintain social connection, how we allow people to show up -- You know, people always say, I want to bring my whole self to work. And I say we already do. All the skills that we cultivate in our lives and in our childhood, growing up, they show up with us at work and this moment has really made that beyond clear.

15:21

HW: Esther Perel, it's always a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much for sharing your insights with us.

15:26

EP: It's a pleasure for me to be here. Thank you.