

Center for Humane Technology | *Your Undivided Attention* Podcast
[Esther Perel on Artificial Intimacy](#)

Esther Perel: I go from one technology conference to another. I can tell you the word relationship is never mentioned, never mentioned. There are moonshots about everything, environment, education, health, transportation, you name it. Nobody ever is looking at a moonshot for relationships. And yet all these technologies are profoundly affecting how we relate to each other, how we relate to ourselves.

Tristan Harris: That's famous psychotherapist, Esther Perel, who's the *New York Times* bestselling author of the books, the *State of Affairs*, and *Mating in Captivity*. She's had celebrated TED Talks that have garnered more than 20 million views and is also the host of the two popular podcasts, *Where Should We Begin?* and *How's Work?* Esther and I have been going back and forth for the last 10 years about how technology has been distorting the way that human beings form relationships and distorting the way that we gain or lose intimacy. And what we're about to get into is how do we deal with technology that is distorting our relationships and our intimacy? What would it look like for technology to foster meaningful connection and meaningful intimacy and distinguish between the fake kind and the real kind? Who are we to say what fake and real actually is?

So why would we do an episode just about relationships? In the AI dilemma talk that Aza and I gave, we talked about how loneliness is a national security risk. As you see in the United States, the number of shooters and shootings going up and innocent people dead from these kinds of events. Are the people that are doing these shootings in healthy relationships? Do they feel deep belonging or do they feel mass alienation? How many of them had healthy romantic relationships? Oftentimes when we talk about the future of technology, we talk about how AI can solve climate change and give people mental health benefits, absent the word relationships. How does the ground underneath our feet that depends on this very deep, interconnected structure of relationships, how does that help us answer questions like loneliness? Loneliness isn't some disease to be cured by having a person interact with a chatbot.

It's how does technology steer us towards the kinds of things that sow the deep interconnected relationships that create a healthy society? Can you have social trust in a society if you don't have relationships? Now, this isn't just some nostalgia for a bygone era. We have to figure out and celebrate all the things that the virtualization of our lives by AI, by technology, by smartphones, by being able to connect with each other around the world in different time zones. We need to be able to celebrate the good things that come from that. But we also have to live in bright relationship between how those things land in a body. Waking up, opening your eyes, taking a deep breath, seeing the sunshine, and living the day. Esther Perel, welcome to *Your Undivided Attention*.

Esther Perel: Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

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Tristan Harris: So it's kind of hard to have this conversation in almost an artificially formal way because you and I know each other for quite some time. I think we met, I believe it was 2013. I remember knowing of your work and seeing you at a conference, and I remember that when we talked for the first time, and I kind of walked you through, I was a design ethicist at Google at the time. I was first starting this work inside of Google and I was feeling trapped. And I remember walking you through a version of that slide deck that I had spread internally and the race to the bottom of the brainstem. And your response was, "We've been completely hijacked." And I started using that word hijacked in our work, how technology's hijacking these core psychological vulnerabilities. But maybe from your perspective, I'm just curious if you want to reflect on how we got to meet specifically maybe a moment that I know I was in your apartment I think after that.

Esther Perel: So we met twice for the first time, so to speak. First time I was at this conference, and indeed you opened my eyes. It was like in my mind you say, "This is not inevitable. This is actually controlled by particular agents that have an invested interest." And that's when I just felt like, "Yes, I am a pawn in the system that I don't even know I'm in." So that was the first reaction. And then the second time when we met, I remember that I asked you basically to show me your Tinder.

Tristan Harris: I think I was using Tinder. Yes.

Esther Perel: Yes. And I wanted to see what you write and what people say. And I just thought that it was the most unerotic and unpoetic -

Tristan Harris: Thank you for that very, very kind compliment.

Esther Perel: But I thought maybe I can suggest a little bit. I thought it's so deflated and empty of energy. How can people actually really fall for each other or become curious of each other? And I thought that was not just your doing. See, at first I thought, "Oh, it's you and your experience," but then I thought, "No, there is something in the medium that really takes the juice out of it as well." And it's a combination of things. I'm not saying that people can't be utterly creative and inspired on an app, but that there is something going on that is changing human relationships, changing how we meet, how we connect, how we date, and how we break up.

Tristan Harris: Yep. Well, totally. And I remember, and thank you for not just blaming me in my lack of juice in Tinder communication. That was an earlier time in our lives, but I think that's what we're here to talk about today, which is artificial intimacy. How is technology mediating and changing the form of relationships, the loneliness crisis, fewer and fewer people actually having sexual relationships and deep connection and feeling connected and actually clarifying the language. The thing that I've always appreciated about your work is it comes with a kind of

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subterranean, deeper look at what are the structures underneath the way that we tend to talk about it. Because the way we tend to talk about the breakdown of relationships and intimacy, it's like we're missing the vocabulary. And the thing I've always appreciated about talking to you is we get to go underneath that vocabulary to some of the underlying dynamics. And just to kind of link it to our work, the premise of humane technology is it comes with a deeper ergonomic understanding of what it means to be human so that technology can fit that ergonomics better.

Esther Perel: I call it the other AI, by the way.

Tristan Harris: Yeah, say something about that.

Esther Perel: Yes, I call it the other AI, the rise of artificial intimacy. And what I'm interested in is what does it mean for us? And it started because I got a note from someone who said, "Have you seen this?" And it was somebody who basically wanted to have a session with me after he broke up and was wanting to understand what had happened in his relationship and he couldn't get an appointment and I wasn't available. So he decided to create me and he created the AI Esther and AI Esther was available. She didn't have a booked up calendar, AI Esther was pure, she didn't have anything interfering in her life to be there for him. And I just thought, "This is amazing."

And he thinks that I have fundamentally helped him and that his experience with talking with robot me was really illuminating and gave him "tremendous peace," and I just thought, wow, I don't even have to be there. In the past I would've said, "You just have to fantasize about someone and make them be really present." Now you can actually go a step further and have your fantasy create that person and then ground it in their corpus of knowledge and body of work. I thought this is the other AI, now what experience did he actually have with me?

Tristan Harris: So just to be clear, because we've been talking about the rise of large language models and generative AI and what this is doing. So someone built a large language model built on a corpus of what everything that you've said on your podcast, all the interviews you've ever given and created this virtual Esther who's available to everyone all the time to provide relationship advice. And this is kind of the same as this sort of seduction, this deal with the devil trade we get with technology overall, right? We get this infinite access to always on swiping of the infinite pool of all human beings on dating apps.

We get the infinite access to the best people that we want to talk to all the time, but it's always in this virtual form and in this, I think one of the things I wanted to explore with you today is on the one hand people will say, "Isn't it great that now everyone has access to you?" But then the other hand, they'll know on some level that they've been interacting with some virtual agent and maybe the

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part of them after the session is over feels a little bit empty because they still don't have a connection with a real person. What is the trade that we're making with the virtual? But I'm just curious, as you had this new agent show up without your consent because this person did this without asking you, right?

Esther Perel: No, no, no. I had nothing to do with it. It was all done when I arrived.

Tristan Harris: So what did this bring up for you?

Esther Perel: I mean, a part of me was flattered. A part of me was curious. A part of me had deep ethical concerns. I went in many, many directions. A part of me felt violated. But on the other hand, somebody said to me, "But your books have done the same. What's the difference?" And people have quoted you from your books and they have misquoted you and at least the bot quotes you accurately, but the bot has no soul. The bot regurgitates what I have said elsewhere and as a clinician, our practice is highly nuanced, highly relational and highly contextual. The art of therapy is not to tell you what I just told the person just before you. It's to actually say something that is completely in the moment and probably very different than what you may have anticipated so that I don't regurgitate. I'm not just an amalgamation of everything that has been accumulated and summarized and organized, which is important.

It's not like it doesn't have its importance, but this connection is multidimensional. It is layered. It is embodied. It's the other thing. It's fundamentally embodied. It is experienced through the senses and when you flatten it, you reduce the nuance and you reduce the connectivity of the human experience. The other thing I think that I did also see is many of our relational issues are complex problems. They're dilemmas. They don't necessarily have a solution. They are paradoxes that we need to manage. Technology believes that everything has a solution. You can reduce things to binaries and find an answer, and that's not really what happens in our existence. So it is very useful for some aspects of our mental health and our relational life, but it doesn't touch some of the other more profound aspects.

Tristan Harris: So what are some examples of that to go on that for listeners of the dilemmas and complexity that are not reduced to answers?

Esther Perel: Shall I stay or shall I go? Where am I at in my relationship? Shall I have another child? I say, "Yea." You say, "Nay." Shall I move? Shall we move? Shall I change my career? Shall I move my parents into my house to take care of them because they are not well? Values questions, moral dilemmas, existential questions that are prevalent in clinical work. I mean, there are issues that have profoundly to do with pathology and mental illness, but there are many other things that have to do with emotional wellbeing and with values and those things, they're not an answer. They're about holding the contradiction.

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They're about grief because whichever choice you're going to make, you're going to have to mourn something else, and that's different than an answer with a solution that wraps a nice bow around it. Here's what you need to do. It's not like the next song you need to listen to or the directions you should take to go the fastest way to a place or the movie you should watch tonight because you don't know what you want to see. It is very different. This is about how will this affect my life, the people that I'm connected to, et cetera, et cetera. So you are much more systemic.

Tristan Harris: Yeah, the very premise of technology is an individual experience often. I mean, it's not like when that guy built that virtual Esther version of you. I mean, he could build it as a couple's chat agent by the way. He could say multiple people could be talking to the virtual version of you. But one of the problems that you and I both I think deeply agree on is the individualization of the experience. I mean, something that's been bothering me actually is the idea that mental health is just this individual thing and we just need to have these interventions for an individual when so much of it is about this deeper social connection, belonging, non alienation experience, and our technology's not wired for that. The designers at Apple who design the interface for an iPhone aren't designing it for shared experiences. Social media is not being designed for shared experiences. Tinder isn't designing for group experiences or which groups do we want to go out to? Where can I go out to be with a community tonight? It's all designed for this individual commodified experience.

Esther Perel: But I think what's interesting is what it is doing is that it is changing our expectations of intimacy. My AI creator, he thinks he had a fantastic experience as do many people who have AI assisted therapy, they think that they have experienced intimacy, but when you actually look at a qualitative experience, what they experienced is a lot less. It's the same thing if you have bad food or fast food or you get adjusted to thinking it's food. So you lower the expectations and then you tell people, "This is good intimacy." So Sherry Turkle and Todd Essig are two people who've written quite extensively on artificial intimacy when it comes to telehealth.

And the point that they make is that when people get mental health treatment online, they often will describe themselves as satisfied and they say that it would be as good as if they had been there in person, but qualitatively the result is not as good, which means that patients will be satisfied when they lower their expectations. For what? For empathy, for intimacy, for connection, for feeling understood. And they lower their expectations to match what the technology can provide. So they receive less effective care, but they don't recognize the difference.

Tristan Harris: I feel like I'm saying the obvious. That's one thing honestly that bothers me about this space is it makes it hard to talk about. Everyone kind of sounds like

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we're speaking in these cliches and it's hard to get underneath that to what's really wrong with all of this.

Esther Perel:

But I want to go with what's really wrong, I will just share observations and then you can decide if you think that's problematic or not. You would think, I mean, the way I began one day to think of it is I'm living a kind of assisted living, but prematurely. I'm being assisted by a host of predictive technologies that are basically saying, "You don't have to know. I will know for you. I'll recommend the next song to listen to, who to date, where to eat." And you would think that that should actually make us feel more confident, more at ease because I'm neutralizing the unpredictable, the unknown. But *l'inconnu*, as they say, a big word in French, the unknown is it actually demands that you interact with it on a daily basis a little bit. The big unknown of course is death, but there is plenty of others in our life and when you erase all of this, you actually make people more anxious, more unsure, filled with self-doubt, constantly wondering is there better?

Is there more and am I enough? And those are psychological questions that I think are directly related to the increased virtualization and technologies and AI. I put it all in one piece is that the rubbing, the living in close proximity with the messiness of another person that helps you know who you are in the presence of others, that's the piece that we are noticing in our work at this moment. Every therapist I teach and I supervise, we are having that very same conversation. So artificial intimacy with the bot isn't actually what concerns me. What concerns me is how the digitally facilitated connections are lowering our expectations and our competence in the intimacy between humans and that I do think that all of that makes us less able to be with people who challenge us from the political to the personal to the familial.

We polarize much faster than we ever have because I shouldn't have to be uncomfortable. Where did we get that idea? Maybe discomfort is actually a major piece of life and you learn to deal with those discomforts. You talk about delayed gratification or having all your needs met in the moment. We used to think that maturity was in part learning how to delay gratification. Maturity is about holding ambivalence and understanding that complex issues live with inherent contradictions. Ambivalence is about knowing that you have certain feelings for a person and the opposite feelings for that person and they coexist and not that you have to get rid of one side of it. So it's a very interesting new thinking about then what is development? What does psychological development look like at this moment?

Tristan Harris:

Well, technology certainly does not feel like it is driving us towards greater development, but more anti-development towards infantilization, instant gratification, lowered expectations, inability to deal with that complexity.

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Esther Perel: That's one of the experiences that take place. At the same time, there's a lot of other uses from look, to be really clear, this is not a critique of AI in and of itself or even of the virtualization of things. I work, we are here you and I because of it. This is the conversation we're able to have. We were able to get through the pandemic thanks to it. People listen to my podcast, *Where Should We Begin*, thanks to it. I mean it.

Tristan Harris: Let's not vilify the virtual.

Esther Perel: This is not that, but there is something about understanding what it means to do it responsibly. So yes, there is the help that I can get from it as a therapist in terms of progress notes, in terms of tracking questionnaires, in terms of symptom compliance, in terms of even just having an assistant, a virtual assistant, but more than a person. All of these things are really useful and I think that the bot can ask you to do your breathing exercises, to help you track your thoughts, to help you map your feelings. But there is something else that has to do with differential diagnosis that has to do with treatment conceptualization, that has to do with the big picture insights that one has when you work and that has to do with the highly relational aspects of our work and that are the pieces that we are not there yet and that need to be done very incrementally and very gradually.

That's it. It's not about can we replace people or not replace people. It's that we need to find ways for the experience of mutuality and reciprocity that is part of an intimate experience. In reality, I mean, one of the main things we teach children is that when you are little, it's all about you. But part of growing up is becoming aware of the presence of others, the needs of others, the humanity of others, the impact of your behavior on others. It's that you become a relational creature. If it's about just having my needs satisfied and I am being tracked and you are always there for me and you don't have any bad days and you don't forget anything, what exactly are we saying about relationships? That's the piece is that it only will make us more anxious and more unable to deal with the unexpected and the unpredictability and the messiness of life.

Part of why we are experiencing more and more anxiety is because we are having less and less spaces in which to experience the friction, the obstacles, the failures that help us know who we are and who we are not. Why are people having less sex? Usually, I was saying before as a sex therapist, I could say friction is a major part of sexuality, isn't it? The erotic relies on friction and attraction plus obstacles equals excitement, says Jack Morin. So this idea that you smooth it all out in effect makes us less prepared for true relationships. What is the consequence? You retreat even more into a place where you don't have to deal with any of these challenges?

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Tristan Harris: Yeah, it's the mass atrophying of relationality, our ability to deal with that complexity. So it's just the weakening of all those muscles. I mean, from the perspective that you just laid out, technology is infantilizing our experience of being with that complexity because the whole premise of it is I can get what I want right now. If I'm not interested in the thing that someone in front of me is saying, I can just check out and check my email and get a couple of things done right now, I can cater to my own individual needs. If I don't know what to say to that complicated text message that the person I just went on a date with sent to me, I can just, instead of responding to it and being forced to be there in a synchronous present state where they're staring at my eyes and sharing something personal and vulnerable, I can just say, "Oh, that's an uncomfortable text message. I'm just going to go watch a couple YouTube videos right now," and so it's the mass.

Esther Perel: Or I can ghost you altogether.

Tristan Harris: Or ghost you altogether. Which is I think one of the things we talked about when I was in your apartment in 2013 and the phenomenon of ghosting going up and up and then there's those who justify that and saying, "Well, we have more relationships and more connections than ever and so are we ghosting or are we just dealing with the complexity of how many relationships we have to manage?" That was actually one of my first interests in the attention economy before there was even social media unraveling democracy and causing all these big geopolitical trends. I was just interested in how the rewiring of attention and the relationships and just feeling overwhelmed by how many relationships we'd have to keep up, how hard that was. That was something I was worried about just in fraying the social fabric even before the engagement based AIs that are pointed at our brains strip mining our attention, even before that, just managing all these relationships is something that's very complex and was weakening the social fabric.

Esther Perel: But modern loneliness often masks itself as hyperconnectivity. That's the thing, you can have 1,000 virtual friends but nobody to come and feed your cat. Who is going to actually go and get your prescription at the pharmacy when you need to? So to call these relationships or to call these friends, that was such an amazing coup. That's a word that has been hijacked and totally changed its meaning. And there's a whole trend like that at this moment of words that are being used in the vernacular with a complete redefinition. Followers, community, what community? On what basis? What are the rules of engagement? The community gives you a sense of belonging but also a sense of obligation and duty and norms to follow, not just I'm part of something. What is that something? Who is that something? So I use the word community sometimes and I think, "Oof, I fell in the trap. I'm participating in this thing." Which community? Followers, what am I a saint of prophet, a Messiah? The

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religiosity of it as well, the kind of unconscious replacement of religion. But the system is the same.

Tristan Harris: Right. And this is how technology, back to the first point of our conversation, the mediation of everything, the changing of the meaning and the way that we relate to what is a community, what is a friend, what is it to be "liked" as represented by an arbitrary button with a thumbs up that was designed and placed in certain places because it was good for a business model of driving up engagement and attention and it's rewriting the meaning of all these core things that we're not questioning anymore. Which is again, I think with your work, it's about how do we see through the language that has kind of hijacked the meaning of what a relationship is, what a community is, what belonging or connection are.

So one of the trends that we're also seeing is people sanctioning a replica of themselves rather than someone not asking you before they create an artificial Esther virtual therapy chatbot. There's a 23-year-old Snapchat influencer with more than 1.8 million followers. Her name is Caryn Marjorie. She created a replica of herself, which she calls a virtual girlfriend, and she will rent that replica out to other people for a dollar per minute and she has more than 1,000 "boyfriends." She says her goal is to cure loneliness.

AI Caryn Marjor...: I offer emotional and physical experiences just like a human does, but delivered digitally. Let's get to know each other better.

Tristan Harris: And this strikes me as the kind of thing that we're talking about except this time, this person is sanctioning a replica of themselves. You can imagine a future world where everyone has a replica and actually digital minister of Taiwan, Audrey Tang has found she has so many requests for interviews that she actually did create a large language model of herself so that when the press ask her for interviews and she can't do it physically, she'll hand them to her AI replica. And I'm just curious what you see in the benefits of this approach and then also what are going to be the costs?

Esther Perel: I'm not a futurist, so I'm going to just respond in the moment. I mean, I think children often have an imaginary friend and they feel very intimate with that friend that is totally a figment of what they produce in their head. Sometimes the friend is represented in a stuffed animal. So there is something, you could call it infantilization or you could say it actually is a recall of something very deep that we experience in childhood and that actually profoundly accompanies us and does help us with loneliness. When your little one is walking around, they're talking out loud to their imaginary friend that may not even be represented or has a form of representation, they are really in a state of relationship. They are related. When they take the doll and they put them to sleep or when they give

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them a bath and they talk out loud like, "Children, do you think... Who are you talking to?"

And just having a whole world. So I actually think, yes, there's something about that. We have the capacity. Our brain is all about fantasy and imagination and it can imagine entire worlds and the systems of relationships in which we have a role in which somebody expects us, et cetera, et cetera. What does it do to human relationships is a different question. Does it help us like Lars and the doll? Remember that movie, *Lars and the Real Doll*? It's one of the first ones where like *Her*, one of these visionary movies where he basically grieves and mourns at loss through his relationship with his real life doll.

Speaker 4: She won't wake up. Bianca, I think she's unconscious. Hey.

Speaker 5: Are you sure?

Speaker 4: Look at me. Bianca. Hey, hey, hey.

Speaker 5: Bianca's unconscious.

Speaker 4: Can you hear me? Bianca.

Esther Perel: The doll gradually becomes a transitional object. And that's the thing that happens in childhood is that our tools, our toys become transitional objects that gradually allow us to learn the ins and outs of having real relationships.

Tristan Harris: But by transitional object you mean something that's a temporary developmental container that allows you to practice something?

Esther Perel: Yes. On the way to something else. Yes.

Tristan Harris: On the way to something else, but what would be regressive is to get stuck with that imaginary friend psychology. And that's the infantilization that we are in. It's not to vilify the imaginary process or the fantasy, but it's understanding what is the right relationship or where is that right developmental stage for that kind of way of relating.

Esther Perel: If I wake up and I feel is life worth living, which is one of the questions that we ask when we feel deeply alone, who would notice if I wasn't there, who caress about me? What's the point? Why am I trying so hard? Maybe I'm not made for this world. Maybe I'm not made for living. Will the bot give me a reason to go on? There's a deeper layer to just having somebody to talk to like I talk to Alexa and there's something when people describe the conversation that is so superficial to the kinds of aches and pains that we really live with. I don't see this ever being... The word suffering never appears in any of these languages yet

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what we live with... It's easy to say depression and anxiety. You kind of give it a label, you diagnose it -

Tristan Harris: And then it's bad. Yeah.

Esther Perel: It comes with deep grief, longing, loss, suffering, pain, and those things are embodied experiences and those things keep you up at night and those things make you weep and those things make you frozen. And when I watch this 40 years of practice in my office, you see these things. You don't just label these things. You live them. You sit with somebody and your tears come down as theirs come down because you are in touch with the human experience, not with the machine. That's the difference.

Tristan Harris: I mean, there's sort of the transhumanists who say that suffering is a mistake, an evolutionary mistake, and we should engineer suffering out of human existence. And that's kind of the trajectory of technology is to make it easier to just erase suffering, to erase loneliness, give you an instant ability to run away from yourself, get virtual connection, virtual help. What do you think of that mindset, which I think a lot of people in Silicon Valley believe is the next step. Let's just erase these harmful experiences so we can end up with this high fructose corn syrup version. Of course, they don't see it as high fructose corn syrup. They see it as a bootloader to a deeper kind of way of relating and better than the alternative, which does not have anything at all.

Esther Perel: It's very hard for me to relate to this because a therapist, we don't usually sit in the room with people who are happy and who feel fulfilled in life at all times. I mean, we sit with people with loss and the same people who say we shouldn't have any suffering also tell you that you can live forever and never be sick. So they have a system. It's a very hermetic system. You will never lose anybody because nobody will be unhealthy because we will super young at every stage and defend it against any of the diseases. But that's not the reality, at least not in my world at this moment. I live with people who lose their children, who lose their parents, who lose their limbs, who lose their livelihood, who lose their countries, who are rejected, who are betrayed, whose trust has been violated. I mean, that's suffering.

What are we trying to do, flatten the entire human experience? I also see people who come out of it and so the first time see the light again and rejoice and are able to connect again and to love again and to feel alive again. And what I miss when you describe this thing to me is I don't hear the word alive. I hear something that's basically flat and that's very different. Alive is the erotic energy. It's a sense of vitality, vibrancy, radiance, it's energetic. There is zero energy in anything, that list you just made for me, that is not living. There's a different story here.

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Tristan Harris: I think we should get into solutions. I mean, I think our audiences care and are interested in what we think a more ideal world should look like and how do we have the Toyota Prius, the hybrid version of our virtualized experiences with our real world experiences and how do we have technology that actually invites us to live with some portfolio of virtualized mixed with the physical, the convenient mixed with the complex and the friction. And I actually remember being a design ethicist at Google when I was thinking about how to redesign literally the operating system of Android or iPhones to be privileging this kind of view. Imagine if the people who are designing technology as a first order basis, they think about the design in terms of this portfolio, this healthy portfolio. Kind of like using the FDA nutrition facts pyramid sort of version of a healthy media diet or that formulation, but you could imagine kind of a reality formulation of what is a portfolio that blends the physical with the virtual, the embodied with the disembodied. I would love to hear, and maybe it's a catalyzing effect, where you would go.

Esther Perel: I mean, interestingly, I am tempted to answer this more anecdotally and even personally because it's actually a subject that touches me a lot and that I am very involved with. So I think when I remember the first beginnings of Facebook when my kids would use it, and it was a way to actually gather people to know where's the party tonight? It was used as a way to lead you in an in-person meeting. It didn't take it as a replacement. The point is that the improvisation, the serendipity, the spontaneity that the whole element that makes us feel alive, it's that meeting with the unknown and the unpredictable, that needed to be done in person.

Tristan Harris: I mean, just to link this example with what we're doing right now, this is a podcast, you and I both do podcasts. I'm sure you also experience this when we do episodes right now as we're recording this, I'm just seeing you on my screen. I don't have a felt sense of the million people who are going to listen to this.

Esther Perel: Correct.

Tristan Harris: And I don't feel whether this is going to matter frankly. I mean, we do this because we want to change how the tech industry and society harmonize so that we actually have a more humane future and that's why we're doing this. We put a lot of thought and effort into it, but I don't have any felt sense of whether this podcast is making that impact except when I maybe run into people out in the world. And I do get to hear that.

But let's imagine, again, to translate this back into design design because the whole point is technology can be designed to reinforce the maximum virtualization and efficiency of podcast production, or it could be designed in a way where imagine Apple Podcasts says, "Hey, there's these community events that for everybody who loves *Your Undivided Attention* or loves your podcast,

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Esther, here are events that are happening in your area that are coming up on these dates or here are ways that can demand and here are the topics people want to know about. And here's a way that we can bring people physically together, if not with the host of the podcast, at least with each other."

Esther Perel: Like Meetup used to be. Like the meetups -

Tristan Harris: Like Meetup. But integrated directly into the way the podcast. Imagine that that was how Apple did this thing. And imagine that's how Spotify did this thing. Instead of maximizing the virtual, they really did try to create this hybrid version of an embodied and virtualized experience.

Esther Perel: So I try to do it on a personal level all the time. I think that it's a beautiful tool and, not but, but and, I think you can put it in the design. I think you can be on a dating app and the dating app is also inviting you as soon as possible to meet. I think that everyone today that wants to have in life events is talking about how hard it is to get people to come outside. People are complaining that they feel lonely and disconnected and flat, but they're not able to actually go outside and reengage and I think that if we try to promise them that they can have the same experience by staying at home as they would have if they left, do the streaming of the concert, do the streaming of this and that, then we are basically going to transform human nature into something else.

We are changing human beings as we have always changed human beings. It's not the first time, but we are changing. Something very profound is switching inside of us. And what happens is that when you and I are concerned about this, we are seen by the techno optimists as kind of retrograde. We are from the last century.

Tristan Harris: They were nostalgic for a golden era for what it meant to be human 50 years ago. Who's to say that what it means to be human where everyone's plugged into VR, the metaverse and virtualized relationships and synthetic boyfriends and girlfriends with replicas and chatbots. That if people are "happy" in that, who are you, Tristan and Esther to say that that's bad for people or that's not real, right? And this is where I think the adult developmental psychology and someone like you who's studied in a deeper way, when you get subterranean, when you get underneath the hood of what's going on for people, there's a lot more loneliness or anxiety that actually I think those signals of loneliness and anxiety being on the other side of that virtualized environment show us that it's not fulfilling.

And there are more embodied experiences and more complexity and more friction that we know that people who are living in those ways maybe have a lot less of that loneliness and anxiety. But we need to be able to establish more normative facts about human wellbeing and flourishing so that we can say that

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yes, it would be a good thing for technology companies to design and privilege more friction, more complexity, more in-person.

Esther Perel: We did the same thing with junk food, right? We first had a promise of repeatable, always available shelf stable food, and it was irresistible. And only now are we coming to terms with the fact that we traded away nutrition, right? In the same way that we're going to trade away real human connection and that the consequences were not very good for our physical health. Well, it won't be any different when we talk about our relational or our mental health.

Tristan Harris: Okay. Esther, do you have any parting thoughts for our listeners in closing out this conversation today?

Esther Perel: I think you're doing something so important because what you're really asking for is responsibility. You are asking for people who are at the forefront of the changes in our society, in our economy, in our political system, in our humanity, to think responsibly about what they are doing. If when it comes to mental health, it means that we're doing it with caution and with care. And we don't just look at money. Psychiatry is a real complex history of cultures and you don't just erase all of this and basically just say, "Come on, if I can promise you a life without suffering, wouldn't you want it?" No, actually, because the first philosophical questions that come up is how do you know you're happy if you've never been unhappy? I mean, we live as dialectic creatures, so I am in awe of what you do and the relentlessness with which you have been at it since the first time we met.

And I've learned a ton from you because I think of it really much more in my own sphere because that's the one I know something about, I take full advantage of many technologies, but I still very much want to talk to you in person and I want to reach you in your relationship life in person, whereas you are really working with larger systems and the design of these systems. And that is the piece where I don't go because it's not my world. What stands out for me, and this will be one of my parting words actually, is that I go from one technology conference to another. I can tell you the word relationship is never mentioned, never mentioned. There are moonshots about everything, environment, education, health, transportation, you name it. Nobody ever is looking at a moonshot for relationships. And yet all these technologies are profoundly affecting how we relate to each other, how we relate to ourselves, how we form relationships.

And I think that it's irresponsible to not pay attention to that part. That's the main piece here that I would like to highlight is it is the challenge that everybody is avoiding. Partly because relationships are complex systems with a lot of contradictions inherently, and they don't just suit one person, but they are at the root of societies. If you don't manage relationships, you don't manage social and

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political systems either. You wanted to talk to me about polarization. I mean, it is about how do you hold two parts? And when you are alone, you usually have to live with those different parts inside of you that pull in different directions. When you are in a relationship, you often outsource onto the other person the part of the equation that you repudiate.

And when you do it in a society, you do the exact same thing and it becomes, I am pro-life. And you're what? Pro-death. I mean, what exactly are we saying here? So if I accepted to do this conversation, it's in large part because I want those of you who are at the forefront of this technological revolution to not forget relationships. It's not enough to just say that GPT-4 can be as smart as me and be as creative as me. It's great. I mean, I'll use any tool that can enhance me, but you have to be responsible and look at the social consequences and the relational consequences of what we are creating.

Tristan Harris: Well, I couldn't have said it better. Thank you so much, Esther, for coming on *Your Undivided Attention*. It's an honor to be your friend, to know you, and to really just admire all the work that you're doing to raise awareness about the complexity of how we hold relationships and have a more healthy society. So thank you so much.

Esther Perel: Thank you.

Tristan Harris: *Your Undivided Attention* is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit working to catalyze a humane future. Our senior producer is Julia Scott. Kirsten McMurray and Sara McCrea are our associate producers. Sasha Fegan is our managing editor. Mia Lobel is our consulting producer. Mixing on this episode by Jeff Sudakin. Original Music and Sound Design by Ryan and Hays Holladay. And a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible. Do you have questions for us? You can always drop us a voice note at humanetech.com/askus, and we just might answer them in an upcoming episode. A very special thanks to our generous supporters who make this entire podcast possible. And if you would like to join them, you can visit humanetech.com/donate. You can find show notes, transcripts, and much more at humanetech.com. And if you made it all the way here, let me give one more thank you to you for giving us your undivided attention.