

Podcast/Book Review

Where should we begin?
By Esther Perel. (2017). [Audio podcast].

The other half of Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder). A guide to living in an intimate relationship with a partner who is on the Autism Spectrum (2nd ed.).

By Maxine Aston. (2014). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
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When One Half of a Couple Seems to Struggle with Relationality: Thoughts Stimulated by Esther Perel's Podcast Series *Where Should We Begin?*

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I sometimes find myself feeling hopeless about the possibilities for emotional connection between couples, and this is more likely when there seems to be a difference between the partners in their capacity for relationality, or even empathy.

Renowned psychotherapist and author Esther Perel has recently released a podcast series of her work with couples entitled *Where Should We Begin?* I found it to be a fascinating and intimate insight into Perel's consulting room and into the lives of the courageous couples themselves. In episode one, "I've Had Better", Perel speaks with a couple seeking to understand how to recover from the betrayal of his affair. As the session progresses he begins to compete with his partner's feelings by saying, "I felt that too". Unfortunately, as Perel identifies, this "me too" has the effect of appearing to equalise feelings, which can lead to an escalation in conflict as the other partner feels dismissed. Perel helps him to "just reflect" her feelings back in order to stay on "her side of the bridge just a little longer". It was then that I wondered whether one of the ways in which couples therapy can be particularly useful to a partner who has difficulty in identifying their feelings, is through listening to their partner express their own feelings.

Perel suggests a separate email address for her couple, reserved for them to talk to each other. This is a suggestion that jumped out at me as I read Maxine Aston's (2014) *The other half of Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder): A guide to living in an intimate relationship with a partner who is on the Autism Spectrum*. Aston dedicates her book to all those who love a partner who has Asperger Syndrome, and her aim is to assist in maintaining successful

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relationships. Her slim volume strikes me as a sensitive, yet realistic appraisal of what it is like to love someone who struggles with relationality to a greater or lesser extent. Aston suggests that it “is the importance of acceptance, support and understanding which can make the difference between whether a couple stays together or not” (p. 13).

Listening to Perel alongside Aston, I am humbled by their seemingly similar therapeutic goals of improving communication. Aston describes an approach to communication, ostensibly for the partner of the person with Asperger Syndrome, but likely equally applicable to both people in the relationship. Her strategy includes giving “complete messages”, communications that “contain at least four forms of disclosure: stating the facts, your thoughts, your feelings and what it is you need” (p. 69). This is very close to many widely accepted couples interventions, such as the Gottman Rapoport Intervention, where each person takes a turn as the speaker and the listener, with a focus for the speaker on identifying their feelings and needs, and for the listener on validation of at least a part of what they hear. Aston argues that the partner with Asperger Syndrome is less likely to be able to guess what you need, but I would suggest that many, if not the majority, of us don’t understand what is needed or desired unless we are given the information. There are obvious similarities between Aston’s suggestions for couples dealing with Asperger Syndrome and more widely applicable couples therapies but perhaps the difference is in the application? It may be that for the couple where one partner has autistic traits, the tools of couples therapy are required for longer as a scaffold while the couple practise the skill of complete messages:

By being able to communicate in complete messages both understood what the other wanted to say and they agreed to put a notice on the door to remind him to give her a hug. When the hug became a habit the notice was no longer needed. She had learned not to disguise her feelings [of rejection and vulnerability] with anger and he had learned that if he gave her a hug, she would be happy and he could enjoy his breakfast. (Aston, 2014, p. 69)

There is usually going to be a difference between partners in their capacity for emotional connection or empathy, in much the same way that there is likely a difference between partners in their desire for sexual intimacy. Perel’s podcast series and Aston’s guide to living in an intimate relationship with a partner who is on the Autism Spectrum illuminate how very different couples can infer that one partner doesn’t care about the other’s feelings enough to temporarily put their own aside.

I recommend Perel’s podcast series for her demonstration of how she works with diverse couples to grow their ability to integrate the experience of the other. Aston shows me in particular how therapeutic couples work can assist a couple living with Asperger Syndrome to feel “listened to, validated and supported in their attempts to maintain and strengthen their relationship” (p. 53). The therapeutic task might be defined as helping the individual to put aside their own feelings and needs temporarily in order to focus on the feelings and needs of the other. When one half of a couple seems to struggle particularly with relationality, the difference in the approach of the therapist is perhaps one of perseverance than degree.

References

- Aston, M. (2014). *The other half of Asperger Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder). A guide to living in an intimate relationship with a partner who is on the Autism Spectrum* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
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