

# This is what's missing in our sex lives in 2024, according to Esther Perel

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Esther Perel's trajectory from private practice psychotherapist to internationally renowned relationship expert is deeply entwined with technology. It was her publisher's printing presses that distributed her

2006 breakout bestselling book, "Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence" (HarperCollins), in more than 30 languages.

The videos of her subsequent hit TED talks that brought her theories on desire and straying eyes to tens of millions of viewers. (The latter of which she expanded upon in her 2017 book, "The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity") Multiple podcasts that extended Perel's therapy practice far beyond a physical office. An Instagram account where Perel sprinkles tidbits of relational wisdom into the feeds of more than 2 million followers. And, coming on Sept. 17, two hour-long [online courses](#) designed for people to strengthen their sexual connections.

"Suddenly, you can reach people in the villages of every continent," Perel said. "That's technology."

But the same technological forces that have helped Perel's ideas reach the masses have also begun to mold and meddle with modern-day relationships: We swipe to oblivion on soul-sucking dating apps, disappear like ghosts from our romantic interests' lives and are lured from our partners by our smartphones at crucial moments for connection.

It's these unsettling phenomena Perel aims to tackle in her most recent U.S. speaking tour, "The Future of Relationships, Love & Desire," which she will take to the YouTube Theater on Sept. 10.

Ahead of her visit to Los Angeles, The Times spoke with Perel about Gen Z's sexless reputation, the limitations of intimacy on online platforms and how public shaming on social media can interfere in the bedroom.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

## **How do you think technology has shifted the romantic landscape since you began writing about it?**

The predictive technologies that are promising to unburden us of the inconveniences of life are also creating a situation where we are gradually more anxious, not less anxious. Because we don't get to practice the things that actually make us less anxious: experimentation, meeting with the unknown, dealing with uncertainty, the unexpected, dealing with the lessons that you learn from bad choices. That's what makes you less anxious, not an algorithmic perfection.

If you spend so much time with algorithmic perfections, you begin to experience and create warped expectations, and you carry those expectations for perfection into your relationships with other people, and you become less able to deal with conflict, friction, difference.

Many studies say that Gen Z is having less sex, with fewer partners. A UCLA survey from 2023 said that a little more than 47% of people between the ages of 13 and 24 feel most TV shows and movie plots don't need [sexual content](#), and want more focus on platonic relationships. What do you make of this?

It's symptomatic of something that is happening in society, in our changing culture. Technology being one piece of it. Relationships are imperfect and unpredictable. So is sex. And you're vulnerable and you're exposed, even. And, by the way, sex is never just sex. Even if you hook up.

So you're less prepared for the vulnerability, for the unknown, for the consequences, for the challenges of communication that sex demands. If everything needs to be negotiated, as things are today, in relationships, and there is no longer a major religious or [social hierarchy](#) that tells you

how to think, you have to make your own choices and decisions yourself.

Then, in order to negotiate everything, you need to be able to communicate, and those very communication skills—the ability to deal with uncertainty and the unexpected—are the very skills that are weakening in the digital age. Sex is the messiness of human life, the bumps, the smells, the caring.

This, to me, is one of the central questions for the future: How are we going to manage the messiness of human life? That's the opposite of an algorithmic perfection.

But the point is not that Gen Z wants less sex. They want less sex because they're more isolated to begin with. They have less friends. They don't go out, they work alone the whole day. You can go on an app, you can hook up, and after a while that gets a little boring for some. So it's not the sex, it's everything that sex is interwoven with.

## **Do you think it's possible to foster that kind of intimacy you're describing on digital platforms?**

Yes and no. For a lot of people, it allows them to meet in ways they could never have met. But I do think that this is emotional capitalism, in which you have 1,000 choices at your fingertips, in which you partake in a frenzy of romantic consumerism, in which you are afraid to commit to the good because you fear that you're going to miss out on the perfect.

We find ourselves evaluating ourselves like products, and that commodification is soulless. Do people meet on dating apps? Absolutely. I think 60% of people these days meet online. But I think there's going to be a generational shift. There's more and more attempts by people who are done with the apps to meet in person, even if it's speed dating, even

if it's meeting in other circumstances, or even if it's coming to my show.

My most important message in response to this is: Don't go on a date in a bar, in a restaurant, at a table face-to-face, that resembles a job interview where you're asking each other a set of stale questions that tell you nothing while you're waiting to see if you're getting butterflies.

Go do something with your friends and bring your date along. Integrate the dating into your life. You will have 1,000 [data points](#) by just seeing how this person interacts with people, how they answer questions or how they make comments. But primarily, you're not isolating yourself, cutting yourself off from your life to go play the lottery, to then lose, and to then have to come back with your shame, to your life, to your friends, to tell them it didn't work. We can do better.

**You've talked about how, once you walk into the bedroom, you should throw political correctness out the window. But these days we see a lot of online shaming related to that very thing. How do conversations about sexual politics on social media influence our personal intimate lives?**

There's two questions in what you're asking. One is: Is there a new type of moralizing that is occurring? And then the second one is: What is the nature of erotic desire?

I see sexuality as a coded language, as a window into the self, into a relationship that demands deep listening, and that listening is that actually, sexuality is a coded language for our deepest, emotional needs, wishes, fears, aspirations, wounds. That's why I always say, Sex is never just sex. Even when you think it's hit and run and it's supposed to not

mean anything, the effort not to make it mean something is meaningful.

In that sense, it is irrational. Why we like certain things, we don't fully know. We don't fully know why what I like, you find disgusting. We don't fully know why this memory turned into a fantasy. We don't fully know the inner workings of the erotic mind. The brain is a black box as it is, but this adds a whole other layer to its sexual fantasies. It's a uniquely human production that makes no sense sometimes, because it defies our values. It defies our perception of reality. It defies our perception of who we are as good citizens.

Nobody wants some of these things in real life, but turned into play, they can become highly arousing, exciting and satisfying. And it goes even further when you go into the world of kink. The erotic mind is often politically incorrect, meaning it doesn't abide by the rules of good citizenship that you yourself abide by in the rest of your life.

But let's not be mistaken: nobody wants to be forced into anything in real life. Because when you play it, you're not being forced. There is no greater freedom than voluntary surrender. But "voluntary" is the essential word, so it's extremely carefully said. Because I know how tender and sensitive this is.

But that's one of the ways I've helped people make sense of their sexual lives, their preferences, for over 40 years. Consent has become a central organizing principle, because consent goes with desire.

If desire is to own the wanting, in order to own it, it has to be consensual. Sometimes it's consensual, but not necessarily wanted, because we can live with all kinds of contradictions inside of us. I say yes to you, but not really to me—things like that. So consent is extraordinarily important, but it is not the only key element of sexuality. There are other pieces to this story.

We are shaming on a ton of different things these days. When I say we've taken the shame to the public square of social media, it's because this is not that different from the kind of puritanical thinking of "The Scarlet Letter" and excommunications of all sorts that have existed throughout history. We have often, you know, exiled people to maintain our own moral superiority in various ways.

I'm not talking about people who deserve to be schooled for what they've done or arrested. I'm talking about how the collective and sexual scandals have forever been scandals that consolidated what was thought of as the moral fabric of the community that blamed, scolded or exiled you.

**I know that the breadth of your work is not something that you can boil down to tips. But what do you want people to walk away with, to keep in your everyday life, from your speaking tour?**

I'm not here to give you a talk. I'm here to co-create a conversation together, and like the best therapy sessions, they don't end at the end of the session. It's what happens afterwards. It's who you talk to that you were sitting with and didn't know an hour before. It's who is waiting for you at home that you should have a difficult conversation with. And if you can internalize me and take me with you into your various areas of your life where you need some of that input, then I have done something meaningful.

Here's one thing I say in the tour, and I say it in the courses too: Relationships are stories. What I would like to invite you to do is to consider your stories with a new curiosity, with more nuance and ambiguity.

I want you to think about what are the parts of your story, relational and sexual story that you want to keep and develop further, and what are the parts of your relational story that you want to leave behind or change? That's my invitation.

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