

HOW DO I DEAL WITH EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS?

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 101 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I'm going to be answering three listener questions. One question has to do with how to manage triggers. Another question has to do with finding safe people after we've had relationships with a lot of unsafe people. The third question has to do with how to help churches be better at ministering to abuse victims. So let's listen to our first question.

CALLER 1: Hi, Natalie. I would like to ask if anyone has a good suggestion as to how to manage and cope with triggers. They are unpredictable. They are painful. They bring me right back in a flash to abusive episodes. For me, those triggers can be auditory, visual, or tactile. They can be aromas. They can be music. I'm not sure if there is any better way to handle it than I've been handling it, and I'd like to hear from others. Thank you.

NATALIE: This is a great question and one I think a lot of listeners will be able to relate to. Here's the thing about triggers. We are emotionally triggered by thoughts in our brain, and those thoughts come from our programming. For example: if you were programmed to believe that wearing the color red was evil and anyone who wore it had sold their soul to the devil, if you had believed this from the time you were a small child, and if this belief was hard-wired into you with traumatic associations like getting hit, getting called names, being deprived of water or warmth, or perhaps with being molested, then that programming is going to get triggered in your brain if you see red clothes. Now I'm giving a far-fetched example, but hopefully you can see how it's possible for your brain to be hard-wired with some pretty bizarre things that wouldn't normally make any sense. Other people wouldn't be able to understand why the color red would send you into a panic attack, but your brain would know exactly why.

Here's the thing about our brains and our thoughts—they are connected to our bodies. Everything works together very beautifully. When we get thoughts in our brain, whether they are conscious thoughts or non-conscious thoughts (I've mentioned before that 95% of our thoughts are non-conscious thoughts), those thoughts send and trigger hormonal and chemical signals to our body that cause emotions, which are vibrations in our body that are lodged and kept inside the different parts of our body. Triggers also cause our amygdala, this primal brain that we have at the base of our brainstem, to get hyped up and ready for a fight, to run away, or to freeze, depending on the situation. Your primal brain's job is to keep you safe. The problem is, if you are not in imminent danger, it will backfire on you.



The problem is when your amygdala wakes up and freaks out, your pre-frontal cortex—which is in the front of your brain, the part of your brain that reasons and thinks, rationalizes, and makes decisions, that part of your brain that you want to keep online when things are going sideways—that part goes offline and shuts down. Again, this entire system is set up to protect you. There is no time to reason through things if a tiger is coming after you. But if you aren't in imminent danger or real danger, you really don't want your pre-frontal cortex to shut down. You want it to engage and help you reason through your situation in a more objective way so you can make good decision, strategize, and do all the things we need to do as adults. The problem is that our brain and body have been hard-wired in a trigger loop that will continue to go round and around and around unless something interrupts it.

Hebb's law says that, "Nerve cells that fire together, wire together." Something has to cut that wire. The reasons those thoughts and experiences have become triggers is because your brain and body have never processed through that experience and completed the stress cycle. For me, I did EMDR therapy. I know a lot of you have done that. Hopefully, you've at least heard of it. EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. (I'm not going to get into that here because it will get too involved. I encourage you to Google it, EMDR therapy, and you'll find out all about it.) In the moment of a trigger, here are some things that can help you when you are triggered:

First, stop and take some deep breaths. This helps to calm your amygdala so your pre-frontal cortex can come back online again, enabling you to think rationally.

Second, do something physical. Take a walk, do some jumping jacks, lift some weights, or dance around. My favorite thing to do when I'm super stressed and triggered is to put on my headphones and take a really brisk walk. This helps your body complete that stress cycle; it helps you to process through it.

Third, you can do a thought download. This is where you write all the thoughts your brain is offering you so you can get them out of your head, where they feel really overwhelming, and onto paper, where you can look at them more objectively. Also, the process of writing gets that pre-frontal cortex back online and operating the way it is supposed to. It is important to remember that the thoughts you are having are not you. That's not who you are. Your thoughts are not who you are, so you don't need to judge your thoughts or feel bad about them as you are writing them down. When I do a thought download, I see a lot of pretty crappy things come out of me. But if I sit and judge those or feel bad about them, all I will do is trigger more of the stuff inside. I don't want to do that. But if I understand that they are just thoughts that have been programmed into me, that I'm just going to observe



them objectively, that they are just thought sentences in my physical brain that are causing hormonal and chemical reactions in my body, then that's all they are. I can only address these things if I'm not attacking myself for them. That just triggers my amygdala even more.

Fourth, keep a record of the things that are triggering you so you can discuss them with a skilled therapist. If you notice that a certain smell is a trigger for you, write it down. Write what you are feeling in your body; write what it was that triggered you; and write as many of the thoughts that your brain is offering you as you can. Triggers keep us from being able to control our lives. We can't ever control our environment. It is pointless to try to do that. But we can control our thinking about our environment. God's word talks about renewing our minds, and I think this is just a glimpse of what the Bible is referring to. We're talking about breaking addictions to thoughts and emotions that have been memorized and engrained in our psyche from the time we were small children, even infants. This is going to take time and personal work, but it is a work that is well worth doing. This is exactly the work that we do in the new Flying Higher program for divorced Christian women. This program is opening soon for just a short period of time. It's going to be a smaller group of women who are ready to dig in and do this hard work and make those serious changes in their brains and bodies within a community of other Christian women who are doing the same thing. If you are interested in joining us when it opens on January 27th, head over to joinflyinghigher.com and get on the waiting list. If you get on that waiting list, I will send you an email when it opens up. It will only be open for five days, and then it will shut down for six months. We're going to take this small group of women, whoever wants to join us, and we'll have a crazy good time with each other. We're going to grow like bananas! Let's listen to the second question.

CALLER 2: Hi. I'm sitting in my car away from my house listening to podcasts, and I'm so grateful for all the help and support here. My stomach hurts. I've been dealing with headaches. I'm trying to play catch up with all the things I'm supposed to be doing, but I feel like I'm struggling alone because I don't have a safe person to talk to. It feels like it would be helpful to have someone to cry on their shoulder. I don't know how to do that—how to find a safe person. Everyone I've identified so far, including my sister, my dad, and my kids, I can't put that on them. Maybe there are safe people, but I don't want to burden them. I don't know how other people handle this, if they actually bare their heart and soul or if it relieves any of this pain. Thank you.

NATALIE: We have a triune Creator God. This is important to understand because we are created in this triune Creator God's image. We are created for fellowship and relationship. We crave to have it, and we crave to offer it. This is a beautiful thing. One of the devastating effects of abuse is the relational betrayal that it brings. When victims wake up to abuse and



try to get out, they discover that many of their relationships are in fact abusive. By abusive, I mean that they are controlling. A relationship is abusive when one person in the relationship needs to exert power and control over the other person. The target then becomes like a non-person in order to make the relationship work. Of course, this is not healthy. It's like more of a parasitic relationship. Nobody was created or wired to thrive in that kind of relationship. Getting away from abuse often means losing more than just a spouse. It means losing family, church, and friends. Then, in the aftermath of such a traumatic experience, many women feel like this woman—who in the world can I trust?

I've experienced this myself. I was excommunicated from my church. The members of my family of origin have nothing to do with me now. For a while, I even lost one of my older children. It was so tempting to capitulate and just go back and let them have their way with me again. My brain's programming kept telling me I was a bad little girl, a disobedient little girl, and a mean little girl. I wasn't making mommy happy anymore, and that made me a nasty, selfish child. But I held steady through those uncomfortable feelings, and I began to rewire my programming with what I now believe are thoughts and beliefs that are serving me well in my new life. I had to learn how to have my own back. I had to learn how to love and care for a woman named Natalie and the little girl that was hiding inside of her. I had to nurture her back to life again so she would feel safe enough to come out and love again. Do you see the difference? I can now love others without letting them have their way. I can say, "I love you, and no, I won't do that." "I love you, and no, I'm not going to go there." "I love you, and no, I won't believe that just because you do, and you want me to." This means I don't trust everyone that I meet. They have to earn my trust. This does not mean that I need to be unkind to people. I can be polite from a distance until someone has proven to be trustworthy. I'm much better at watching people. I think I used to be really naïve about people and just assumed that everyone was amazing, that everyone was going to be nice, and that everyone cared. I would rather have had a good relationship with other people than have a good relationship with myself. But now I've gotten much better at picking up on red flags, and I don't dismiss those red flags anymore. The Bible says that even Jesus trusted no man because the Bible says He knew what was in man. That doesn't mean Jesus didn't love us. He loves us, and He also knows we're going to mess up. If we're going to be like Jesus, we will love others while also knowing they are going to mess up. Some of them will mess up in such a way that we cannot trust them. Some of them will not tell the truth. Some of them will not come clean. Some of them will not take responsibility. Our personal boundaries are going to keep us from falling into their vortex when they do those things. That said, I want to say that I know hundreds of safe women who are full of empathy, understanding, personal experience, and love for one another. I see it every day in our Flying Free and Flying Higher program forums. We gather on Zoom every month. We get into small groups. I know dozens of women who have made lifelong, in-person friendships



through those programs. So if you feel like you've lost everybody, and you're looking for a community that is non-judgmental, kind, loving, helpful, and supportive, you don't have to look very far. As I said earlier, Flying Higher is for divorced women and it's opening up on January 27th. Flying Free is not going to be open again until this spring, but you can get on that waiting list by going to joingflyingfree.com. So it is joingflyinghigher.com for the program for divorced women, and it's joinflyingfree.com for the program for Christian women who are either in a marriage or are getting out. We do have divorced women in Flying Free as well. Let's listen to our last question.

CALLER 3: I'm wondering if there are any resources besides your podcast, which I love, out there for teaching churches, biblical counselors, and other people helpers how to properly deal with abuse—how to recognize it, training on how to minister to families and victims of all sorts of abuse, whether it's emotional, spiritual, economic, physical, sexual, etc. I think it is a huge problem that we lack people with knowledge. I'm wondering if there is a curriculum out there that seminaries can use to better equip future leaders in the church with more awareness of these issues.

NATALIE: Oh my goodness. It's not that there aren't any good programs to train pastors, churches, and biblical counselors because there are so many incredible resources now. It's wonderful! I'll share some of those in a minute. The problem is not the lack of resources or the lack of information. The problem is the lack of interest. Those of us who are survivors are very interested in the church learning how to better serve women in abusive relationships, or men in abusive relationship for that matter. We're very invested in that. However, here's the thing. My theory about the lack of interest is that these institutions and their disciples have a theology that doesn't allow for the eradication of misogyny and abuse of women. It's actually their theology, their deeply embedded belief system, that propagates misogyny and the abuse of women. Of course, they don't say and would never say that they believe women are less than or should be mistreated. Of course not. But they teach a religious belief that says that women are under men. You guys, this is the definition of abuse—power and control over another human being. Religions call this tradition, and some even say that the Bible teaches it. But power and control over someone else is abuse, plain and simple. Jesus did not teach power and control, nor did Paul. There are so many resources out there that debunk that kind of destructive theology. If you go to my website, flyingfreenow.com, in the top menu bar there is a resources link. If you click on that, you'll get a drop-down menu. One of those pages is for pastors and other people helpers, and there's another page that gives resources to help you learn another perspective about women and ministry. Here's the thing. If you believe that women are limited in the scope of their ministry simply because they are missing something between their legs, then you may need to do a little more studying on that subject. If you are



anything like me, I grew up in an extremely conservative environment, and I lived my entire adult life in that environment. I had only studied the propaganda that I had been spoon fed my entire life. That was my entire worldview; that was all I knew. In fact, I'd been warned not to study anything else. But breaking out of that spiritually abusive environment enabled me to branch out and study other Bible scholars and teachers, and it opened my eyes to see a God who is not abusive, a God that I don't have to be afraid of, but a consistent, loving, Creator God who brings safety, freedom, peace, and joy. I think my favorite go-to resource as far as a curriculum... You asked about a curriculum. I highly recommend the Give Her Wings Academy. It is a systematic curriculum. I think it takes nine months or maybe a year to go through it. It's for pastors, people helpers, biblical counselors, and any kind of counselor. It has some amazing teachers in there. Just go and check out their website. I believe it is giveherwingsacademy.com or Google it if that's not the exact URL. I highly recommend that one, and then again there are links to other resources if you go to my website flyingfreenow.com and click on the resources button in the menu bar.

Okay, you guys. That's all I have for you today. If you enjoy this podcast, please go over to Apple iTunes and leave a rating and review so that other Christian woman can find this podcast. Share it with a friend. Share it with your counselor. Let other people know that this resource exists. We have 101 episodes as of today, and that's a huge vault of incredible information and education that is completely and totally free and available to Christian women. Let's get it into the hands of as many Christian women as possible. Let's raise awareness of emotional and spiritual abuse in the church of Jesus Christ so that the church at large is not something that is known for this. Right now, it is kind of known for being abusive. That's the exact opposite of what I believe Jesus Christ came to establish in the hearts and lives of men and women. That's it! Thanks for listening. Until next time, fly free!

