

IS IT MY FAULT OUR MARRIAGE IS BAD?

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 109 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I'm going to be answering two listener questions, so let's dive in.

QUESTION 1: Hi Natalie. I wanted to know how you worked through not blaming yourself or taking on the blame of your ex-husband and how did you work through... What are some keys or tools that you worked through with not taking all the responsibility on your shoulders of what happened in the marriage, through separation and divorce, and even in current circumstances with your ex-husband?

NATALIE: I think this is a great question to launch a discussion about boundaries – what is yours and what is mine. I see a lot of confusion in Christian survivor circles about this, because I think that as awareness grows about how survivors took too much responsibility, meaning they took responsibility for their marriage, their husband's emotions, the behavior of their kids, whether the in-laws were happy, the management of the home, the care and feeding and happiness of all the millions of humans around them, and on and on it went – they took responsibility for all those things, and then they realized it wasn't all theirs to take.

Many of them, having been traumatized and taken advantage of for so long, throw off that responsibility, which is good. But they also throw off some of the responsibility that does belong to them. Mainly, I'm talking about the responsibility they have for themselves. I see a lot of survivors expecting or hoping that other people will step up and rescue them. They see this damage that has been done to them. They are exhausted. They are often angry, and rightly so. But sometimes they may overcorrect the problem to their detriment.

Instead of taking back their personal power and letting go of the responsibility only for others, they give up all the responsibility. Then they feel disappointment and abandonment when nobody steps in to pick them up. I get it! For crying out loud, you've been giving, giving, giving, and giving for decades. Isn't it about time to get a little in return?

I remember when my church excommunicated me for divorcing my ex. One thing that

caused me deep frustration was the fact that I had spent my entire life, literally from the time I was a child, serving in church ministries. The same women that I had driven to Bible studies, hosted Bible studies for in my home, donated money to, babysat their kids in the nursery, taken meals to – some of these very same women voted to excommunicate me instead of giving me what I desperately needed, which was help and support.

I was single-parenting eight kids at the time and working full-time to make ends meet, and some of my kids have special needs. Nobody stepped in to help. Honestly, I didn't think that was right. It really wasn't right. But it is what it is. The fact of life is that people can't always help us when we need it the most. Some can't help because they don't want to, and some can't help because they are overwhelmed with their own problems. We can fight that reality. We can resist that and push that reality away. We can complain, freak out, and hope that others will step up, but that will only make us feel worse. You can't control other people. Spending our energy wanting other people to do right by us is a waste of our superpower. Other people get to do what they choose to do.

That doesn't mean we can't ask for help. We can certainly request help. But they can say, "No," and we don't have a right to be angry about that. They aren't responsible for us. When we have this belief, "They aren't meeting my needs," we feel resentful. When we feel resentful, we fume. We spin. We may try to manipulate to get them to meet our needs. We buffer and we wait. Resentfulness doesn't inspire or motivate us to meet our own needs. The result is that we don't meet our own needs.

Our result proves to our brain that what it believes is true. "Nobody is going to meet my needs. Life sucks! I'm going to die!" That is what our brain on autopilot sometimes believes. In the programs that I offer, we call our brains Myrtle. Myrtle can be quite dramatic sometimes. We love her to pieces, but she needs some redirection. It is our job as adults to calm her down so we can step into our own personal power.

All that was the background for what I'm going to say next, because I'm guessing you are wondering if I am ever going to answer the question. As a reminder, the question was how to not take the blame for the failure of a marriage, and how to figure out what kind of responsibility is actually ours for the marriage, for the separation, for the divorce, and everything that follows. If your partner was emotionally abusive and he refused to take responsibility for his behavior, then he is responsible for creating the results of that. What are the results? An abusive marriage.

It only takes one partner to make an abusive marriage. It takes an abuser. The victim is

not the problem. The victim doesn't cause the demise of the marriage just by virtue of her being present in the marriage or having one day said, "I do," to an abuser. She's not responsible for his behavior. She is also not responsible for his happiness. She is not responsible for his emotional well-being, his healing, his comfort, or his spiritual growth. She is not responsible for what her church leaders believe is true or not true. She is not responsible for the rules in her church or what her friends and family choose to make her divorce mean for them.

All the thoughts, ideas, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of all the other human beings belong to those other human beings. The results they get in their own lives because of their own choices also belong to them. She has nothing to do with that. She's only responsible for her own thoughts, beliefs, emotions, feelings, and behaviors and the results those things bring her.

People really struggle with this. In general, people are pretty much all up in everyone else's business. Christians tend to think it's their God-given duty, so they put a little spiritual spin on their meddling. What do we do about this? How should we think about this? I think we need to get really good at letting go. We let go of all the external stuff, all the stuff outside ourselves that we can't control anyway. We let go of what other people think about us. You can't control that. We let go of making them happy. Why do we want them to be happy in the first place? When you think about it, we want them to be happy so that we will be happy. If they're happy, then we're happy. We manipulate things to ensure that they will be happy, and sometimes at our expense. Then we resent it anyway.

It's like our neighbor complaining about her rose garden that needs weeding. She whines and complains all the livelong day until you finally go over there and weed it for her. Now she's happy, but you are annoyed. Now she complains about how her kitchen needs to be cleaned and insinuates that it's your fault it's dirty and, "Aren't you going to do something about it?"

Do you get the analogy here? Other people like you to come over and take care of their house and yard, but that's not your job. Also, other people want to come over to your house and yard to rearrange the furniture the way they like it. That's not their job. Everyone needs to stay in their own house and yard. Then we can get together with invitations and have fun while leaving the responsibility to each person. That, my friends, is how you don't take responsibility for the demise of the marriage, for the separation, for the divorce, and all the crap that follows, especially when it comes to custody and all that drama. You get really good at taking your own responsibility and letting go of theirs.

So when the church says that it's your job to save the marriage by having better sex, you can just chuckle at the emotional childishness of that statement and walk away. It's adorable that they think that, but you don't have to think that. You know that great sex takes two involved lovers who are safe with each other, not one.

When your husband says you ruined the marriage by filing for divorce, you can let him have his fascinating beliefs. He will not change his mind because you have an argument with him, so why waste your breath? You know you filed because he was a naughty man, and after two decades you realized he wouldn't stop being naughty. He can totally be naughty. It's his life. He's an adult. He gets to be an asshole if he wants to be. But you're not the gal who lives with a naughty man, so you filed. End of story! He's responsible for being abusive, and you are responsible for your choice to not be with that guy.

When your church says that you can't be a member there anymore because you broke the member rules, guess what? If you signed a paper saying that you would keep their stupid rules (and I did this), then they have every right to play their kindergarten game by their rules and kick you out. They really do. They are responsible for their own club rules, and you are responsible for making the badass choice to break their game rules because for you, so much more was at stake. Their little game was no longer important to you. You grew up, and that's okay. But take responsibility for growing up. It feels really good!

I know many survivors look back on the marriage and wonder what they could have done differently. I've done that. I certainly didn't do everything perfectly. Who does? Not even the nicest, sweetest gem of a person does everything perfect or even close to perfect. Marriage is about two humans living together and building a life together, and that takes some work. But it is totally doable when you have two people who simply take responsibility for their own house and yard – for their own behavior.

I can look back and say that when I messed up, I always admitted it and said I was sorry. The issue was when my ex messed up he didn't admit it or say he was sorry. Instead, he made his bad behavior about me somehow. That is not a victim's responsibility – ever. Snapping, being too loud when you come to bed, leaving your socks on the floor, forgetting to get the right food at the grocery store, parking the car wrong, making mistakes – all these are normal human things that are easily remedied with a simple, "I'm sorry. I need to work on that," or "I bet you needed to sleep, and I made that difficult for you. I'm so sorry. I'll do better."

Most survivors are those kinds of people. Most abusers are not. They would rather

have a root canal than say they are sorry for anything. They cannot be wrong or do wrong or feel wrong or say wrong. But I'm telling you, something is wrong with their programming. But it isn't your job to fix it, nor can you, contrary to the belief of many people who still believe that we are responsible for the houses and yards of other adults. Let's listen to the second question.

QUESTION 2: My husband and I have been married for fifteen years. We have a two and a half year old, almost three year old, daughter. We were married for twelve years before we had our first and only child. I had always dreamed of being able to quit my job and be a stay-at-home mom. Thankfully, I've been able to do that. For the last almost three years it has just been me and my baby at home, bonding and having that time together. It's been so precious to me.

It's taken having a child of my own to really see and realize that I am in an abusive marriage. I'm getting to the place where I do want to get out. But the part that scares me the most and that I dread the most is knowing that if I do, then I will probably have to go back to work. What will I do with my daughter? Will I have to put her in a daycare center? We won't have this time together that we are used to, not to mention joint custody where I don't get to be with her all the time. We are hardly ever apart now. I think that would kill me more than anything. I guess my question is what advice would you have for someone in my situation with a small child who doesn't want to give up being a stay-at-home mom, but I know I need to do something for my health and for the health of my child and our home environment?

NATALIE: First, I want you to know that I hear you. You are crazy in love with that little girl. She's yours. She's vulnerable. She's very young. She needs you, and frankly, you need her too. There is an emotional and hormonal bond that is like super glue. The thought of tearing that bond apart is going to bring a feeling of deep sorrow and loss. It probably feels like you've lost control of all that is good and right. Now you and your child are going to suffer.

First, you need to know that it is true that you don't have control over your husband and what he does or over the external circumstances of your life. I also want to talk to other moms out there who may have older kids they've been home-educating their entire lives. This is kind of the same thing. These are kids who are in your life every day. You love them. You love their presence. It's hard to let go of your dreams. It's even harder to let go of your kids. You know that if you decide to file for divorce, you are probably going to have to let go of both, or at least it will feel that way for a while.

You do have a choice, though. You need to tell your brain that so that it doesn't feel like

you are in a corner. You do have a choice. You can stay in the marriage and work on boundaries. You can work on completing the stress cycle. You can work on mind management. It is an option, and you need to know that you have that option. You have another option to get out of the marriage and chart a new course on unfamiliar ground. That is very uncomfortable for our brains. Our brains dislike change. They don't like to chart new courses. They want to keep the same synapses they have been experiencing their entire lives.

Believe me, I understand that neither of these courses is amazing. They are both full of massive amounts of pain, loss, and stress. These two choices are the choices of the woman who is married to an abuser. It is one of the many reasons that abuse is so tragic and life-altering. If you are listening to this episode and are single and contemplating marrying someone who exhibits signs of being an emotional abuser, then just be aware that one day on your journey, you too will come to this same crossroads. Both choices will gape at you.

When I faced this dark place, the only way I could choose was to actually go down each road a bit in my imagination so I could see where each road might lead me and my children. I wrote down what each road would be like, and I lived it in my imagination. Then I made my choice and I started walking. Five years later, I am where I thought I would be five years ago, and I'm much further. I have experienced what I imagined and so much more. I drank deeply from the horrors of that journey, but I also drank deeply from the beauties of that journey. I have no regrets.

But my life is only mine to live, and I can't live yours. You are the one with skin in this game. You are the one who knows your husband and what he is capable of. You are the one who knows what your daughter needs both now and ten years from now. Your brain may tell you that you don't know, because not knowing feels safer for your brain. But as an adult woman, you do know. The adult you knows. You know the timing. You know a lot of what is around the bend. We just don't always want to look at it.

If I were coaching you right now, I would probably ask you to question your brain's programming. I would ask you to write down all the things you believe about being a mom, about parenting, about daycare, about employment, about men and women and marriage, about responsibility, about divorce and custody, about what kids can and can't handle, and about what is safe or not safe. Then I'd ask you to look at your list of beliefs and ask yourself where those beliefs came from and whether you want to keep those beliefs. You may want to. Or you may look at some of them and say, "I want to change some of these beliefs."

I thought my kids needed to be homeschooled, and I homeschooled for twenty years. It was good for one of my kids. In fact, it was the perfect choice for him. But it was a horrible and destructive choice for two of my other kids. It was a neutral to slightly negative choice for some of the others. I had an education degree. I love teaching, and I loved homeschooling most of the time. But I didn't know then what I know now about what my kids needed. I had a lot of strong beliefs that I refused to question until questioning them became necessary. Hindsight is always 20/20, right?

Here's my point. You can't know, either. None of us can. But maybe we can hold our beliefs a little more loosely so we don't miss opportunities to learn new ideas and try new things. I do that now, and it is greatly beneficial to my younger kids that I do. My older kids have seen me pivot, and I think some of them respect me for that. Some of them may judge me a little for that. I raised them in a pharisaical environment, so I can't be surprised if they've picked up some Pharisee fleas, right?

Back to your question of advice. I can't tell you what decision to make, but I can tell you this: Don't make any moves until you know for sure it is what you want to do and that you have really good reasons that you love for doing it. Finally, make sure you have your own back in doing it, no matter what happens.

I have two programs for Christian women. One is for women who are wondering if they are in an abusive marriage or not. Or maybe they do know, and they want to learn more about who they are and how to get their power back. Or maybe they are separated and going through a divorce, and they need support. That program is called Flying Free. It has helped hundreds of women find hope and healing.

I also have a new program for Christian women who are divorced called Flying Higher. This program focuses not on healing, but on rebuilding our lives in seven key areas: Our relationships, our finances, our careers or missions, our environment, our faith, our emotional health, and our physical health.

You can apply for these programs by going to joinflyingfree.com or joinflyinghigher.com. I always offer women who apply a few perks just for applying. So don't miss out!

That's all I have for you today. If this program is helpful for you, please do me a huge favor and head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a rating and review. Your rating and review will encourage my socks right off my feet, but it will also encourage Apple Podcasts to show this podcast to more Christian women who need to hear what it offers. In this way, you can help others fly free as well. Speaking of flying free, until next

time, I hope you'll do exactly that – fly free!