

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M DOING THE RIGHT THING BY LEAVING MY EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE HUSBAND?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://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 11 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today it's just me, and so what I decided to do is go way back to 2017, and I found a Facebook Live where people were asking questions on Facebook, and I was answering those questions. And I was reading through them and realized they're so relevant for today, and I decided that I was going to kind of do a repeat of that here on the Flying Free Podcast for you. So basically this is going to be a question/answer session, and let's get started.

The first question is, "Why do you think longtime church friends refuse to help when the wife starts telling the truth, and instead of helping her, they shun her and help the abusive husband instead?" The next question which was related is, "Why does the church refuse to acknowledge that this is a serious problem and take real steps to address it?" And the third related question is, "Why is there no church discipline?"

Okay, so my answer to the first question is this: There are two different worldviews at play here. In one worldview, we have women who are relegated to an underling status, created only to serve under a man, and not a whole lot more. In that worldview, it isn't proper for a woman to protest her lot in life. Men are innately deserving of royal treatment from their woman, and a married woman is viewed as the property or extension of her husband. If the man is unhappy or cruel or rude or abusive, the issue lies with the woman. She isn't doing her job to make him happy. If she were more submissive, happier, kept the home cleaner, kept the kids quieter, read her husband's mind and never gave him any feedback, then maybe he'd be nicer to her.

So everyone who buys into this worldview is going to be upset when a woman bucks the status quo. The reason that your friends support your husband is because they believe that he is in the right and you are in the wrong. That is their worldview. So why does the church refuse to acknowledge that this is a serious problem? Because the church preaches that worldview. That is the church's worldview as well. It's a feeder into the abuse dynamic.

And finally, why is there no church discipline? Well, there actually is. The church often does discipline one of the parties, but the party that they discipline more often than not is the female who's bucking their system. So she's usually the one who gets kicked out.

Now, this is a spiritually abusive environment. The answer for you personally is not to try to change others. That means we don't try to change the church. We don't try to change our friends and their worldview. We don't try to change our abuser in his worldview.

The answer lies in being able to let go of everybody else and what they think and what they believe and to turn your focus back to Jesus Christ Himself and to you and change yourself. Move away from the groups and institutions that are teaching a destructive worldview. And this will involve some studying and reading, and you can find resources on my website, [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com).

The next question is, "Should I tell my spouse my plans to leave and/or to file for divorce?" I think the answer to this is going to be different for different people. I think it's good to take things slowly and in increments to avoid a huge blow up. One suggestion is to say that you are moving out to give yourself some space and time to think through what you can and can't handle anymore in the marriage. If you're leaving yourself, this is all you really need to say, if anything. If you want him to move out, then you may need to get some outside help to make that happen, because most abusive men are not just going to move out because you asked them. That's been my experience personally, and I've seen that pretty much across the board. So you can actually see a lawyer and you can file papers to have the person leave the home while you are working through a divorce.

After some time has passed during your separation, you can file divorce — if you file for divorce — if you want to, and when they are served papers, that's their message. Or you can tell them in advance if you have some good reasons for doing so. Often when you give an abusive person a heads up about your plans, they will do things to thwart those plans, okay? It's not always the best idea to give an abuser personal information about yourself, about your future, about what you're doing. By this time, you want to be setting up some very clear boundaries between you and that person. One of the reasons why this abuse dynamic is in play is because of the lack of boundaries. So you want to be working to change that, and that means not sharing information with him. But it really does depend on you and that person and your circumstances as far as what information you do share and what information you don't.

Another question is this: "Do you think when deciding whether to reconcile or divorce after months of separation and watching and weighing, et cetera, that it is possible to be absolutely sure that you're making the right decision? In other words, is it reasonable or realistic to wait for that absolute feeling?"

So I want to be really clear about this. I think the answer is that it is possible to be absolutely sure that you're making the right decision. But having that absolute feeling is not the same thing as wanting absolutely to do it, okay? We often know in our gut that we should do something, but we don't want to do it, and that's why we rationalize it away. I actually do encourage women to make sure that they are sure of their choice before jumping off that cliff. Why? Because the consequences of that jump are extremely painful. This is not a cakewalk in the park to get out of an abusive marriage. The way out is going to take Herculean effort in many cases, and even several years. You need to have that confidence and resolve in order to get all the way from point A to point B — or, I should say point Z.

Now, I waited probably longer than I should have to be certain. But when I did finally make that decision, I knew I was never going to look back, and I never did. You kind of want to get to that place, and it definitely takes some time, so be patient with yourself and let that process unfold naturally. You will eventually come to a place where you are sure.

The next question is, "How do I know if he is changing this time? He is getting counseling and the church has talked to him, but not to me. He's doing some things to show that he's trying, but this has been what he does for the past twenty-three years, and he is a chronic liar. He cheats me and the family out of money and time. I do and I don't want to believe again. I'm so very tired of being on this rollercoaster and I want to get off desperately. I'm trying to hold on, but there's not much left and I have no more strength."

So first of all, you and your church cannot force a person to change. That is actually an unhealthy crossing of boundaries, and Jesus never did that. You were never going to see Jesus running after the rich, young ruler and saying, "Oh, come back. Come back. You need to change." He never did that. Jesus extended invitation to repentance and change, but He did not ever force anybody to do that. And indeed, many, many people that He was in contact with never did change. They never did change their worldview. They never did change their behavior, okay? And He was the Son of God. So I don't know why some of us and some churches and some spiritual leaders believe... I think they're extremely naive and possibly a little bit arrogant to believe that they somehow have the superpowers to change another human being when not even God chooses to do that, okay?

Here's the thing, the bottom line: You are not responsible for your abuser. You are responsible for you. It is a very tragic situation that many churches will reach out... They'll put lots of time and energy into trying to help an abusive spouse to help force

them to change rather than investing that same time and energy and focus and the resources to help the women and the children who are trying to recover from the abuse. I think the reason that they do that is because their goal is not to help individuals so much as it is to save the marriage, and they believe in their worldview that if the abuser can change, then the wife will be safe and the marriage will be saved and everything will be fine. So they're starting at the wrong place and for the wrong reasons.

So our job as believers is to minister to the people who come to us for help, not to force people who don't want help to change. Because here's the deal: Change only happens for real — I'm talking about real change, not fake change or temporary change, but real deep and lasting change — only happens when a person pursues and desires it for themselves. Conviction that leads to real repentance and real change has to come from inside a person, not from external pressure. External pressure will force an abuser to change on the outside. They will go through all kinds of hoops in order to manage their image and maintain control of their partner. It's all about control and image management at that point.

Now, the reason that you wonder if you can trust him this time is because you said it yourself: He's a chronic liar and a cheat. You can't trust him because he is not trustworthy, and that's not your issue. That is a normal consequence of what happens in a relationship where one person chronically lies and cheats. The question you should be asking yourself is not whether or not you can trust that he's changing, because the answer to that is "no." The question you should be asking is what you are going to do about the fact that you can't trust him. How is that going to impact your future? And you get to decide that. Not your lying, cheating spouse, not your religious community. You are the one who has to live with the consequences of being in close proximity to a liar and a cheater. So you get to decide what to do about that, and what your religious community and your friends think about that is completely and totally irrelevant.

The next question is, "How do you know when it's time to walk away and never look back? How do you find the strength and courage to do so?" So I suggest that you do these three things. Number one, remind yourself over and over again that the past is the best predictor of the future. Say it out loud with me: The past is the best predictor of the future. Abuse is a cycle. It has a good side and a bad side. Now, of course, abuse is all bad, and the good side is what hooks you in. So when I say there's a good side, it's not really good. The entire package is bad, okay? If you can remember that the good part of the cycle is just a worm on a hook, then you will stop seeing it as good. Just because an abuser has a good day (and that's usually when everything is going his way), that doesn't mean that he is fixed or that your relationship is okay.

Number two, set up some boundaries, implement them, and watch what happens when you stick to your guns. All hell usually breaks loose. Sometimes this is all it takes to open your eyes to the reality of the abuse and give you the motivation and momentum to do something about it for yourself.

And number three, walking away is tricky. It's horrifically painful on every level. I wrote a blog article about how it's like climbing out of a pit on a hot ladder where every single ladder rung is burning hot and hurts like crazy. So the alternative, though, to climbing that ladder and getting out of the pit of abuse is to just stay at the bottom of the pit. You get to decide when you've had enough and you are ready to take that painful journey up and out.

I have a private education and support group called Flying Free. If you want to be part of that group or you want to learn more, all you have to do is go to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com). That group can change your life, literally. I've had hundreds of testimonies of how that group has helped women in ways that counseling has never been able to help them, in ways that other things that they've tried have not been able to help them. This has finally been an answer for many, many, many women, and it could be an answer for you too, so explore that at [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com).

Here's the next question: "My husband left a few weeks ago after I set up some boundaries that made him very angry. I thought about sending him links to Patrick Doyle's videos on abusive relationships and what real repentance looks like while he's gone. However, I just watched your video from a link, and you suggested not sending him any information, as abusive men will end up turning it back on you. My question is, could these videos help paint a clearer picture to him and help me communicate that I'm not willing to go on unless we seek individual counseling to see if change is possible?"

Whenever you begin to set boundaries with an abuser, the abuse cycle is going to intensify. You want to know if you should send your husband some helpful videos to communicate your belief that you both need to work on yourselves. But my advice to you is no. It is not your responsibility to spoon feed a person who has historically been closed to all personal feedback from you. He's already made it crystal clear over the many years of your marriage what he likes and what he doesn't like. So why would you want to violate his boundaries in this area? You gleaned wisdom from Patrick Doyle videos? That is wonderful. Your abuser, though, is a big boy. If he wanted help, he would be googling information and help just like you did. The fact is, he doesn't want help. He doesn't believe he needs any help.

I recommend simply stating in as few words as possible, with as little emotion as possible, what your plans are. Just say, "I am no longer going to tolerate your abusive treatment. I'm getting help for myself to recover and heal. What you choose to do for yourself is your business, but if you continue to treat the kids and I abusively, I will take steps to deal with that in a legal manner, and it may mean that our marriage will not last. I do not plan to warn you about this any further."

The next question is, "Why do I feel attachment to my husband and why don't I feel any relief? Does this mean that I should go back to him?" What you are experiencing is trauma bonding, which basically means that you are physiologically addicted to that person, literally. Chemicals like dopamine and serotonin along with stress chemicals get released into your body system during the different parts of the abuse cycle, and your body literally becomes addicted to those rushes. Getting away requires a time of detox, which includes intense withdrawal symptoms.

But once you've successfully gone through that process, and I suggest that you do it with the help of a counselor or therapist who is experienced in trauma recovery, you will then be in a place where you can see clearly and make better decisions for yourself and move on with confidence and hope. The Flying Free membership community is also there to help you to detox with the support of your peers and mentors.

The next question is, "How do I learn to not be so critical of myself when I go backwards?" This is a personal growth thing. Human beings are naturally judgey and critical. It's just in our human nature. We hate on ourselves and we hate on others. This is the exact opposite of what God intended. When we truly see ourselves through the eyes of our Father God, we are able to relax and rest knowing that we are fully loved and fully safe no matter what we do, no matter how many mistakes we make, or how many times we regress.

In Flying Free, we work on self-compassion and care. We cannot love others fully and with vulnerability if we are hating on ourselves. When we know that we are safe, that's when we have the power to create safe places for others, and this is what it means to grow up to the fullness of Christ in us.

The next question is, "How can I forgive myself for marrying him in the first place — for divorcing him? How can I live the rest of my life without being oppressed by guilt thinking I must have sinned? Because some Christians believe abuse isn't biblical grounds for divorce, but I knew that I was dying and I had to get out."

You feel guilty because you believe deep down that you have done something wrong.



You can't forgive yourself because you feel no forgiveness from God. You are basically believing what other selfish and sinful and misguided human beings are telling you, but that is not what God tells us in His word. People love to lay the law on others. It makes them feel better about themselves if they can compare themselves with other people and say, "Well, you're not obeying in this area, but I am." Remember the judgey, critical nature of humans? But Jesus Christ took all of your sin on Himself so that you would no longer need to bear it. This is what freedom in Christ means. You can let go of that heavy burden and you can leave it at the cross. His righteousness is now imputed to you.

This means that when God the Father looks at you, He sees all the holiness of God the Son looking back. It is truly a miracle, and one that you can embrace and walk free in. You were not made to remain a caterpillar crawling on the ground. Jesus died so that you could be transformed into a beautiful butterfly and be set free.

The last question is, "I had to go no contact, but we have children. We're in the middle of the divorce now, but the kids are having to deal with him directly. My teenager is no longer wanting to see him because of the emotional damage that she's experiencing. Our younger children don't understand yet. There is a guardian ad litem involved, but it takes time. How do I protect our children in the meantime?"

Your goal is to focus on your own parenting. You cannot do anything about how your ex parents. What you need to do is practice empathic parenting. Your kids are not going to be getting empathy from their father, so you need to do double-duty parenting in this area. Empathy is extremely important for a human's healthy, mental, and psychological development. All people need to feel, on a very basic and deep level, that they are heard and understood — that they are seen. If you can hear and validate your child's emotional world, they will trust you and be safe with you.

Remember that we deal with our children's feelings before we can solve their problems, okay? Let me say that again. We deal with our children's feelings — feelings — before we can solve their problems. The child needs to feel valued for who they are, not what they do. When you parent with empathy, you are in tune to your child's emotions all the time. You are validating their feelings. When they come to you with something hurtful that their dad did, you simply listen and sit with them in the chaos of their emotions. Now, that doesn't mean that you coddle them or add gasoline to the fire of their drama. You need to be the adult, you need to stay calm, stay in control, teach them healthy boundary skills.

For example, I knew of a situation where a girl came home one weekend and said that

her dad had been kicking the back of her chair. She asked him to stop, and of course, what happens when you ask a narcissist to stop doing what they want to do? Well, they get angry, and instead of stopping, he kept doing it and verbally attacked her by saying, "You're so cranky. What's the big deal? You're always such a crank." So she calmly stated again, "Dad, I'm not crabby right now. I just don't want you to kick my chair."

Now, of course, he still didn't hear her or validate her experience that she was a separate human being with a separate experience, that she had a right to not enjoy having her chair kicked, she had a right to ask him to stop. He didn't hear any of that, and he didn't believe any of that, but at least she had learned to do her part. She spoke the truth out loud, which was a benefit to her brain and her mind, even if her dad was unwilling to see her as a separate person and respect her wishes to not have her chair kicked.

So teaching your kids healthy boundaries is going to serve them well when they grow up and move on with their lives. They will undoubtedly meet other narcissistic people in the workplace and elsewhere, so hopefully they will be better equipped than most people at spotting them and dealing with them. Certainly better equipped than maybe we were. There are two parenting books that I highly recommend. One is called "Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child" by John Gottman, and another one by Heather Forbes called "Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control." And a children's book that I recommend is, "Growing Up with a Bucket Full of Happiness." It's an excellent book.

And then finally, if you can get them into counseling, I highly recommend that. Outcomes for children of divorce and children who have one parent that is narcissistic are so much better if they can get therapy — outside counseling and therapy. And I recommend a secular counselor who is experienced in helping children heal from trauma.

So that's all we have for today. If you would like more information, you want to learn more, please head over to my website, [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com). Otherwise, fly free.