

STAYING CONNECTED TO OUR KIDS POST-DIVORCE

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 114 of the Flying Free Podcast. We have some great questions from some listeners. Let's hear our first question.

CALLER 1: My husband and I have been married for fifteen years. We have a two-and-a-half-year-old, almost three-year-old, daughter, so we were married for twelve years before we had our only child. I had always dreamed of being able to quit my job and be a stay-at-home mom, and 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.

Honestly, the part that scares me the most and that I dread the most is knowing that if I do, 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're used to, not to mention joint custody where I don't get to be with her all the time. We're hardly ever apart now, so I think that would kill me more than anything. My question is, what advice would you have for someone in this situation with a small child who doesn't want to give up being a stay-at-home mom? I know I need to do something for my health and for the health of my child in our home environment.

NATALIE: First, I want to thank you for your question. Thanks to the rest of you who've been leaving questions at the link that I put in the show notes. I appreciate all your questions. This particular question I have heard many times before. I think it is especially concerning for younger moms who have little kids. I think it's great that you are recognizing the abuse early on. That means the education and awareness that is growing in our world around this issue is working. It's effective. It's waking women up sooner than later and giving them tools they need to get out, especially in the Christian environment.

But when you have younger kids, this can be really nerve-wracking, because we sense that younger children are less able to stand up for themselves with an abusive parent. They are less able to understand the dynamic. They are less able to cope. I think you have a few different options, and I think it is important to at least look at all those

options as objectively as you can in order to make a decision you feel is right for you. You could make a decision now that you may change your mind about six months from now based on things that happen. Don't ever feel that if you make a decision, you are locked in for life. Absolutely not. You can change your mind any time you want to. Sometimes it frees us up to decide if we realize that it's not the end of the world if we end up changing our mind down the road.

One option is that you could stay in your relationship until your child is old enough to go to school, and once she's in school, she would have the involvement of other caring adults who would have their eyes on her and on your situation. I think this has been really helpful for my own younger kids. Then when she's in school, you can go to work and get a job. Another option is to get a job where you can work at home. There are a growing number of companies now that, because of COVID... COVID was a bad deal, but there were a few good things that came out of COVID. One of them is that a lot of companies have realized the value and savings in having employees work from home. The job market for work-at-home people has grown. I think this is something you could explore. If you worked at home, you could leave your marriage and still support yourself and still be with your child. I see a lot of women doing this and making this work.

Another option is to think differently about your experience in order to alleviate some of that fear and dread that you talked about. Right now you have the belief that you have this wonderful bonding time with your daughter and that it will go away if you end up getting divorced and have to put her in daycare or whatever. But I think it is an option to believe that you will still have amazing, wonderful bonding times with her even if you share custody or if you have to go to work. I think another option to believe is that most parents have to work and that most kids do fine in daycare. I think this is a human experience. It doesn't ruin people's lives, and there is nothing wrong with that childhood experience. Again, I'm just throwing out ideas. Nobody has to believe these things. These are optional. I think lots of times we think there is always a right and a wrong answer, but there isn't. There are options to choose from.

It's also optional to believe that whether you stay or leave your relationship, your child is going to have some wonderful life moments and she's also going to have some painful life moments, because that is life on planet Earth. When we bring children into this world, that is what we are bargaining. We're bringing them into their own life journey that will be full of great things and hard things. One thing I want to offer you for sure is the fact that when you are a healthy and whole person, you will be able to offer the best of who you are to your child in the time that you have with her. You'll be able to offer her a beautiful example of a mom who is present, who is strong, who is

capable, who does what it takes, who makes hard decisions, who is okay to fail and make mistakes, and who gets back up and tries again. That kind of role model will have a huge impact on your child's psychological, spiritual, and physical development. Right now, what you are feeling is fear and dread.

If I were coaching you in one of my programs, I would ask you what you do when you are full of fear and dread. I'm not sure how you would answer, but I think when a lot of us feel fearful we tend to hide, we don't make decisions, we procrastinate, we beat ourselves up, we panic, we jump to wild conclusions, we believe the worst is inevitable, and we loop around and around in our minds. When we're doing all those things, it's hard for us to be present with our kids when we're riddled with fear about the future. Do you know what the result is? When we think we're going to lose all this great bonding with our child, we end up not being present with our child anyway. Then we prove what our brain already believes. We miss out on some great bonding because of all that fear that distracts us.

This is the kind of situation I do live coaching on with the women in my programs every single week. If I were coaching you in my program, I'd bring you on and we'd uncover some of those inner beliefs that you have around divorce, children, motherhood, working, daycare, and all the rest. Then we'd look at the results those beliefs bring to your life and whether or not you like those results. We'd also explore some other options so you can spend some really amazing time with your child and make the most of these beautiful days with her. Sometimes we get away from our abusers and end up beating ourselves up and wasting so much emotion and energy on guilt and fear instead of leaning into love and hope. It's as if the abuser's voice is still in our head, controlling us. That negative energy seeps into all the other areas of our lives. This is exactly what I help women with in Flying Free, which is my program for women of faith in abusive relationships, and how I help divorced women in the Flying Higher program. If this is the first time you've ever heard me talk or the first time you've heard of these programs, you can go check them out and learn more about them by going to joinflyingfree.com, or if you are already divorced, you can go to joinflyinghigher.com and learn more. Let's listen to our next question.

CALLER 2: Hi Natalie. I'd love you to talk about parental alienation, when a spouse pits the children against you and causes them to hate you, turn on you, and not want anything to do with you. My husband, after his lawyer told him the children get to choose which spouse they want to live with, actively went on a campaign to get the children to want to live with dad and believe that mom was crazy, et cetera. It was very hurtful. I know you mainly deal with mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse. One way that churches and spouses can abuse women is sex — either withholding or doing

things that a spouse is uncomfortable with. My husband has said that there's no such thing as marital rape; that if I'm a Christian, my body doesn't belong to me and that I need to be willing to yield and deny myself and die to myself. My church excommunicated me, and the verse they gave me that I should obey is to "Submit to your husband in everything." I filed for divorce when I decided that it's not okay for a man to treat his wife horribly, sexually assault them, or rape them and make that a continual threat with the contingency that if I were a Christian, it would not be rape... Please touch on this subject. Thank you.

NATALIE: There are two separate issues here. We're going to take them one at a time. I don't know how old your kids are, but the information that your husband's attorney gave to him is incorrect. Children do not get to choose which parent to live with. There are some states that will have an age limit on that. Some states will say if they are fifteen or sixteen they might have a say, but in most states the general rule is that it is in the best interest of the children to spend time with both parents post-divorce; unless, of course, there is documented evidence of physical or sexual abuse. That attorney has offered his client some misinformation. Your spouse has used that information to believe that he can convince the kids to choose him. This is psychologically harmful to children for us as moms to do it or for dads to do it. I would encourage you to get them into some counseling where they can process their thoughts and feelings about the divorce, and maybe about some things their dad is doing, with a trained, experienced, and licensed therapist who specializes in children and divorce.

As far as what you can do, I would simply tell them the truth. Look up the law in your state and inform your children that it is in their best interest to spend time with both parents, and that is what the courts will decide. Their opinion on the matter is irrelevant. Those of us who have children who don't want to spend time with their dad, we must tell our children the same thing: "No, you can't stay with me tonight. It's dad's turn to spend time with you. If he is being mean to you or something, then you can go to your room and stay away from him. But you need to go spend some time with him. I'll see you again tomorrow. You can call me if you need anything, but everything is going to be okay. You can do this! I'm so proud of you, and I love you. I'll see you in the morning." That's how we can talk to our kids about it. Obviously, the ex-spouse is maybe not going to approach it that way, and we can't do anything about that. But you get to decide how you want to show up in this situation. Your husband is being a petulant child, and he's playing by junior high rules. But you get to rise above that kind of behavior and be the adult that your kids need you to be. They're going to notice that. They're going to notice the difference. They will respect that, eventually gravitate toward that, and hopefully adopt that kind of stance for their own lives.

As far as your husband's belief that rape isn't a thing if you are married, and your church's belief that women need to submit to their husbands in everything, it is really important for all of you to remember that these are just the stories they tell themselves to make their own universe work for them. Even these people would know it is selfish to say, "I should be able to have someone else's body whenever I want to." They sense that. That would be selfish. So they wrap that selfish message in a spiritual story, they take a Bible verse, and they do a bit of twisting in order to get the body that they want to cooperate with them. They cannot meet their needs on their own because of their emotional and spiritual immaturity, so they will blame and shame you into doing it for them. Then they call it your Christian duty. Do you see how this works?

Of course, if you are going to a church that believes these kinds of stories and preaches these kinds of stories, they are going to kick out anyone who doesn't cooperate. This is coercive control, both in the home and in the church community. That is why in churches like this you see so much abuse in all the homes of the couples who are involved in churches like this — not in every couple, but in a lot of them. I don't believe this is actually Christian or Christianity. This is the antithesis of what Jesus Christ teaches about love, sacrifice, and leadership. But you know what? They get to have these beliefs. They are adults, and they get to make their own club rules and live by them with whoever else wants to buy into the same stories and live that way. This is a free country. They can do that.

It sounds like you decided you didn't buy into those stories anymore, so you got the boot. Welcome to the world of adulthood. This is a world where adults get to make their own decisions, and we give other adults freedom to make theirs. This is a world where we don't control other human beings, but instead we empower other human beings to be the best version of themselves possible. This is the world where you get to thrive and grow and learn and make mistakes and change your mind and make more mistakes and take risks and live your amazing life — the life God gave you responsibility for, nobody else. You also get to let go of the manuals of all the other people and let them be responsible for the results in their own lives. It's a pretty nice place to be. I'm saying that from the perspective of having lived in the other world most of my life. Instead of feeling nauseated and full of fear most of the time, you get to feel confident and full of love. Getting the boot out of my own church a few years ago — one of the best things that ever happened to me. It sure hurt at the time, but it really was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I call this world of adulthood "Christianity" — the real version. Let's listen to one more question.

CALLER 3: Hi Natalie. Thank you for creating this platform for women like us. I have been married for eleven years. These eleven years I've been neglected emotionally and

sexually. My husband wouldn't want to touch me despite me pleading, begging, asking, and threatening. He only initiated making love twice over these eleven years. The last four to five years, it was like four or five times because I kept asking for it. The way he talked to me... His attention span is like one minute. You heard me right; it's a minute before his mind goes somewhere else. As a wife, I feel very, very lonely. I asked for a divorce finally two weeks ago, and now I've been seeing a tremendous change in him. He treats my sons better, but I still can't trust him. I'm not sure whether this is all for show or whatnot. Should I forgive him?

NATALIE: First, I want to tell you I am sorry for what you've had to live through for over a decade of your life. I think your husband has made it clear who he is. I think he has shown you over and over again. The only reason he appears to be changing is because you have threatened to take away what he believes belongs to him, so he's doing what most abusers do when their victims make their way out of the relationship. There are some great articles on change and how to know if your husband is really changing or not that we will include in the show notes. If you want to read more about this subject, just go to flyingfreenow.com/114 to get those links.

If you believe he's really changing, you're going to see that change as lasting and real. It's going to be a change that comes from the inside of him, not initiated by anybody else, but initiated by him, coming from inside of him and then radiating to the outside. That is real change. It will not just be this outside, esthetic change so everyone will notice, "Oh my gosh, he's changed." No. It will come from the inside out. You will be able to sense it, because change means change. When a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, the butterfly cannot go back to being a caterpillar, because it has changed. But if you took a caterpillar who was pretending to be a butterfly by pasting wings to its caterpillar body, eventually it will reveal that it can't fly; it didn't really change after all.

So you can decide to stay and see if he has really changed if you want to. I did that. I did that a lot. Or you can do what I eventually did. You can decide that whether or not he has changed, you are done. It is totally up to you. But it sounds like if you are looking for a partner who can listen to you, who can make love to you, and connect with you on the intimate level that you wish to connect with someone else, this is probably not going to be your guy. It's hard for us to accept this, because our brains have been running on a software program that says, "This is the guy I thought I married. If I can just find him in there, all will be well. I'm sure he isn't what he keeps showing me he is. I'm sure he can change. I'm sure if I could just say the right things, give it enough time, or do the right things, then he will be the man that I dreamed he was when I married him." What happens is that we loop and loop on those beliefs for so many years that they are this well-worn highway in our brain's programming. So it will take some effort

and practice to grow some different beliefs based on what you've actually experienced in your relationship rather than on your wishful thinking.

You may want to practice some new thoughts like this: "My husband doesn't like sex, and that's okay. I do, and that's also okay. My husband doesn't like to listen to me, and he doesn't have to like to listen to me. But I want to be with someone who loves to listen to me. I'm going to accept my husband as he is, but I want to be with someone who loves me and is invested in a growing relationship. This means that this guy is not going to be a good fit for me. I wish he was. But I will accept that he is who he is, and I will not expect him to be someone he isn't. I will also accept that I am who I am, and I will not expect myself to be different. I will pursue a life that is safe for me and full of love for myself and my children."

All the original thoughts are optional. We have to understand that. All our beliefs are optional, and the new thoughts are also optional. You get to decide for you what you want to believe and why. Just be aware that the things we believe, the thoughts we have on a regular basis, create feelings inside of our bodies. Those feelings cause us to do certain things. The things we do create our results.

That's all I have for you today. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!