

CAN EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE MARRIAGES BE RESTORED?

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 116 of the Flying Free Podcast. I was thinking about how much I love doing this podcast. I love it so, so much. I'm having so much fun with it. When I was in college, there was a student radio station. My friend and I... You could volunteer to be DJs for this radio station. It was a Christian college, and the student radio station was a Christian radio station. We would play Christian music. In between the songs, my friend and I got to talk on the radio. It felt so real. It was a professional studio. It was all super fun, and I loved it. I kind of feel like this is the closest I can get to being back.

I didn't go into communications or anything. English Education was my major, but my friend was in communications. She had to do a lot of volunteering for that as part of her degree, and I just came along for the fun ride of it. But I kind of feel like I'm doing that now with this podcast. Back then, there were no such things as podcasts. It was just all radio. But now I can do this kind of thing in my home. I'm in my basement. I record in my basement in a closet. I like this so much better than video. For me, I can do video now. I used to be terrified of video. I can do it, and I do it occasionally, but I much prefer the format of audio. I loved recording my book on Audible. I loved recording that, and I love doing this.

I love listening to podcasts. I listen to multiple podcasts every day when I'm getting ready for the day and whenever I'm doing anything that doesn't require my brain. Your brain needs to function if you are listening to a podcast too, but I mean when I'm not having to create anything or attend to children and their issues, and I can just lean into someone else talking. I love it.

Anyway, I want to thank you for being listeners of the Flying Free Podcast, for making this podcast possible, for supporting it through listening, and for supporting it by leaving reviews on Apple Podcasts. Leaving ratings and reviews over there — so many of you have taken me up on that request, and I love it. All that does, besides making me feel happy and making me feel like I'm going to keep doing this... "They like what they're hearing!" I feel like this is scratching an itch. Besides that, it also causes Apple Podcasts to show the podcast to more people as an option. I think that's great, because the messages that are being communicated in this podcast are important for Christian

women to hear, even if they are not in an abusive relationship. It's important that people become aware that emotional and spiritual abuse are a real thing, and they are actually pretty prevalent in the Christian world today.

Today we are going to listen to and answer three listener questions. After we're done, if you want to ask a question, you can. If you go to the podcast page, which is on my website, flyingfreenow.com/116, there's a link there where you can record your own question. You can record it on your phone, laptop, or whatever device you are using. You press the play button, and I think it will allow you to record a question that is up to one-and-a-half-minutes long. Then I keep all those questions in a file. I'll go through every once in a while and record an episode like this one where I'll pull three questions out and answer them. This is something we do in the Flying Free Program as well. We have a Q&A every month, so this gives you a little taste of what we do in the Flying Free Sisterhood Program as well. Let's listen to our first question.

CALLER 1: Natalie, I was curious. You seem to do a lot on people breaking up their marriages. I was wondering if you did anything on reconciliation or restoration for marriages? I just wanted to know. You have a blessed day. Thank you.

NATALIE: I love this question. It gave me a chance to think through what I do, and I love that. Here are some of my thoughts. My work is with Christian women who are in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages. That's my focus. I could choose to work with Christian women who are just married who aren't in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages if I wanted to. But my calling is specifically for women, Christian women or women of faith, who are in these kinds of relationships. They may also experience other types of abuse like financial abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse; but for sure the women I work with are experiencing emotional and spiritual abuse.

By the way, those two types of abuse are always present. Emotional abuse is always present in every other type of abuse. In other words, if you are being financially abused, you are also being emotionally abused. If you and your partner are Christians or involved in a religion of some type, there is always going to be an element of spiritual abuse as well, because usually in an abusive relationship where there is an element of religion, the Bible or God is used to justify the abuse. The question is if I also help to restore marriages. The answer to that is largely no. I don't do that kind of work, because the work I do is to try to help women to get free from abuse.

I think it is important to define our terms here. When we talk about restoring a marriage, what comes to my mind is that there must be something that was healthy before which you now want to restore. For example, if I have an antique desk that has

been sitting in my garage for fifty years and I want to have it restored, that implies there is value in that desk that I could bring back to life with some work and tender loving care so we can restore the desk to its original beauty and luster. But what if I have a large, ugly piece of leftover cement sitting in my backyard that was left there from when the house was built, and nobody has ever removed it? I'm not going to talk about restoring that chunk of cement. I wouldn't use that word "restored" to talk about that chunk of cement and any hope that I might have for it. The reason is that the chunk of cement didn't have any value to begin with. It should have been hauled away to the dump after the building project was completed. We're not going to restore something that doesn't have any value to begin with.

Many Christians want to hang onto this idea that abusive marriages can be restored — not only can they be restored, but they should be restored. They hang onto this like you would hang onto a chunk of garbage. They talk about restoring that abusive marriage as if the abusive marriage has value. But abusive marriages don't have any value. Not only are they worthless, but they are actually destructive.

If we took our analogy a little further, we could say that hidden in the cement is a stick of dynamite. (A stick of dynamite doesn't make any sense, because you have to actually light it for it to detonate.) Let's say a bomb. Some people think it's good to keep a block of cement in the backyard and pretend that the bomb isn't there. Do you see the analogy here? I would be the person who would call in a bomb squad and have the cement removed from the premises and thrown into the sea where it can detonate without injuring anyone. I will not try to restore that piece of cement. I want you to hear me very clearly here. Just because I believe in removing cement blocks (or abusive marriages, in this case) doesn't mean that I am not about restoring antique desks. Quite the opposite! Because I value things that are truly valuable, that is why I believe in the importance of dismantling things or destroying things that are destructive. I believe that tolerating abuse in marriage actually prevents healthy marriages. In other words, focusing on cement blocks in backyards distracts us from restoring antique desks that need our help.

Let me say this another way. I believe in restoring human lives, not necessarily marriages. In an abusive marriage there is one person begging for help, to be loved, and to be restored to wholeness. There is another person in that abusive marriage who is taking a hammer to the whole process. It would be lovely if both parties were looking to be restored, but that is rarely the case. There is plenty of help for abusers in the church. This has been my experience, and I've seen this in literally hundreds of people's lives. There is lots of help for abusers. They have all the male church pastors, elders, leaders, and everyone who buys into their paradigm walking with them to help them.

On the other hand, there is very little help in churches, for the most part, for victims. That is why I help them. I find it fascinating that the work the church does with abusers reaps very little good fruit, while the work that I and other advocates do with victims on the outside... We are on the outside of the camp. We're not allowed in the camp, so we do the work on the outside of the camp. What we get to see is a hundred times a harvest of transformation, love, and freedom. I like to think that it's because we are working to restore antique desks that have been neglected for decades while the church chooses to play with rocks in the backyard. Let's listen to our next question.

CALLER 2: Hi, Natalie. My question is... I agree with everything you guys are talking about, you and everyone you have on your program. It has just been so enlightening. My question is, where do I go to church now? How can I find a Bible that reflects the true message from the Lord? Of course, living in the Spirit, I understand that, and I do that daily. I walk with Him; I walk with the Lord. If you could recommend a good Bible... I'm enjoying my Bible now more than I did before, and I have a Strong's Concordance, but where do I go to church now? I've been going in and out of church. It's probably not under a name. There's been one in my life since I've been a Christian that I thought was pretty good, but it has changed now. Where can we look for a church, even if it is online, that coincides with what the truth is?

NATALIE: I think this isn't going to be an easy question for me to answer specifically, giving you specifics: "I know the perfect church for you, and I know just the right Bible that you need to read." I think this is a question that would be answered differently for different people, because everyone listening to this podcast is at a different place on their faith journey. Some people are really happy with their church and the Bible they are reading. Some people have left the church but love their Bible. Some have left church and no longer read the Bible, but wish they had both back. Some want nothing to do with either of them ever again. Some have left their faith and come back with a new faith that is richer and deeper than the one they had before. There are a million variations of those places with a million different stops all along the way. Where you are today will not be where you land tomorrow, not if you are truly growing.

If I were to give you some specific recommendations of churches or Bible versions that I've found helpful, it would not actually be helpful. Someone may resonate with those church styles, the leaders, the sermons, the music, the whatever; and some people would not. So I'm not going to do that. Honestly, I haven't found anything that I can sink my teeth into yet myself. I don't go to church right now, and today I can say I'm not sure I ever will. I might change my mind, though. Who knows where God will lead me or what He's going to do in my life? I'm open to all the adventures. But for now, this is where I am, and I've made peace with it. In fact, I've not only made peace with it, but I

love it! I love where I am right now. I feel connected to the Church of Jesus Christ, the global Church, in a more profound way than I have ever felt before. I don't even go to a church building anymore where I sing three songs, listen to someone pray, then listen to a sermon, after which I enjoy a donut hole. I see the Church as so much bigger than that. I hear profound truth in both secular and Christian music. I hear truth that renews my mind, changes my soul, and connects me to the Holy Spirit of God, who is always present within me.

But sometimes I don't often sense Him, because I'm often distracted by life, pain, or false thinking. Worship, for me, is less like singing a verse of a song over and over twenty-four times in a row, and it's more like breathing while I stand at my window and watch some deer drinking at the pond behind my house. Or tucking my little boys into bed at night after a deliciously nerve-wracking chapter from "The Series of Unfortunate Events." Breathe in; breathe out — while I stroke their beautiful, soft, little heads and examine their beautiful, tired faces. "Thank you, Creator God, for this creation of Yours — a gift for me to enjoy." I fellowship a million times more than I ever did before. I get to interact with my Christian sisters every day in my programs. We share our sorrows, our prayer needs, our joys, our victories, and everything in between. I never have to be afraid of being judged or kicked out. I never have to be afraid that a leader is going to come along and shame me for not doing what they would do if they were me.

Let's talk about the Bible for a minute. The Bible is the Bible. There are 500,000 different versions of it. But setting all the versions aside, what we believe about the Bible in general is something we need to each figure out for ourselves. Most of us believed what our churches taught us, or maybe what our parents taught us. All of us were taught different things. So which ones of us were taught correctly? Are we ever going to know for sure? I don't believe we can on this earth. I think it is fascinating that you can take one passage of scripture and there is so much Bible scholarship out there which all differs just on that one passage. So who's right and who's wrong?

I think this is like the baby/toddler stage of human development. In that stage of human development there is right and wrong, there's yes and no, there's black and white, there's us and them, there's in and out, and over all that you have a mommy and daddy to tell you exactly what is what. There is a correlating spiritual development as well. To learn and grow, we will eventually need to get past that initial developmental stage and learn how to think for ourselves. Learn how to see nuance. Learn how to integrate what we learn with what we see and experience around us and be open to the fact that we might change our mind down the road because of new information that comes our way that we didn't have before.

For me, I've chosen to look at lots of different teachings or interpretations of the Bible. I am no longer scared that if I look outside my tradition that I grew up in that I will go to hell, dishonor God, or become a heretic. I think that is leftover propaganda talk designed to keep people in the infantile or toddler stage of development. I say "leftover" because it is still in my head as leftovers from what I grew up with. If God is love, then He loves you — period. If He's powerful, then I'm pretty sure that He can handle my inquiry, my doubt, my wavering, my fickleness, and my humanity. God is not like me. He is not like my pastors. He's not like my parents. He's not like my husband or any other human being on this earth. God is not in a box that I or anyone else has built for Him. There is more to God than we understand or know or can comprehend. I believe there is also more to the Bible than we can know or comprehend. When it comes to the Bible, I think there is also less to the Bible than we might think. There is way more to God than we might think and a little less to the Bible than we might think. You can call me a heretic for saying that. This is just stuff I have done a lot of studying on and thinking about for a few years now.

All this is a beautiful mystery, I believe. It is supposed to be a mystery. We're not supposed to have all the pieces of the puzzle. That's no fun! That's not what life on this earth is about. We were all given a few pieces, and we get to have fun trying to put the puzzle together with the pieces we've got. Someday, God will give us all the pieces. Until then, we're going to have to live in that tension of knowing some things and not knowing other things. We get to explore and play with this thing our whole lifetime. It's crazy amazing if you think about it.

If you're afraid of not getting it right... I've had people say this: "I want to get it right. I want to believe the truth." Well, don't we all? The problem is that we can't know the truth for sure. We can't know all the truth for sure. God didn't give it all to us yet. If we're afraid that we're not going to get it right or that we have to quickly find the right church, the right Bible, or the right answers so that we have some closure and can move on to have a happy little life, then we're missing out on all the adventure, the joy, and the peace (because that doesn't sound very peaceful to me to feel all the anxiety and panic that you must have the right thing) — the peace and the love of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Always remember that if there is fear inside of you — fear, panic, or anxiety — then you are looking at the wrong thing, because perfect love casts out fear. They will know we are Christians not by our church attendance, not by our Bible knowledge, by how many times we read the Bible every day, or how much Bible we read every day. They will know we are Christians by our love, and the more that we are reveling in the love of God for us, the more it will spill out over all the people all around us. I believe that's

what real Christianity is. I think the rest is an imitative, fraudulent type of Christianity.

CALLER 3: Hi, Natalie. I have a question about Christian books. Are there any Christian books you would recommend for women who are in abusive marriages or relationships to stay away from if they are still in their abusive relationship? I know there are Christian books that might perpetuate the idea of “just lay down and take it” as a Christian wife. I’m curious to see if there are any study books pertaining to marriage that are unhelpful or could be damaging to a woman in an abusive relationship. Thank you.

NATALIE: I don’t really like to censor things. I like to teach people how to decide for themselves so that when they see or read something that aligns with their values or with the love of Jesus Christ that we just talked about with the prior question, that they can see that for themselves and move on from it on their own without someone else telling them what they should or shouldn’t read. As I’ve worked on my healing and put some distance, time-wise, between myself and the abuse that I experienced from my family of origin, my first marriage, as well as the church abuse that I experienced, I’ve discovered it is helpful to go through a process of phasing out that whole idea of looking at all the things that were wrong and to eventually turn my focus to learning, growing, and moving forward.

I believe there is a time to look at all the bad stuff we’ve swallowed so that we can stop swallowing it, right? I think that is important. But humans tend to take on, think about, and become or do what they focus on. We could be out of our abusive relationship, and many people are, but they are still reading about abuse, talking about abuse, ruminating about it, eating, drinking, and sleeping it. This has the potential to keep us stuck in the cycle of abuse in our brain, even though our body may be completely out of the situation. Also, I don’t ever want to be a gatekeeper who says, “You should read this. You’d better not read that, or that will send you down a slippery slope.” I’m not the boss of anybody. You get to read whatever you want to read. You’re all adults, and I respect your right to decide for yourselves. If you make choices that end up giving you bad results, that’s part of your growth process, right? My job is to love and support you through that process however it looks for you. I no longer believe in humans playing the role of God in the lives of other humans. I find that to be a form of abuse.

I had a library full of Christian marriage books that encouraged me, because I was in an abusive relationship, to stay in that kind of relationship and to embrace abuse as a way of life. I’ve thrown all those books away now. I’m not saying those books wouldn’t be helpful for people who are in normal marriage relationships, but they don’t work the same way if you are in an abusive relationship. If you go back to that restoration project

we were talking about, restoring a desk, some cleaner that may be able to clean the desk before you put on a new coat of varnish (I've never restored a desk, so I'm not sure how you do it) could be put on that slab of cement in the backyard. You are definitely not going to get the same result.

I do have a list of all my current favorite books about marriage, parenting, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, trauma, what the Bible says about women, and divorce. You can access that list by going to my website, flyingfreenow.com/my-favorite-books-for-survivors. I'll provide a link in the show notes of this episode if that's easier. It might be easier just to remember to go to flyingfreenow/116 and look for the link to that resource page.

I'll throw out some of the ones that fall under the category of marriage. I put them under the category of marriage, but some of them aren't about marriage. They are just about building a healthy you. But you can't have a healthy marriage if you don't have a healthy you, anyway. One book I have on that list is "Beyond Boundaries: Learning to Trust Again in Relationships." (I think that's John Townsend.) Brené Brown's "Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead." Another book I have on there is "Getting Back Out There: Secrets to Successful Dating and Finding Real Love After the Big Breakup." (I don't think that's a Christian one, but it's a good book.) Another Brené Brown book I love: "The Gifts of Imperfection: Letting Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to be and Embrace Who You Are." Another book, "Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love." The last two are two of my favorites, both marriage books. One is called "Mutual By Design: A Better Model of Christian Marriage." The last one, which is my number one: "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert," which is John Gottman. That doesn't come from a Christian perspective, but it is an amazing book, and I highly recommend that for anybody who is contemplating getting married again. If you are in an abusive relationship, you can read that book. That book can help you by showing you just how far away from a healthy relationship your abusive relationship actually is, which is sad, but also helpful. We cannot make any difference in our lives if we are living in denial or hiding or covering up what is real. We must be able to face reality first.

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