

## WHY RELATIONSHIPS ARE COMPLICATED FOR SURVIVORS AND HOW TO UNHOOK FROM RELATIONSHIPS DRAMA

*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 118 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to be answering a listener question, so let me play the question, and then we'll dive in.

CALLER: Hello, it's Tracy. I'd like you to address the problem that I'm coming across where women who've been in abusive relationships only know how to relate in particular ways, especially if they were raised in abusive families. So developing, figuring out healthy ways to relate, even to other women who've been in abusive relationships, is a huge challenge. We're not to be independent and isolated like monks or hermits, but we're also not to be laying our burdens on other people. This has a particular flavor with women who've been in abusive relationships. It's a problem that I'm seeing, and I'm trying to figure it out for myself. Do you chase people up when they haven't answered your call? Or does that look like you are hounding them? If you make arrangements, are you trying to control their lives? How do they feel about it, because they think you're trying to control their lives? All that kind of stuff. I hope that's clear. I'm sure you've got something you can say about it. Thanks a lot.

NATALIE: Well, of course I've got something to say about it, right? This is the Catch-22 of abuse. It's damned if you do something and damned if you don't. In an abusive relationship, if you speak up, you get criticized and blamed. Let me give you an example. Your partner says he's going to be home at 5:00, but instead he comes in at 9:00. You have the audacity to ask him where he was or why he was so late. Instead of a straightforward, normal answer, such as, "I'm so sorry. I totally forgot I had a board meeting at church tonight," he says, "What is your problem? Are you my mother now? You're always on me like a hawk, expecting me to be perfect. Well, I'll never be perfect enough for you. Quit trying to control me and my life. Back off! You're like a dripping faucet wife in the Bible. What is your problem?" (I want to add that a normal person might forget to tell his partner about a board meeting at church, but it would probably be a rare thing, because normal people think about and consider their partners and how their actions have an effect on them. They love their partners and wouldn't want to harm them. If they harmed their partner in this way, it would be more of a rare exception to the rule.)

Let me give you another example. You want to go out with your friend for coffee on a

Saturday morning, so you ask your husband if it would be okay and if he could keep an eye on the kids while you're gone. He responds with, "What are you asking me for? You'll just do what you want anyway. When do I ever get time away? Fine. Of course I'll watch my own kids. Sheesh. Treat me like I'm the babysitter. Go have your time away. Whatever." Those are a couple of examples of how you get damned if you speak up.

But now I'm going to give you an example of how you get damned if you don't. You know that if you speak up, you're going to get bomblasted ninety percent of the time. Eventually you learn to stay quiet, and you only rock the boat when absolutely necessary. The next time your husband is late, you don't say anything. But later that night he whines, "You didn't even ask me where I was today. It's like you don't even care about my life. You never ask me how I'm doing. You just ignore me and treat me like I'm your dog or something." Or the next time you want to go out with a friend, you simply say, "I'm going to go out. See you in two hours," and you leave. When you get back, you get this: "Who do you think you are that you can just take off without asking? You're always just running off and doing whatever you want and leaving me with all the responsibility. If I just walked out, you'd be on my case for the next three years about it." You see? Damned if you do; damned if you don't.

Now imagine this goes on for a year. (By the way, I'm giving some mild examples of how this plays out. I'm sure you can all think of times where it's much more dramatic and much more serious.) Let's say that this goes on for two years and then ten years. What about thirty years? I know women who've been married and doing this for over thirty years. Imagine that your brain is now programmed to fear every single little move that you might make. You're afraid to say something; you're afraid not to say something. You're afraid to make a decision; you're afraid not to make a decision. Also imagine that you are not just getting this kind of treatment from your partner, but you're getting it from the environment that you and your husband are immersed in. You're getting it from your small group leaders at church, from your pastor, from your friends, from your family of origin, and from your older kids as they grow up steeped in the same toxic way of interacting with other humans. Your life is like a minefield riddled with hidden mines as far as your eye can see, and your job is to figure out how to walk in that minefield and try your darndest not to step on a mine.

Then you finally get out and you learn to recognize passive-aggressive communication patterns. You discover boundaries for the first time. You see that your people-pleasing tendencies have grown way out of proportion, and you start making all these connections in your brain. Once you learn about emotional and spiritual abuse, you start to see it all over the place. This can be kind of unsettling. There's a song by Sara Bareilles, my favorite musical artist of all time, called "Orpheus." Here are some of the

words: "I know you miss the world, the one you knew, the one where everything made sense because you didn't know the truth, that's how it works 'til the bottom drops out..." This is what happens to survivors. The world no longer makes sense in the same way that it did before, and it's natural to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction for a while as you discover you are a human being who deserves just as much respect, honor, freedom, and autonomy as every other human does.

You begin to take back what had been stolen from you. You take back your voice, your experiences as you experienced them, your brain space, your resources, your time, your treasured and safe relationships, your emotions, your thoughts, and your choices. You begin to give away what you had taken on that didn't belong to you. You give up your responsibility for your partner and your responsibility for the other adults in your life — for their emotions, happiness, behavior, choices, thoughts, and experiences. All this can get very messy. This is the process of getting out, figuring things out, and healing.

I'm going to give you some examples from my own life. When I began to speak out about my experiences, I noticed that nobody was listening. What did I do? I tried to get louder. I allowed myself to get passionate and emotional in front of other people, whereas prior to that, I had been careful to play pretty small, because I was afraid they wouldn't like me. I posted some passionate and emotional things online. At home, I began speaking up and calling out bad behavior. I started saying things like, "Stop! I see what you're doing. Stop now!" I started calling a spade a spade. I wrote lengthy letters spelling the problems out in every way I could think of. I had endless meetings with people I thought could help me, but ultimately, they didn't.

After one year of an in-house separation, followed by two years of a physical separation, I filed for divorce. After three years, nobody had listened and nobody had cared. They had all decided to go along with my husband's narrative that I was the problem. I had been outspoken and passionate with all these people, so they bought his story that I was out of control and borderline. They figured they had their evidence. But I also now had mine. I decided if nobody else was going to have my back, I was going to have my back. I decided to let them keep their stories and their manuals for how life was supposed to go, and I would keep mine.

Even so, there were aftershocks. After the divorce, which was another two-year process, I wrote a book. In this book, there is one little part where I mentioned my sister and her family who had marginalized me because I was no longer living according to their manual for life. Shortly after that, my beautiful dad died. My mom and both of my sisters decided they were done with me, and I lost my entire family of origin

because first, I dared to get divorced. That was a problem for at least one person in my family. Second, I decided to tell the truth about my life. That was a problem for the other ones.

Relationships can be challenging, but healthy relationships should not be challenging or feel like they are minefields. You should not have all this terror around making moves in a relationship. That doesn't mean we don't have to be careful in our relationships, but being careful not to drop a precious gem and being careful not to step on a mine are two completely different types of being careful. I'm careful not to dishonor or disparage my kids or my husband (I'm remarried) because I love them and want what's best for them.

But if one of them decided to kick me in the back, I will not pretend it didn't happen. I can always say, "I love you. That hurts. Please stop." They might do what their dad did. They might blame me for being too sensitive, too this, or too that (because that gets them off the hook and puts the spotlight on me). Or they might say I brought it on myself. If they do that, I must decide what I am going to make that mean — what I'm going to make that mean. Will I make it mean for me that I'm a bad mom? They might make it mean that I'm a bad mom. That's okay. But am I going to make it mean that I'm a bad mom, or will I make it mean that they aren't taking responsibility for their own behavior? What I make it mean is going to determine how I show up in that situation. Do you see what I'm saying? What they make it mean will determine how they show up. What I make it mean is going to determine how I show up.

If I make it mean that I must be a bad mom or that they are bad kids, then I'm going to feel badly and will show up in ways that aren't healthy for me or my kids. If I make it mean that they aren't taking responsibility for their own behavior and are trying to put that on me so they can feel better and get off the hook, I can let them own it or not, whatever they choose. But I can let them have that, and then I can move on with my own life. I can have my own back. I can allow them to have their experience and their beliefs about it, and I can allow myself to have mine.

Or maybe they will take responsibility for their behavior and then the relationship can be close again. Remember that it is never your sole responsibility to maintain a close relationship with anyone. Relationships can only be intimate and precious when both parties believe that it is and treat it that way. That doesn't mean that you can't have relationships with people who don't treat you nicely. You can still have a relationship with a child or a parent or a sibling who has ousted you, but it will not be a close, safe, or intimate relationship. It's going to be more transactional or, as in the case with my family of origin, my relationship with them is all in my own mind and heart now,

because I don't have contact with them anymore. I've chosen not to chase them down and fawn to get them back. I love them. There's a part of me that's always going to carry that grief and sadness with me over losing them. But there's another part of me that has accepted their choice to move on without me and their behavior, and I've chosen to move forward without all that drama in my life.

Honestly, there is so much more peace in my life. I'm grateful for all of it: The sadness and grief, which comes from a place of love, as well as the moving on part, which comes from a place of acceptance. I'll be honest, there is still a third part of me that is kind of indignant over my history with them. That part of me acknowledges the lies, the gossip, the backstabbing, the manipulation, and the abandonment. But I accept that all three of those parts inside of me exist and are valid.

Now that I've laid this foundation, I want to talk about some of the specific types of situations this listener offered as examples of what survivors struggle with in relating to other people post abuse. The first was how to relate to other women in abusive relationships. What I think she's asking is, "What about wounded women in relationships with other wounded women? Isn't there opportunity for misunderstandings and even abuse or manipulation when you have unhealed people interacting with one another?" There is opportunity for that, and I've seen it firsthand on several occasions in the survivor community.

Let me give you a couple examples of how this might show up. Let's say you go out for coffee with another survivor. (You could translate this into an email conversation or a Facebook interaction with another survivor. But we'll go with the coffee thing.) That person gives you some advice about your situation. You made yourself vulnerable and talked about your situation, and that person comes back and gives you some advice about it. Let's say you have a visceral reaction to that advice because here you are, finally learning how to listen to your own gut, and you want to solve this problem your way for once. But now someone has come along and made you feel like they are telling you what to do, and you feel this instant smallness, like you are a child again and this person is kind of like your mommy-boss. You feel small, and you also feel guilty for feeling like this toward your friend. You also feel you need to fight for your newfound freedom of autonomy and right to make your own decisions. All these thoughts are swirling through your head, and your body is experiencing a lot of mixed and confusing emotions.

This is what I call a trigger moment. Triggers happen when our brain's programming takes over and runs on autopilot. By the way, our brain's programming is just what has been programmed into our brain since we were infants. It's what we've learned from

experience, what we've been taught, what we've read, and all our interactions with teachers, peers, and parents. Our brain's programming is about ninety-five percent of what runs our life. Actually, that's not true. All our thoughts run our life, but about ninety-five percent of our thoughts are non-conscious and the other five percent are conscious. What's crazy is that ninety-five percent of our thoughts are running our lives, and we're not aware of it because it's non-conscious.

I would call this an unmanaged mind. It's totally normal. It means your brain is working the way God designed it to work. Don't be disparaging or criticizing your brain, because it is doing what it is supposed to. In my programs, I call this part of our brain "Myrtle." Your brain is like your Myrtle. It's like a toddler with scissors. The toddler does whatever it wants, and that can be dangerous. We do a lot of work around this in the Flying Free and Flying Higher programs, learning how to change that programming and practice new ways of thinking about old issues, which is critical to changing those knee-jerk reactions and those triggers to settle down and subside so we aren't triggered by things anymore. It would be nice to have that, right?

Let's give an example. Let's say your survivor friend offers some advice, and instead of being triggered and reacting in fear, smallness, and offensiveness, what if your automatic brain response went to, "Oh, she is trying to help me the best way she knows how. I'm grateful for her insight. I like my idea better, but I'm glad she felt free to share her insights." You cannot just want to respond that way or think that way. You have to do the brain retraining to get to the place where that kind of response is now baked into your programming, into who you are.

Another typical survivor response would be to not get defensive. Let's say you're sitting in the coffee shop. They give you advice. Instead of getting defensive, you do the opposite and start fawning, which means when your friend offers this advice, you take it, or you'll hurt her feelings. So you pretend you love her idea. On the back end, you are vexing and freaking out because you really don't want to do it her way, but now you feel you must please her and make her feel like she helped you. Do you see how you are trying to manage her emotions now? If you are anything like me, both responses, defensiveness and fawning, are typical knee-jerk responses that survivors have when someone offers them criticism, feedback, or advice. Wouldn't it be nice if you could say or think, "I love your idea, and thank you for sharing it with me. I'll think about that," instead of fawning? But at the end of the day, you have total confidence in your own ability to make choices for your life and you feel no obligation to manage your friend's emotions or stroke her ego. Wouldn't that be nice? Doesn't that sound like freedom?

Because I just mentioned criticism and feedback, I think we should talk about the



difference between those two things. Criticism is all about the person giving the criticism. It's about their emotions. Basically, when someone is criticizing you, they are throwing up on you because something you did or said brought up something for that person. Now they want you to take responsibility for their emotions rather than them taking responsibility for what they are making what you said to mean. Criticism is toxic. It's unhelpful and is always rooted in fear.

Let me give an example. Let's say you write something on Facebook and someone writes back, "You are ignorant, and you obviously don't care about people at all." That's an example of criticism, because it's an attack and a statement about your character. It's an attack on who you are as a person. Feedback is about helping the other person. It's about the other person. It is rooted in love. For example, let's say you write something on Facebook and someone says, "Just wanted to let you know you quoted that person wrong. The actual quote is this..." or "The link you provided isn't working" or "When you do these Facebook Lives, your bangs are in your face and we can't see your eyes." That would be feedback. Do you see the difference? The first thing to do is decide if someone is giving you feedback or criticism.

At first it may be hard, because if you're easily triggered and haven't done this mind reprogramming, you will think that everything is criticism. You will interpret everything through that lens, that wounded survival lens. It's like putting wounded survival glasses on and everything you see will look like vomit, but not all of it is. So first you want to decide if it's feedback or criticism. You'll get better at that as you go through the healing process. This is something I help people do in Flying Free especially. If it is criticism, what I do is to not engage. I usually just delete it. I don't respond. Honestly, I don't have time to clean up someone else's vomit. I've seen others respond. I've watched others on Facebook get criticized, and then I watch how the person being criticized responds. Pretty soon what happens is there is tit for tat, and both parties are attacking each other. I think it's such a waste of time and emotional energy. Again, I think the conversation ends up being rooted in fear, which propagates more fear. I don't think love can show up where there is that kind of fear. I've decided that other people have total freedom to sit in the peanut gallery and attack and criticize all they want. They have the right to choose that for their lives. I get emails and get attacked on Facebook periodically, and I just delete them. I don't even read the whole thing. Why would I stick my nose in vomit when I can stick it in a flower? I've got stuff to do. If they want to spend their time vomiting, they can. But I will not hang out and watch it. That's just gross.

On the other hand, if someone is giving me feedback, I welcome that, because they are trying to help me. Even if the feedback is unnecessary or unwarranted (maybe they

didn't understand something or misunderstand something), that is fine. I understand that their feedback is rooted in care, and I'm all about the love. I'm going to return the favor and love them back by thanking them and making any necessary changes if I feel those changes need to be made. So they give me feedback, and then I decide what I'm going to do with it.

Are you beginning to see the key to all this? The key is being your own person and letting the other person be their own person. Just because someone has a different belief than you, a different story than you, or a different opinion than you doesn't mean that you must buy into it. You get to have your own beliefs, opinions, and stories, and they are just as valid as someone else's.

I remember an elder from the church that excommunicated me told me, "You have your own narrative, Natalie, and your husband has his own narrative." At the time he said that I was totally offended, because I was still hooked into my husband's narrative and the narrative of this elder. I thought I had to fight to make my narrative the true one or to have them validate my narrative, otherwise my narrative was not valid or true. Today if someone told me that, I would look them in the eyes and say, "You're damn right I've got my narrative, and I'm sticking to it. You can have your story, and you can do what aligns with your character (which is kicking me and my narrative out the backdoor), but I will take my story and change the world with it. Best of luck to you in your little church games." But back then, my brain was stuck in this belief that for my narrative to be valid, other people had to see it and agree with it. I was hooked into their universes. It required me to be defensive, to fawn, or to do whatever it took to convince them to keep me safe, help me, and rescue me.

Do you see this? I was the little girl, and they were the big-wigs in charge. They were like my mommies and daddies. Oh my gosh! Not anymore. I'm an adult, and I don't need them to validate my life or what I went through. I validate it. Now that is good enough for me. Because I am no longer spinning in this crazy vortex of trying to get them to see me or agree with me, I have all this extra energy to pour into loving others. I no longer have to worry about keeping myself safe and protected. I've got my own back, plus I know because of my faith that God has my back. If someone looks at me and says, "You don't know God," that is hilarious to me. I feel bad for them; they are so blind. It is so sad.

Let's see how this applies to the second example this listener gave. She said, "Do you chase people up when they haven't answered your call? Do you make arrangements or not because they might think you're trying to control them?" I think she is wondering if you can take initiative in someone else's life, and how much initiative can you take? If



we apply what I just taught you, that you get to be fully you and show up in full color as yourself, and the other person gets to be fully them and show up in full color as themselves, now things get pretty clear.

You can call your adult child, for example, but if they choose not to answer your call, what are they telling you? If you allow others to be who they are, you will respect what they are telling you and acknowledge the reality that, in this case, they don't want to talk to you for whatever reason. That's all that means. You can make it mean a lot more than that. You can make it mean that they are mad at you, but so what? Why is their anger or their emotion a problem for you? Are you at the place where you can be okay with the fact that others get to have whatever emotions they want to have and it's not your business? If you just had an altercation with them and call to apologize and they aren't answering, you could certainly send a follow-up text apology. Beyond that, you have one of two choices. You can continue to hound them, which is trying to control their response so that you will feel better, or you can respect their choice to distance themselves from you.

At that point, your work lies in managing your own headspace around the possible disappointment and loss that you may feel about that. I teach my clients that our emotions come from our thoughts, not our circumstances. Our emotions come from what we make our circumstances mean for us through our beliefs. If we make their choice to give us the silent treatment mean that we are a loser, a bad mom, and we might as well slit our throat and die, then we probably won't show up in our lives in the same way we would if we made their choice to give us the silent treatment mean that they just need some space. Because we love them, then we will give it to them.

The listener also asked about making arrangements with someone. Of course you can make arrangements that have been agreed upon by both parties. Or you can plan a get together and invite your kids or friends to it. But they get to decide if they want to come. Here's how I try to handle this with my family and my older kids. I have a holiday get together. I invite everyone, and whoever is able comes — end of story. I have zero expectations. I haven't always been this way. I'm telling you what I do now and how I've grown and gotten to the place where I have let go of all this. The drama in my life has gone from super high drama and stress to so much less drama and stress, because I let everyone do whatever they want. I have no expectations. I've chosen to think well of everyone regardless of what they decide to do. If they say, "I can't come because I'm going to go to my boyfriend's house for that holiday," well, great. I don't make that mean, "They don't love me. They love their boyfriend's family better than me." I just make it mean that is what they want to do. It's totally fine. I'm grateful for whoever shows up, and we have a great time. That's not controlling everyone; that's controlling

me, my thoughts, and my emotions, and letting everyone else control theirs.

My ex still tells his narrative to our kids, and I tell mine. Is this confusing to them? At first, especially if you are just getting out of your relationship, it is. But over time, kids see things play out. I'm not a proponent of going off on your kids and ranting and raving about your ex. I'm not saying to do that. But I also don't believe you should cover up or pretend that nothing ever happened or that your ex is an amazeballs guy if he's not. Kids will see right through that, especially if they are not experiencing that. But kids will see things play out over time. They will see they can open up and talk freely with one parent without getting a bunch of critical vomit in their face, and they will see they must be very careful how they show up with the other parent. They might see they can trust one parent to keep their word and be consistent. They might discover the other one really doesn't come through for them very often. They might observe that one parent is generous even if they don't have as much, and the other person is stingy even though they have a lot more.

I tell people this is a long game. You need to work on you, and all the pieces will eventually fall into place as far as your kids are concerned, or even some of your friends. Be patient. Let go of everyone else. Let go of trying to control them and their emotions. Just take responsibility for your own thoughts and emotions. Once you are okay with everyone else being who they are (including people who want to be assholes) and you are okay with you being who you are, that is when you will experience emotional freedom.

I just told you what you need to do to get to this place of emotional freedom, but if you want to know how to do it and work on creating that new programming for your brain that will change your life, I highly recommend that you join one of my programs. Flying Free is a program for women of faith who are still in their destructive relationships, and Flying Higher is for women who are divorced and are rebuilding their lives. You can learn more about Flying Free at [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com), and you can learn more about Flying Higher at [joinflyinghigher.com](http://joinflyinghigher.com).

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If you have a question you'd like me to answer in a future podcast episode, go to my

website at [flyingfreenow.com/118](http://flyingfreenow.com/118) where you will find the show notes and transcript for this episode, and you will find a link where you can record a question for me, and I will answer it in a future podcast episode.

I love, love, love answering these listener questions. I feel like these are some of the best episodes, because I'm helping you with the real nitty gritty of what's going on in your lives. I do a ton of that in the programs, but I like to offer little tastes of what it's like to be in my programs through the podcast.

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