

IS IT POSSIBLE TO STAY WELL IN AN ABUSIVE MARRIAGE?

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 122 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have a listener question I think will resonate with many of you. Let's hear what her question is.

CALLER: Hi there. My name is Elizabeth. I was just wondering if you agree with this idea of being able to stay in an emotionally abusive relationship—if that's even possible. I know I've listened to some of Leslie Vernick's stuff, and I think her position is that if you decide to go or stay, that's up to you. But if you decide to stay, stay well, or stay healthy, so-to-speak. I have chosen to do that because I am ill. I have a chronic illness, a vestibular issue, which makes it difficult for me to be on my own. But I am still considering getting out because I'm wondering, can it really be true that you can stay in a destructive marriage and stay healthy?

NATALIE: We'll start by talking about what staying well actually means. It might mean different things for different people depending on your programming. For one person, staying well might mean just staying and surviving without falling apart emotionally or maybe crying all the time. For another person, it means being able to stay without screaming or arguing or being involved in that constant battle. Both scenarios might require you to become someone that you are not; but for some people, that is a compromise they are willing to make, and they will feel good about it and believe that they are staying well. Other people might think that's not staying well because you're not being healthy when you do that. By the way, this belief that you are staying well if you aren't rocking the boat is going to be reinforced by your church, by your family and friends, and of course your abusive partner is even going to be all for that because they just all want the woman to stop rocking the boat, shut up already, and be a nice, obedient, Christian girl.

Let's talk about what not staying well might mean. Again, not staying well will mean different things to different people depending on their programming. Some will think that it means staying but you are arguing and fighting for your rights, especially if you haven't done that until now. They would say covering up and placating is staying well and fighting for your rights is not staying well. I want you to notice how others might call placating and covering up "not staying well." Do you see how this is totally subjective and open to personal interpretation? No wonder everyone is totally confused. I just

want to notice right from the beginning the various interpretations of staying well or not staying well means. I also want us to think about what we are staying well with and who should stay well and who should get the sam-heck out of there. Who gets to decide? Again, it is all subjective and open to personal opinion. Some would say, "If you husband is hitting you then it's not possible to stay well." Some would say, "You can stay well if your husband is covertly controlling and manipulating you, but if it's more overt, then it's not possible." Other people would also argue about where you draw those lines. Is it okay for him to lie? Should we draw the line at cursing a woman out? What about chronic porn use or even rape? Is it rape or is it just marital duty? Wow! It gets confusing pretty fast. Who do we listen to? (I had to look this up because I wasn't sure.) There are almost eight billion people in the world right now, and that means there are eight billion different opinions on all these things. Which one are you going to listen to? How will you pick just the right one?

Women are conditioned to look outside of themselves for answers, yet God created each one of you with your own life, your own brain, your own past, your own experiences, your own set of gifts, and your own personality. Yet somehow, we think we need to turn all that good stuff over to the opinion of some other human on the planet who has none of those things. God didn't give you responsibility for anyone but you, and He didn't give anyone else responsibility for you. So if you don't shoulder that responsibility and let someone else take it over, are you taking an active role in the life that God gave to you? If not, why not? Because someone told you they know better than you do about what is best for you? Because someone told you they knew what God wanted for your life because God told them or something? God doesn't work that way. He's a little smarter than that. Regardless of what anyone tells you, nobody controls the voice of God or puts words into His mouth. The one who modeled how to do this well in the Bible is the devil. Remember the devil in the garden and when he tempted Jesus? He puts words in God's mouth. He used God's words and then twisted them and made them into something that they weren't in order to control Adam and Eve and to control Jesus. So God doesn't do that because that's abusive, and God isn't like that. He's not an abuser. He gives people freedom, and He offers His wisdom and His love. That's who God is. People who are aligned with God, the Holy Spirit God, will show up in the world the same ways that Jesus showed up in the world. "You are going to know them by their fruit," the Bible says. People who aren't showing up that way are still lost. They are floundering in their own shame. They will not show up like that on the outside with a big "I've got shame" plastered on their forehead. They are going to show up like they have all the answers, and you don't; that they are the gatekeepers of the truth; and that they are the only ones who interpret the Bible correctly. You can feel sorry for them. You can love them. But I don't recommend following in their footsteps

unless you want to fall off a cliff. They can't see anything in front of them. They are stuck in their own programming.

In this world of eight billion opinions, the only one that matters is the Creator's. You know—the One who made everybody. If we lean into the truth that the Creator loves you; that He is for you; that He's giving you freedom to make mistakes, to grow, to learn, and to develop at your own pace; and that He has your back—then you can more easily let go of all the eight billion folks who would love to tell you their take on your life. They would all love to tell you if you should stay well or leave well. They will even give you eight billion ideas on what those two things even mean for you in your personal life. You guys, I'm one of those eight billion people. So while I can give you ideas and support, I can't tell you what to do. I don't know what's best for you in your particular situation. I don't know the timing, the nuances, the layers and layers of issues that you are dealing with in your particular circumstances. I haven't got a clue! I can tell you what helped me. I can tell you what I've learned from working closely with thousands of women in my programs and online for several years. But you are an individual with your very own precious story. You get to use all the amazing freedom and hard-earned wisdom and experience to make your own decisions for your own life. I just get to watch you, love you, and support you in all of that. As Christians, that's what we do for each other. There are no bossy pants in heaven, folks. That means all the bossy pants on earth right now are going to figure it out in the afterlife. (That's what I'm banking on, anyway. Lord have mercy on all of us if the bossy pants get to stay that way forever.)

Let's get back to the original question. Is it possible to stay well and be healthy in a destructive relationship? My answer to that is if you say it is, then it is. If you say it's not healthy for you, then it's not healthy for you. I'm going to tell you a little about my experience. I don't tell you that much about it usually, but I tried to stay well. Leslie Vernick coached me for a year back when I was still with my ex-husband in 2013. I'd been married for twenty-one years at that point, and we had nine children. My youngest was a one-year-old. Leslie's book, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, had just been released. I read it and decided that I was going to get some coaching, and I was going to stay well. She coached me on how to do that. But she also helped me see how I thought that staying well meant being quiet and not rocking the boat, how I couldn't show up in the relationship as myself without paying the consequences. She encouraged me to start showing up, to start just being me, and to be okay with who I was, myself, and all my foibles too—not just the good side of me but the bad side of me as well. The more I showed up in my relationship, the nastier my husband got. He did not like the new real me. Subsequently, a year later, I asked him to move out so we could get some space and I could clear my head. At that point, I was still hoping that we could make this work.

He left our home with some pressure from some friends of ours at church. The intention was that with a separation we could figure things out, and then we'd get back together again. Almost two years later, after nothing had changed, I realized nothing was going to change, and I filed for divorce. The rest is history.

I had to decide for me if I could stay well and if I could be healthy and grow and continue to develop. For me, I wanted to feel like a sane, whole person. When I was with him, dealing with all the crazy-making, I felt discombobulated. I felt like I was breathing poison and it was slowly killing me. This is death by a thousand cuts. I could stay until I succumbed, but that didn't seem like a good choice at that point, especially since my parenting was suffering, as I was constantly emotionally recovering from one subtle attack after another. I was shadow boxing, and I was exhausted. To me, that wasn't staying well. That was just trying to survive the next twenty-four hours. Here's the thing we could be tempted to say because of our programming. "I couldn't stay well. I failed at being able to stay well." Then we could just beat ourselves up about that. That's just a big old lie. That's like saying, "I just couldn't stay in the burning building very well. I failed at it. If only I was a better person, I could've stayed and survived the smoke and the fire. But gosh darn it, my skin started to peel off. Total fail!" No. If you don't want your skin to peel off, you get to leave if you want to. What about those of you who aren't sure, and you want to try to stay well and see if you can do it? I totally support you with that decision. I don't know. You might be able to do it. I know one person personally who is staying well, and she has made it work. But her circumstances differ from mine. Her husband differs from mine, and she differs from me. So you aren't a failure and someone else a success just because you leave and they stay, and vice versa. Do you see how judgmental even survivors can be? Goodness, we've got to give one another a break. This isn't easy—not for any of us. One thing I love about the women in my programs is that they are so supportive and non-judgmental of each other. We really make concerted efforts to foster that in our program because it sets people free. It helps them to feel safe and beloved no matter what they choose or when.

I'm going to give you my idea of what staying well might look like. It's just one idea. There are eight billion other ones out there. You can take mine for what it is—one in eight billion. In my mind, staying well or leaving well or doing anything well would involve me as a person exactly who God made me to be—authentic, 100%. It would mean my feeling safe within myself even if others on the outside didn't like it. I would always have my back. I would always own my own mistakes. (I make them all the time.) I would apologize quickly when I hurt someone and not take on the management of their emotions. I would always tell the truth, stand up for justice, and try to love God, myself, and others in that order, knowing that love always wins in the end. I would have healthy boundaries

and gently let others know when they cross them. Then I'd be okay if they got mad and stomped off because that's their model and their life. It's none of my business. But I would still love them from a distance because love always wins in the end, and it feels better than hate. It would mean taking responsibility for my own thoughts, my programming instilled in me from childhood (even if it came from other people.) It is now mine, and I'm responsible for either dealing with it, keeping it, or changing it if I want to. It means taking responsibility for my own emotions that I deeply feel because of my own thoughts about things happening in my life. It would mean taking ownership of my choices and my behavior and allowing everyone else to do the same for theirs. Then it means taking responsibility for the results I'm creating in my own life because of my beliefs and my choices. It would mean no longer giving myself, my life, and my power away to others; but taking it back and owning it for myself the way God intended when He purposefully created and gave me my own life. I call this living well. It keeps me in alignment with my core values and my Creator, and it keeps me centered and out of reach from all the control freaks in the world who want to run my life for me.

So did I leave well? I wanted to. I tried. My leaving process was four-and-a-half years total—one year of in-home separation, almost two years of living separated, and almost two more years going through exactly the kind of divorce you go through with an abuser. But as Taylor Swift sings in her more recent song, Ricochet, "I didn't have it in myself to go with grace. And so the battleships will sink beneath the waves. You had to kill me, but it killed you just the same. Cursing my name, wishing I stayed, look at how my tears ricochet." Another song that perfectly described how I felt during that whole devastating process was the song Say Something by A Great Big World. "Say Something. I'm giving up on you. I'll be the one if you want me to. Anywhere I would have followed you. Say Something. I'm giving up on you and I'm feeling so small. It was over my head. I know nothing at all, and I will stumble and fall. I'm still learning to love, just starting to crawl." Then it repeats the chorus, "And I will swallow my pride. You're the one that I loved, and I'm saying goodbye." You guys, I loved my ex-husband fiercely! I fought for twenty-one years to make that marriage work. But the time came when I had to love a woman named Natalie, and nobody at that point loved her fiercely at all. Nobody had her back. Fighting for her, in the end, became my battle cry. Yeah, it was messy! For a while, I was fighting for her and my ex. That was really messy. I had to eventually let go of him. I had to say goodbye. I lost everything. I lost my church home. I lost my reputation, my church friends, my family, one of my kids, my security, my hope of having a loving, supporting family into my old age—I lost it all!

But I knew I had God. I knew He was with me no matter what. That is what faith is all about—letting go of all the beliefs and clinging to one thing—faith in God's love. God had

something on the other side that I never dreamed possible. He had this beautiful, safe partner (I'm remarried to Tom), a beautiful, safe, home environment, and meaningful work for me to do with the rest of my life here on earth. So it was all worth it. I couldn't see any of that on the dark side. I had to take those steps into that raging river and swim to the other side with my body flipping all over the place until my feet eventually touched the bank on the other side. I was able to climb out and walk into fields of grace. So whether you stay or leave, my hope for you is that you do it with love and compassion for the woman who has your name. She needs you! Will you have her back? Will you promise to take care of her no matter what? Are you committed to her well-being? Your future self will look back and thank you.

If you want more help growing into this work, consider joining one of my programs. Flying Free is for women of faith in destructive relationships. Flying Higher is for divorced Christian women who are out of their relationships and rebuilding their lives. You can visit joinflyingfree.com to learn more about Flying Free or joinflyinghigher.com for more information about that program. Finally, would you be willing to take two minutes right now and Google the words "Flying Free Podcast Apple." Google will take you to the page where you can leave a rating and review of this podcast. Your two minutes of time will encourage everyone on the team who produces this podcast, and it will tell Apple Podcasts Flying Free is valuable enough to recommend to visitors who are looking for something good to listen to. Your two minutes of time will make a difference for someone just like you. You may never know who it is, but I guarantee it will have an impact. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!