

EMOTIONAL ABUSE SURVIVOR Q&A

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 124 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I thought we'd do something a little different. I decided to curate some questions and answers from a recent Q&A that we did inside of the Flying Free Sisterhood program and put them together into a podcast episode. Every month in the Flying Free Sisterhood program, we do these Q&A's. It's two-hours' worth of me answering members' submitted questions. People can go back and watch the replays. You can watch several years' worth of replays if you want to. I thought I would pull some from my recent Q&A. I need to let you know that the questions sometimes reveal who the person is or what their situation is as far as their location or kids' ages. I stripped all that out of these questions for the podcast (because this is a public podcast) so that there is no... The questions are like the kinds of questions we get regularly. You wouldn't be able to tell who it was because so many women have these same exact questions. I want to reassure you of that privacy aspect. Also, the first question I answer I didn't put the question in at all because there were too many identifiers in there.

QUESTION: So this first answer we will start with, the question was about what if your husband has a mental health issue, like maybe he has Asperger's or is on the autism spectrum or has a personality disorder or something like that? If he's got a mental health issue, then is it okay for him to be abusive? Does the woman need to put up with that kind of abuse? What boundaries can she have if he has a diagnosis? That's the first question. We'll answer that and then continue through this podcast with a question and answer, question and answer. Are you ready to dive in? Here we go.

ANSWER: What I always say is it doesn't really matter why the person is choosing to abuse another person. It doesn't matter why. It doesn't matter if they had a terrible childhood. There are literally billions of people on this planet who have bad childhoods; they are not all abusers, or they don't all choose to abuse. If they have a personality disorder and that's why they abuse, that may answer why they do it, but it changes nothing for you. My job is to help you figure things out for your life. Actually, that's not really my job—that's your job. My job is to support you in doing that.

You are looking for signs of recovery. I would say to stop looking at him. One thing I noticed even in the Flying Higher group, which is for divorced women, is that there is so much focus and obsession—and it's normal because it's a survivor thing—about the

man. We are all focused on him. We're all focused on his healing, focused on changing him so that you can stay with him, focused on him, him, him, him. He's like a millstone around your neck. If you hang on to that millstone, you will get dragged to the bottom of the ocean. Your only hope of ever being free and flying is to disconnect from that millstone and let him have his millstone self. He might sink to the bottom of the ocean, but that's his choice. You get to decide if you want to sink with him or if you want to fly. I'm not saying you must divorce or separate in order to fly. I'm saying the first step to flying is flying internally inside of you. It's disconnecting from that other person, disconnecting from their psyche. An illustration I often use to show this is this. Some of you have seen this, but for those of you who haven't there are two different people. This is you over here. You have your universe, and he has his. But what happens in an abusive relationship is that you both share the same universe. That leads to all kinds of problems, as you've probably noticed. The challenge is going to be to disconnect from the other person. In my healthy marriage, what a healthy relationship looks like is this. I have me; he has him; and there is a bit of overlap in the middle where we share some things. This is our shared space, but I am still my own person. If something were to happen to him, it would be sad and I would grieve, but it would not shake the core, the foundation, of who I am as a human being because my foundation is not wrapped up in another human being, even though we are very close and have a great relationship. In my former relationship, my brain and my universe were all about him. Everything he said I assumed must be true. When Tom says something, I don't just assume it's true. I think, "Well, that's what Tom thinks. That's fascinating." But I don't think that I must think that or buy into it at all. Tom and I have a lot of different... We are much different in our perspectives and our opinions than my ex and I were. But Tom and I get along so much better because he is fine with me having my ideas, and I'm fine with him having his. There is a respect there.

Back to the question, though. As far as your recovery, your recovery does not depend on his recovery. You need to understand that first. Second, his recovery is completely his responsibility. How are you going to know he's recovered? You'll know by how it feels in your body when you are with him. You've probably noticed this. Do you have good friends you know how you are completely safe with? You can let your hair down with them. You know they will love you no matter what. You can just be yourself with them, and you've always been that way. Maybe it's a lifelong friend you've always had that kind of relationship with. Or maybe a sister or brother that you have a relationship like that with. You'll feel that way with the other person. You'll know they've recovered when you know, "I'm safe with this other person." Again, you will feel it in your body. Our physical brains can pick up on things that we may not consciously understand or be aware of. Have you ever been in a situation where you've sensed there was some kind of

danger? When I was in college, everyone was gone, but I was at school and hadn't left yet. They had gone on Christmas vacation. I was way in the back of the library looking for a book before I left. There was someone else close to me. I didn't recognize him, but I felt danger. I was wearing a skirt. I could sense that he was getting down, like he was getting down to get a book on the shelf behind me. My brain was screaming at me, "There's a problem! There's a problem! There's a problem!" I was consciously saying to myself, "It's not that big of a deal, Natalie. For crying out loud! What's your problem?" I looked down, and he was on his hands and knees looking up my skirt. I was in college. Thankfully, that was my first (but not my only experience) being violated in that kind of way. The point I'm trying to make is that our bodies can sense. Even though I couldn't see him, my body knew what was going on in that space. Your body knows that too. So listen to your body. Part of growing and healing is becoming more in tune and self-aware of what your brain and your body are trying to tell you. God gave those things to you as gifts for a reason. We've been told and taught that shouldn't listen to that—that those are evil things: the heart is evil and deceptive, and who can know it. They take Bible verses, and they twist them out of context to neutralize women and to keep us in positions of unsafety so that we can be used and abused for other purposes. That's a bigger picture of what's going on.

QUESTION: I've moved out of the marital home. I'm now in the apartment. I'm unsure of everything. I've lost all sense of hope, future thinking, and even if life can get better. The feelings I had in my marriage were of neglect, something I endured in my origin family as well. I find it difficult to shift past it. I am afraid of slipping into depression. I can feel the other side of myself, full of excitement, and I struggle to help them meet.

ANSWER: One thing I do when I teach you the model in Lesson 1.7 is that I teach you that our brain's run on autopilot on a program and that we have the opportunity... All the model does, it is super simple, it holds up a mirror that says, "This is what your brain's programming is." This is what your brain's programming is—that's the "T" line. When things like this happen, this is what you generally think because that is your brain's programming. When you generally think that, you generally feel like this. When you generally feel like this, you generally do these things. When you generally do these things, you generally have these results. And around and around and around it goes. It is just a mirror. That's all it is. It is life changing because the only way you can change your life is if you have self-awareness. Most people do not have self-awareness. They do not see their programming, nor do they want to. It is too painful. If they do see it, they don't want to change it because brains don't want to change. Your brain is going to tell you all the 500,000 reasons not to look at this and change anything. This is hard work! It's hard work, but it changes lives. It can change yours too, but you must do the work.

The circumstance doesn't have to change, and it won't change, which is good news because you don't have any control over that anyway. With circumstance, let's say it's an abusive husband. You thought, "Sure I can change the circumstance." Your thought was, "I can change him if I just say it the right way. If I just act the right way, if I just do the right things, think the right things, and say the right things, then I can change the circumstance." That is what your brain's programming tells you. When your brain's programming tells you that, you feel a certain way. You probably feel hope, and that hope makes you do all these things that you think you have to do. Do you know what result you get? The same result. It never changes the circumstance because that's not what happens. Our beliefs... We can believe until the cows come home that our husband can change, and that God is going to do a miracle. We can believe until the cows come home that elephants can float over colorful rainbows. That doesn't make it happen. Can God make an elephant go over a rainbow? What do you guys think? Of course He can! God can do anything. All He must do is think the thought, and it happens. God constrains Himself. I don't know why; He just does. Also, God is not a puppet master. He didn't make people and then say, "Oh, goodie! I'm going to make a bunch of Lego characters and then I'm going to move them around and do whatever the hell I want to do with them." God doesn't do that. That's what abusive people do. God is not an abuser. He will not control your husband like a Lego character. Your husband is going to control you like a Lego character, but God will not do that. God will not control you like that either. If you want to keep your programming, God is going to let you keep your programming. God is going to love you with all His big heart 100% with your programming. Nothing you do, think, or believe... You can believe God doesn't exist. He still loves you. That will not change how He... He will not say, "Oh, she's having doubts I exist. Hmm. Maybe I don't like her so much anymore." No! That's what abusive people do. That's what we do as humans. That's not God. God is so much bigger than that. Pastors and religious people bring God down to our size. That's gross. He's not like that.

So the model shows you what your programming is and then once you see it all, you get all these lightbulbs and say, "Yeah, that's what I believe." Then you get to decide, "I don't think I like those results anymore. What can I do about this? I'll tell you, this right here in the "T" line is your power. You change your programming. It doesn't happen overnight. But it happens a lot faster than you might imagine. You can change your programming faster if you make efforts to do it. That means you don't just have a thought and say, "Yeah, that's true. I could think about it that way," and then walk away and never think it again. You have to practice the thought. You have to write it down. Every time you are tempted to think the other thought, the programmed thought, you flip it upside down and replace it with the new thought that your brain also believes. Pretty soon you'll find... I don't believe even remotely the things I used to believe ten years ago. I don't

even believe them. I think those things are so ridiculous now. What's happening here in this gal's question is part of herself is feeling the excitement. That's the part of herself that is thinking new thoughts. But the other part of herself, the programmed part of herself, is still thinking the old thoughts. She can't really put those together. There is some cognitive dissonance there, and there will be until she practices more and more the new thoughts and gives less and less airtime to the old thoughts.

Also, if you feel you are slipping into depression, I definitely recommend you see a family doctor and that you possibly get on medication because that can really help you pull out of it. I'm not on medication anymore, but I used it for a few years to help me get through. It wasn't just the divorce process. It ended up being all the fallout after it. A lot of stress with my older kids, and it was helpful to be on medication during that time.

QUESTION: My husband and I have been separated for almost three years. In that timeframe he has not one time asked to meet to talk, has not addressed our relationship at all, or what is the next step, etc. Prior to our separation, we were living separated under the same roof. My fear in separating was exactly this—that we would continue to live in the same way, only now under two roofs. He makes no decisions, speaks into nothing, and has not an opinion. This is very confusing to me. He isn't a typical abuser—at least, I don't think so. He isn't demanding, egotistical, or attention-seeking, yet he has control in subtle ways. (That is called a covert abuser, by the way.) This leaves me confused, questioning the situation, and playing the tapes of my responsibility in my mind. I feel stuck, and this seems so weird to me. It leaves me questioning everything. Is this abuse, or is this just a really bad marriage?

ANSWER: I think it's both. I don't think it's a marriage at all, actually. Basically, you are living as if you are divorced, but you are not. What I'd like to ask you to think about is that you thought separation was going to change your husband, but it didn't—and it doesn't. Separation doesn't change people. People change themselves because they decide to change. Now you know after three years—after thirty-plus years with a three-year separation—you know your husband is a duck because he just keeps on quacking. You keep thinking he's going to be a kitty cat, that if you just give him enough time he will start to meow. But the guy is a duck, and he is going to quack until he dies. He is a duck through and through. His duckness is always going to be there. Whether you separate, stay married, get divorced—he will always be the duck that he is. (I'm not calling him a duck. I'm trying to show you a parallel. I'm trying to illustrate this to you with a metaphor.) So you must decide—do you want the duck or not? If you want a cat, you're going to have to get away from the duck. Or maybe you don't want a pet at all. (Again, I'm keeping up with the metaphor. I'm not saying husbands are pets.) It just boils

down to making a decision. But please accept the fact that your husband is who he is. He has been trying to show you this for thirty-plus years, and your programming keeps insisting that it must not be true. It must not be true. It's true. It is true. Your job is to figure out what you are going to do about that trueness—that truth—for you. That's all you can do. You can't change the duck and make him into a kitty cat.

QUESTION: My husband says I'm not building trust by not giving him my email passwords. (Of course he says that.) This makes me feel like the bad guy, even though I tell him I just want to have my own space to process things without being interrogated by him. This is an ongoing discussion. What should I do?

ANSWER: There is really nothing for you to do. Your husband has a thought that it's not okay for you to do that. So the circumstance is "wife didn't give me her email passwords." His thought is "wife is bad." His feeling is "mad." His action is "tells wife 'you have to give me these passwords or else you're a bad guy.'" His result for his life is that he's all disconcerted with lots of drama in his brain. That's his model—poor guy. Let him have his model. Let him spin around in his little tornado. You don't have to be part of that. You're an adult. You have email passwords. That's what most adults do. I don't let my husband look at my email either and I have an amazeballs husband! My husband would never ask me for my passwords ever! He would never dream of that because he's an adult, and he knows we are adults who have our own passwords. We let our kids have their own passwords. (Not our little kids.) It's called respect. Abusers don't have this. Abusers are little boys in adult bodies who have temper tantrums because they want to control all the sand in the sandbox. "That's my shovel and my pail. You can't have it. If you're going to take it from me, I'm going to take some sand and I'm going to throw it in your face. You can't play in my sandbox unless you play by my rules." We can just step back from that and have pity for them that they are stuck in emotional childhood. That doesn't mean we have to be stuck there. You don't have to be stuck there. We don't have to play that game. We can be the teacher on the outside of the sandbox who looks down at the little boy who is looking up and saying, "You're a dummy teacher. You're so dumb!" That's amusing. We don't step back and think, "Oh my gosh, I'm dumb. I got my master's degree. I think I know how to teach, but maybe I don't because this five-year-old said I was dumb. Maybe I'm dumb." I'm trying to help you separate yourself from his little imaginary universe where he is pretending you're a bad person because you won't give him your email password. That's ridiculous. You're not ridiculous—he's ridiculous!

QUESTIONS: What are some things you did to check and confirm that your husband had not changed? When my husband is love-bombing or pretending to care, I begin to question reality. If I don't rock the boat, things will go smoothly. (That's it right there!)

ANSWER: Do you want to know if your husband has changed? Rock the boat and see what happens. If you say no to him, if you rock the boat and he just goes with the flow, loves on you anyway, accepts that you have a different opinion and rolls with it like an adult human being, then you know that the guy has changed. He is all grown up now. I can sit down and have a meeting of the minds. I can be my own person. I can be myself. I am totally safe with him. Then he has changed. But if you rock the boat and he has a cow about it, then he has not changed. It's as simple as that. She says, "I see he is changing and listening to his therapist and men's support group." That is not change. Just because he is listening to someone, to his therapist, all that is doing is getting more flying monkeys to be on his side. That is just a strategy; that is not change.

QUESTION: When I confronted the abuse, set boundaries, and change the narrative, this sent things topsy-turvy in our relationship—(Right. You pull out the card in the house of cards.)—causing him to be even more raging—(Because you're not supposed to do that! Leave the card in there!)—thus giving me the impetus to leave and separate. Since that time, he has pushed every boundary and fought the separation until this last month. Suddenly, he said the following, "I believe we need to be separated, and you can't put a timeline on healing..." These are my exact words. (This is called parroting, and abusers love to parrot.) "... and I need to figure out if I want to be married to you." (Again, he is totally parroting you.) He is really starting to work on his stuff, and he has a good therapist. He is reading books on co-dependency and childhood trauma. This is just the background to my question. My question involves trauma bonding. He is now reading a book called *The Betrayal Bond: Breaking Free From Exploitative Relationships* on trauma bonding in toxic relationships. His mantra has always been that he has apologized for his behavior, and I continue to tell him how bad he is. My question is, am I the one who is causing the trauma? Is he trauma bonded to me? I know I'm not always perfect at how I have responded to him. Maybe I am expressing my boundaries in too harsh of a manner. I see he is changing and really listening to his therapist and men's support group. Is it possible I am missing my responsibility here?

ANSWER: Maybe. Only you know the answer to that because I have not been a fly on the wall in your house. Is he really changing? If he is really changing—you can confront him about things, give him feedback about stuff in a kind way—is he having a cow about it? Is he arguing with you? Is he saying it's all your fault? Is he blame shifting? Is he denying? Is he justifying? Is he minimizing? If he has really changed, then he won't minimize things anymore. Then he will own his own stuff. One thing he won't say anymore is, "Well, you..." He will stop saying that because it will be about him owning his stuff. I don't know what your situation is. I know mine, and I don't want to project what happened to me onto you and say what happened to me happened to you. I know I yelled. I swore. Mine would

never swear. He yelled, but he would never swear. Usually if I would yell more, trying to get him to hear me, he would get quieter and quieter and more jabby in a quiet, covert way because he knew he could push my buttons. When I started disconnecting from him so that he couldn't push my buttons anymore, that is when he started getting angrier and angrier. Again, you are focused so much on him and on his change. We have this obsession with these men, and that is a trauma bond. Whether he has a trauma bond with you, I don't know, and it's not really your business or my business. That's his model. He gets to work that out with his counselor. You need to work on your model and on getting your universe, your head, your garden nice and healthy and nurtured. Loving yourself, taking good care of yourself, having healthy boundaries, speaking your truth, being kind. The kinder you are and the more generosity you have toward yourself, the kinder and more generous you are going to be with other people, including your husband even when he is an asshole. You will be like the teacher with the child in the sandbox. You'll think, "Oh, honey. It's so adorable that you think I'm a little dummy, but honey you need to come inside now because you're not playing nice." It would be more like that, but the teacher can still have compassion and love for the dirty little boy in the sandbox rather than saying, "Don't say those things to me! You shouldn't say those things to me. I'm not that way! I know I'm smart." You know what I mean? We don't have to get defensive, upset, or angry when someone says stuff like that to us.

So if you can disconnect your universe from his universe so that you don't have that trauma bond, so you don't buy into his pretend world of what he believes you are. You just be your own self. Let him get his own help. I always get a little nervous when someone says they think their husband might be abusive, but he is getting help and is reading books that are about abuse. What can happen is that they can learn all the verbiage, the language, and then use it against you. That can also happen, and it can create a lot of cognitive dissonance and confusion for the victim as well. We are much more self-aware. We love our husbands, and we want what is best for them. We want what is best for the marriage and are always all in on making the whole thing work. They typically are not. They are typically more than willing to give all the responsibility to us. You need to let go of that responsibility and let him own his own stuff. You own your own stuff and try to keep things as separate as possible. I don't know if you've been here for a long time or not, but if you are new, all this will become clearer as you go through this program. This program is like the river of misery. You don't know, but you are going to be a different person by the time you are done with it. A year from now, when you are done with the program, I promise you will be a different person.

QUESTION: I've decided to stay with my emotional and religious abuser because I don't have the resilience to move out yet. How can I grow while living with him?

ANSWER: Here's what I would do if I were you. First, I know your brain is saying, "I am muted. I don't have a voice." But you do. The first place you are going to use your voice is inside your own universe with you. That is how you will start building it. You're going to secretly build your life while you are still living in that prison. Have you ever seen movies where you have someone like a woman in a prison or a man in a prison and while he's there he's doing what he can to lift weights? He's getting strong. He's preparing himself for life outside of prison. That's what you are doing. Your youngest is 14. That means you've got four more years before your kids are of age and that you won't have any custody issues. Here's what I would do if I were in your shoes. I would start thinking of this like I'm in prison for four years. I've got a four-year prison sentence. I am going to be so badass strong by the time I get out this world will not know what hit it! You are not muting your voice because that's who you are, and that's what you're aligned with. You are biding your time. You are growing your voice and strengthening it inside of yourself. I tell everyone to do this, and I do it myself. You are going to talk to yourself in the mirror. You are going to start using your voice and practicing your voice in the mirror with yourself. With your kids you can speak your truth at times and teach them. Be a good example to them. You can learn how to set good boundaries for yourself with your husband while you are in the relationship. Good boundaries doesn't mean you control someone else and what they do. Good boundaries just means that when he goes off the rails, you get the Sam heck out of there. Say, "I will not hang around you. If you are going to be like that right now, go ahead. You have every right to be that way. If that's how you want to show up in life, have at it. But I will not stand here and hang out with you when you are like this." I'll just give you a random example. I know this is not something in your life. He complains about the food at dinnertime. "I don't like it when you make this. You need to have meat in our food. I don't like a vegetarian meal." Well, thank you for sharing your input, but I'm the one who put this meal together for you and you either eat it without complaining or you make your own meal the next time. In fact, because you complained, I'm going out to eat tomorrow night. You and the kids can fend for yourselves, but I'm going out to an expensive restaurant and have my favorite Chicken Cacciatore (or whatever it is). I'm going to stuff my face and be super happy tomorrow night. I'm going to do that every single time you complain, so go right ahead. I hope you do. I hope you complain all the time because I love Chicken Cacciatore. (I'm being sarcastic again. I'm being over the top.) What I'm trying to do is show you how you can get stronger and learn how to—not play the game—but learn strategies and tactics that help you flex those emotional muscles. Being in this program is going to help you do that. Look at this program as being your workout place, your gym, for your voice and your inner strength. Four years from now, when you are ready to get out, you can make that decision and you can launch into your amazing future.

And there you have it! You can see that I let my hair down a little more behind the scenes with the members of Flying Free. If you'd like to join us, head over to joinflyingfree.com where you can get all the information and get on the waiting list. We'd love to have you join us the next time it opens up. Thank you so much for listening to this episode. I look forward to seeing you again next week. Until then, fly free!