

MY THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES WHEN GETTING AWAY FROM EMOTIONAL ABUSE PART ONE

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 126 of the Flying Free Podcast. It has been nine years since I went to a local Barnes & Noble with my belly full of baby, my arms full of computer, my heart full of despair, and sat down with a cup of coffee and googled terms like "passive-aggressive husband," "painful marriage," "hitting a wall in my marriage for two decades," and that kind of thing. I had never heard the term "emotional abuse" before, and I certainly didn't believe I was being abused. Abuse was when your husband gave you black and blue eyes. I had a husband who took care of his family, played with his kids, and brought home the bacon. My husband was a faithful, church-going man who would give the shirt off his back to anyone who asked. Abuse? That never crossed my mind.

I found little that day other than a book about passive-aggressive men and a book called, *Who's Pushing Your Buttons?* by John Townsend and Henry Cloud, a book which describes emotional abuse without calling it that. But what happened that day was this—I woke up my reticular activating system in my brain, and I started noticing things I had never noticed before or things I had noticed but hadn't allowed myself to think about or focus on before. My brain had been very invested in believing what it had been programmed to believe from the time I was a baby. That is that love goes hand-in-hand with abusive behavior. Let me give you some examples.

When someone criticized my hair, my makeup, or my fingernails, that meant they loved me. When someone told me I would grow up and live in a pigsty, that meant they loved me. When someone told me I could never do or be something that I wanted to do or be, that meant they loved me. When someone controlled what I did or believed, that meant they loved me. When someone hit me if I didn't agree with them, that meant they loved me. After all, they told me they loved me all the time, and they were just looking out for my best interests.

So when I got married and all the same things happened, it felt normal. Did I like it? No, I hated it! I felt oppressed and depressed, but I thought it was because there was something fundamentally wrong with me. I wanted to be loved and accepted, so I went along with it, hoping that eventually I would get the hang of being perfect for the other

person. I would bend over backwards to give more than anyone else—to give more money, more gifts, more of my time, more of my effort, more of my love, more of everything. If someone told me the goal was here, I would make it my goal to go above and beyond that. I wouldn't settle for A's; I wanted the A+++. I wanted there to be no doubt that I did everything I could and then some.

I'll give you an example—homeschooling. If being a great mom was important, then I was going to go above and beyond a great mom. I was going to do it all. I was going to teach my kids, cook, clean, bake from scratch, pick the best curriculum, give my kids that Thomas Jefferson education, and raise not just decent kids but great kids—kids who were going to be leaders in the world. If prayer was important and effective, I would pray four times as much as anyone else I knew. I would be the prayer warrior, pacing my kitchen floor early in the morning before all my kids got up to eat their homemade granola and scrambled egg breakfast that I made for them after my hour-long devotion and prayer time. If carving out time for traveling to see in-laws or having other families from church over for dinners and picnics was important, then I was going to carve out three trips each summer to visit in-laws and would have other families over a minimum of once per month. These were just some of my regular goals. I was a high achiever, and that didn't change when I got married and had babies. If having one baby was great, then nine babies were even better.

I never got the approval of the ones I loved. According to my husband, I would always be selfish and self-serving. I was too this and too that and too the other thing. Nothing I did made a dent. Honestly, I hated myself. I judged myself and I judged other people around me because I was exhausted, doing all the things and getting nothing in return, and everyone else was perfectly happy being a lazy butt. My kids weren't turning out any different from theirs. In fact, some of their kids seemed to turn out much better. Not fair! The formulas were not working in my favor. Again, it couldn't be the formulas; it had to be me. What was wrong with me?!

I did not have my own back. I did not love and accept me just the way I was. I was really trying to prove to myself that I was worthy of living life here on planet Earth, and I thought that was the way to do it. I was jealous that other didn't have to try so hard, and it seemed God loved them just fine the way they were. But me? I was a special snowflake that needed to glow for God to love me. But that was just my pride. I had to glow for me to love myself. I didn't know a secret I'm going to tell you right now: You don't glow by trying to glow. You glow naturally when you are all in and exactly who God made you to be, and that includes all your warts, too. It includes your dark side and your lovely side. Once you totally accept all of yourself, you discover you accept all other

people as well. That doesn't mean that you're best buds with everyone. Actually, you'll get much better at healthy boundaries once you love and accept who God created you to be because you will protect that precious creation; you won't throw it under the bus all the time. What it means is you will lose the judgment of others when they think or do things differently from you. You may not spend time with them, but you definitely lose your judgment of them.

You can always tell who hates on themselves by reading people's reactions on Facebook. I know I've said this before, but self-haters throw up all over anyone who doesn't believe what they believe. To love themselves, they must be in the right. If others don't see eye-to-eye with them, they feel threatened. People who are secure in Christ and in who God made them to be are the ones who are also curious, open, kind, and accepting of the differences of others. When others have a different opinion, they aren't threatened by that at all. They understand that everyone is in a different place and has a different perspective. Honestly, they trust in a bigger God who can handle all those differences. When I throw up on other people, I communicate that I have a pretty small, petty god who is wringing his hands in frustration over the billions of folks who don't agree with me, and I am his personal representative. Do you see how ugly this is and how unlike Jesus this is?

That was a long introduction (of which I am famous for) to what I want to share with you today. I want to tell you what I'd do differently if I had the chance to go back in time nine years and do it all again. If I could go back as the person I've grown to be, which is by far not perfect, but I am growing, who is now fully accepting of me and fully accepting of others just as they are, what would I do differently? I'm going to break this into two episodes. In this first episode, I will talk about what I'd do differently in my former marriage. In the next episode I want to get into a bit about what I'd do differently in my former church. I hope this gets your own brain's reticular activating system revved up so you can notice and gain self-awareness around why you believe what you believe, why you feel what you do, and what kinds of actions you take regularly that keep giving you the same results. Self-awareness is the first step to changing up the game of life. So here we go.

Nine years ago, when I first started learning about emotional abuse and destructive patterns of behavior, I did three things with that information. Number one, I tried to force my husband to change so that we could stay married. Number two, I continued to submit to him while simultaneously trying to evolve myself. This is an impossible task since submitting to him would make evolving impossible. He didn't want me to evolve unless it meant more perks for him, which it would have, but not the perks he knew and

cared about. Number three, I asked for the support, help, and validation of others, thinking that I needed their permission to live my adult life. Let me tell you more about each of these things and what I would do differently now.

First, I tried to force my husband to change so we could stay married. I had twenty years of journals to look back on and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was something malignant about our relationship. There is an episode (which I cannot remember off the top of my head, but I will stick in the show notes) where I go into some of my journal entries so you can get a glimpse of some things I was writing about and the things I was believing. I had known our relationship was problematic even before we tied the knot. I just didn't want to look too closely at it because I had a ton of confidence that my love would change everything, and I trusted God to help me. This idea was so ingrained in my brain that even when I did finally get honest about the malignancy, I still thought I could save the day. All I had to do was communicate in the very best and most effective way possible, and the Holy Spirit would do the rest. My husband would have an epiphany. He would change. We would go all over the world telling our story of redemption. That fits into my paradigm of how God changes the world. I would be a catalyst for this change because while I loathed myself, I also thought I was amazeballs. Yeah, those two things can and do co-exist inside all of us. If you every wonder who the hell you are, you are a human. There's nothing wrong with you. Welcome to the human race. Do you know what happened? Nothing. My husband didn't change, and all I did was continue to beat my head against a brick wall. Ouch!

What would I do differently? I would stop trying to control my husband. I would work on accepting him just the way he is. When he was abusive, I'd say, "Hey! That was abuse, and that's what he does. He's just being consistent. He gets to make his own choices for how he lives his life, and this is how he lives his life." But I didn't want to accept reality. I wanted to create my own. A reality that made sense and was more comfortable for my brain. My reality was not comfortable, and it didn't make sense because a man who says, "I'm sorry" while gaslighting you, controlling you, or criticizing your most precious efforts of love is pretty Alice in Wonderland type of cray-cray if you ask my opinion. But if I had to do it all over again, I would work really hard on rewiring my brain to acknowledge and accept reality. (This is why I started the Flying Free Sisterhood because I wanted to help other people do what I did not do.) This is who he is. I am married to "that guy," and he gets to stay that way if he wants to. After twenty years of asking for change and never getting it, I can pretty much assume he's made it crystal clear that he does indeed want to stay that way. What would have changed about our story if I had accepted this reality? I would have been forced to decide about what I could do in that reality. Not what I could do if I could change that reality, but what I

could do within that reality—the reality that I had to work with. This brings me to the second thing I did that I would change now if I could go back.

Number two, I continued to submit to him while I simultaneously tried to evolve myself. But here's the thing. You can't evolve yourself if you can't be yourself in the first place. If you are giving up responsibility for your life and allowing someone else to run it, you will not be able to change anything. I thought I could have both. I could keep my husband and my marriage, accepting that they were both dysfunctional and creating all kinds of emotional, spiritual, and physical consequences in my life, yet I could continue to grow and evolve as a person. I do think you can grow to a certain point. I don't just think that; I know you can. When I look back, I see I was like a caterpillar who wanted to turn into a butterfly, but there was a heavy blanket over me preventing me from climbing the stick to spin my cocoon and begin the metamorphosis process. I would have had to decide to either accept that blanket and remain under it or wiggle out from underneath and find my stick to climb. Those were my two choices. If I had to do it all over again, I would have chosen to wiggle out a lot sooner. As it was, I spent a long time, years, continuing to think I could get the blanket to lift off me and provide a protective shelter from the elements rather than continue to be a heavy, stifling weight that kept me from being what God wanted me to be. The reality was that the blanket wasn't going anywhere. Again, we cannot change another person. We're not supposed to. It's actually abusive to try to control and change another person. We are wasting our emotional energy trying to do that when we could better use all that amazing energy to change our own life. But I stayed under that blanket for four more years before I finally wiggled out, climbed that stick, and filed for divorce. The caterpillar that was me at that point finally turned into a pile of goo within my little chrysalis. I was completely undone. But that is the only way to become a butterfly. I didn't know much at that point, but by then, I knew that much. Although it took four years of soul searching and tremendous fear of the future, I did eventually make that choice. I am so glad I did.

The third thing I did back then was that I asked for support, help, and validation of others. I not only asked for their support, help, and validation, but I kind of expected it. I believed I needed it to give me permission to live my life. I had been raised in a home where I was not encouraged to make my own decisions, and when I did, I was criticized for it. When I made a decision that resulted in a failure of some type or a mistake, I was berated for it. This created a lot of fear and unnecessary caution about making decisions. Plus, in the patriarchal movement I was a part of, a woman wasn't capable of making wise decisions, anyway. God didn't create women that way, I was told. He created men to rule over women because men were naturally wise leaders, and if women tried to rule over men, they were being rebellious and anti-god. It was bizarre for

me because neither my dad nor my husband was at all a leader in their personality. They weren't wired that way. They weren't leaders in their motivations or their desires. I, on the other hand, was a born leader. It was extremely confusing to me and was one of the many things about that patriarchal culture that made little sense. But I blindly accepted it. I dealt with the cognitive dissonance because that was all my brain knew. I was told if I tried to learn about or think about anything else or be open-minded to any other ideas that would be heretical, I would dishonor God, and dishonoring God was something I was loath to do. I loved God. I wanted nothing more than to bring Him glory, and I didn't want to stand in the way of that. I had baked into my psyche this belief that I was incapable of making wise decisions for my own life, and therefore I needed to rely on the objective wise opinions of everybody else. The Holy Spirit would especially speak through husbands, pastors, teachers, or small-group leaders the best and preferably men over women. Of course, they were the ones I sought permission, approval, and validation from. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (I've said this before, but I'll say it again), I searched high and low to find the wizard who knew the way back home never realizing I wore the power on my own two feet; the power that had been given to me by the Holy Spirit.

In the fall of 2015, I decided to grow up. I made a conscious decision. I literally stopped and said, "You know what? I'm a freaking adult! I'm forty-nine years old. It's time for me to grow up and stop asking permission." I felt God's pleasure like I had never felt it before. I was beginning to come out of my cocoon. When that happened, all the people who were used to my coming to them for advice and help got a bit upset. My theory is that they enjoyed playing the role of God in the lives of other people. Maybe it made them feel less shame or more worthy, I don't know. Whatever their motivations, they were upset when I said, "Thank you for your help so far, but I'm going to spend some time thinking about this on my own and make my own decisions from here on out with the help of God." I think they thought God wouldn't talk to me directly. I think they thought God only talked to them. (It was fascinating.) I was beginning to realize that was just their story. They are just humans like me. It wasn't necessarily a true story. They bought into it, but did I want to buy into that story, or did I want to buy into the story that God told in His word that there was no mediator between me and God other than Jesus Christ, that I had the Holy Spirit living inside me just like they did, and that the New Testament tells us in several places that God freely gives us His wisdom in Christ.

What I would do differently now is that I wouldn't ask for permission. I wouldn't ask for everyone's opinions. "What do you think about this? Do you think this is okay?" I would just be my adult self and make my own decisions and live before God and not men and patriarchal women. I know, I know. There's a verse in Proverbs that says, "In the presence

of many counselors there is wisdom.” But living your life and ultimately taking responsibility for that life does not negate that piece of good advice. The Bible also gives examples of wicked counselors who give bad advice, and God’s people must go against that bad advice. We must be careful not to pull a random verse out here and there and create an entire existence from it. I don’t think that is wise; I think that is dogmatic foolishness.

That is all I have for you today. I will come back next time and talk about what I would do differently in the church I went to at the time, or even in the two churches prior to that one. I’m excited to share a bit more of my story with you there.

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I’m grateful to all of you who keep listening. It’s so much fun to do this. I love it; I love you. I’m excited about all God is doing in our lives. I believe He is setting His daughters free, and we’re all part of that beautiful story. That’s it for today. Until next time, fly free!