

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

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 127 of the Flying Free Podcast. Thank you for joining me again this week. If you're new around these parts, I'd like to invite you to subscribe so you don't miss an episode. And if you've been around a while and haven't left a rating and review yet, I would kneel and kiss your feet if you did. Okay—I probably wouldn't do that because it's kind of weird, but I would be really thankful. We've had some amazing reviews come in lately. This one is one of my favorites. Do you know what the heading was? She wrote, "Abuse haunts, but Natalie is a ghostbuster." I busted out laughing when I read that. This is what she wrote in her review. "Forgive me, Natalie, for waiting this long to write a review of your amazing podcast. My friend has been processing through a difficult divorce and she told me about you over a year ago. I started listening and realized how I've been haunted from unresolved trauma from my own abusive marriage (finally divorced in 2014) which played out in my thoughts and defensiveness toward others as I wanted to control them to avoid more pain. Your clear and specific guidance on issues dealing with relationships and communication has been indeed freeing and life healing. The information given in these gold nugget podcasts is so rich! I can only imagine how beneficial your groups will be. Thank you for using your painful experience to help others navigate through destruction to a bright, hopeful future! Sending love and genuine gratefulness." Thank you so much for taking the time to write that review and for giving me some laughs. That heading, I think that's the number one favorite heading for me.

Last week in episode 126 I talked about what I would do differently in my former marriage if I had a do over. I listed three things. The first was that I had tried to force my husband to change, and if I had to do it over, I would have accepted him the way he was and left a lot sooner. Second, I continued to submit to him while simultaneously trying to develop myself. If I had to do it over, I would have submitted to God and continued working on my self-development. Submission to God meant creating a lot of waves and discomfort, but then I would have seen more clearly the need to get out of that environment much sooner. Third, I asked for the help, support, and validation of others, thinking I needed permission to live my adult life. If I had to do it over, I would have stopped seeing myself as a child and would have lived into who God created me to be as an adult woman, taking responsibility for my own life, and make decisions that

reflected that personal responsibility. Again, if I had done that, I would have seen sooner the necessity of leaving that relationship. I talked about that in episode 126. If you want to hear all the details, you can go listen to that at flyingfreenow.com/126.

In today's episode, I want to talk about what I would do differently in my former church. I made three mistakes (I probably made a lot more than that—but I'm just going to talk about three) as a church member. I made the same three mistakes in both churches that I was a member of during my adult years. I was a member of one church from 1989 to 2003 and the next church from 2004 to 2015. That last church, I sent my official letter of withdrawal from membership, but that letter was rejected because they said that I was "in sin" because I wouldn't be reconciled with my estranged husband. I sent an official letter of withdrawal in 2015, then that church refused to accept it but officially and publicly ex-communicated me two years later in 2017, just before our divorce was final. Fun times, huh?

What were the three mistakes that I made? First, I disconnected from learning resources outside of those denominations as was recommended by the leaders in those churches. (Hmmm? I wonder why?!) I limited all my learning to theological viewpoints held by those leaders within that sub-culture of Christianity. Second, I did this because I had a hierarchical view of human life that revered men over women and leaders over laity. I believed the leaders were my authority and that they spoke for God into my life, so to reject their advice, opinions, or input was to reject the word of the living God. (Does anybody see the problem with this?) Finally, I had a low view of my own worth before God, and I believed my worth would be proven by cooperative submission to white male leaders and their wives. I literally viewed them as bigger and better than me, even the ones who were two decades younger with a lot less life experience, ministry experience, and biblical study under their belt. The one main issue sums up all three mistakes is that I was not self-differentiated. Self-differentiation, according to one online definition, involves being able to possess and identify your own thoughts and feelings and to distinguish them from the thoughts and feelings of others. It's a process of not losing connection to yourself while still holding a deep connection to others, including those you love whose views may differ from yours. The universe between my ears (my brain) was not self-differentiated to the degree that it should have been. I allowed the opinions and the beliefs of others to engulf and become my own. I was often confused because those opinions and ideas contradicted some things I also believed about God, the Bible, and how God related to people. But because I had been raised in a matriarchal home (I know — the irony is not lost on me,) it was thick with dispensational theology and black-and-white simplistic thinking; this was literally my programming. It had been baked into the fabric of my essence. While the Holy Spirit was

growing my own spirit and bringing me along my own journey, I was constantly coming up against this deeply seated programming from my youth.

In the years since then, I've done a ton of personal work on this program to rewire it, changing my brain first and then my life as followed. Everything we create for ourselves in our lives starts with the thoughts in our brains, ninety-five percent of which are not conscious until you do this work. That's why it is so important. This is the work I do with the women in my programs. I help women go from being victims of their programming to reclaiming their adult, individual selves. When they do this work, their lives change, and they can more effectively influence other vulnerable people in their spheres of influence. We are about the same work of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who changes the world not by coming and taking over but through one human at a time. You know who that starts with? What human does that start with? It starts with you. That change is only possible when you live into who God made you to be — when you live into and take responsibility for your own personhood and not the personhood of someone else (whose responsibility is theirs and not yours.)

Here's what I would do differently in my churches now with my new programming. First, instead of disconnecting from learning resources outside of my denomination and limiting all my learning to theological viewpoints held by the leaders within that sub-culture of Christianity, I would (and I do now) branch out to learning other perspectives and theological viewpoints. I would take personal responsibility for what I put into my brain and not rely on someone else being the gatekeeper of my brain, like a mommy and daddy situation. When we put that responsibility on another person, then we can easily blame them for keeping us stuck. The bottom line is that they are not at fault. I'm sorry, but we are adults, and we are responsible for all our learning — who we learn from, what we learn, what we want to keep, and what we want to spit out. Then we are responsible for what we do with that learning, nobody else. Does that mean that I beat myself up for not knowing what I didn't know back then? No way! Criticism and beating yourself up is unmotivating. Nobody thrives under condemnation and criticism. What it means is that I hold compassionate and curious space for who I was while continuing to walk expectantly forward into who I am becoming. I sincerely hope that five years from now I can look back at this time and do another podcast on what I would do differently if I could go back to this moment in time. I hope we are all changing, growing, learning, and evolving more into the version of ourselves that God intended when He created us. This means along the way we will take risks and make tons of mistakes. All of that is good and right and okay. It is part of growing up. If I were to go back, when someone would say, "Never read anything by Rachel Held Evans; she is a heretic!" I would have immediately gone out and read one of her books to see for myself just how heretical

she is. I would have loved her message and her heart. I would have recognized a soul sister in Christ. (I think most of the people who told me not to read her had never read her either.) If I were to go back when someone told me, “There is nothing you can do if your husband is abusive. The Bible says a wife must stay and submit until you or he dies – period” (a pastor actually told me this at the very beginning of my marriage), I would have gone out and studied that for myself instead of just taking their word for it and staying for twenty-three more years.

The second thing I would have changed is my hierarchical view of human life that revered men over women and leaders over laity. I would no longer believe the leaders were my authority, that they spoke for God into my life, or that to reject their advice was to reject the word of God. I would have known that is what the Bible says is the consequence of sin in Genesis in a woman’s life – that Eve would no longer look to God but would instead desire the approval of her husband over God. Instead of that, I would be invested in breaking and reversing that consequence in my life by turning my heart back to God and revering Him over white men in suits and ties and white women in floral dresses. Would I change my stance and my attitude from that of a submissive puppy to that of a raving lunatic? No, no, no. I would change it to that of a loving, curious, and compassionate queen because that is who I am in Christ. I can have compassion on the white men and women and the fact that they impose their rules and regulations on others. Why? Because they lack self-differentiation and shame because they are not living in the fulness of their potential in freedom and love in Christ. I would know that folks who are living in the fulness of their potential will always extend that same love, freedom, and potential they are living in to those around them. We can not give to those around us what we do not possess.

Instead of a hierarchical view of humanity, which is rooted in humanism and man-made desperation for power and control due to high anxiety, I would view humans as equals regardless of gender, social status, nationality, or race, and I would live into that, seeing myself as separate from others while still working toward healthy connection and personal development and growth. That would mean that when a pastor says I don’t know God, instead of shaking and becoming devastated or angry, I would feel compassion for his inability to see truth or to know the God who knows me and him alike. This would mean that when I was told that I wasn’t submitting enough to my husband, and that I was scaring him with my own personhood, with being who I was, instead of trying to be smaller to fit into their template of the perfect Christian wife I could have compassion and hold space for their lack of insight into seeing the amazing humans around them, the female lights who were made to shine and share Christ in all the same powerful ways that men did, and how this lack of insight on their part kept

these white men from growing their churches and being the hands and feet of Jesus in their communities and in their corners of the world; how their ideas and grasping for power actually had the opposite effect and neutralized both them, the gospel, and the shining female lights around them; and how one day God was going to see those shining lights free from the bushes of the white men so God could continue to change the world through His precious sons and daughters who were in alignment with His Spirit and not just stuck in their own ego driven agendas.

The third thing I would change is my low view of my own worth before God which kept me from realizing my full potential as His daughter on this planet. I was afraid—afraid of rejection, afraid of disappearing, afraid that my life had no meaning, and I had been indoctrinated with the idea that I would be accepted, seen, and loved and I would have meaning if I submitted to the agendas of white men. If you only take away one idea from this episode, let it be this one. There are two things in this world that are opposites: fear and love. (There are a lot more things that are opposites, but the ones I'm going to talk about right now are fear and love.) Where you have perfect and complete love, you have no fear; and where you have fear, you have no perfect and complete love. Perfect and complete love is who God is. The Bible says God is that love. It is His essence. Fear is the opposite. Fear is the enemy. Fear keeps us from God and keeps us from our life that we were meant to live and who God intended us to be. I was forced to look that dragon in the face when I realized it was going to be either God or my church, and I knew it was a dragon telling me to pick it, lying to me that the church was God in my life, and the church knew best; the church was my authority. Power, control, manipulation, threats, fear. I finally recognized it for what it was—spiritual abuse. My God was no abuser god. I had to choose.

I chose to walk away from that church. You can read more about that journey if you go to my website flyingfreenow.com. If you type "Bethlehem Baptist" in the search bar you will see my article about why they are an unsafe church for people who are in an abusive relationship. I started seeing them as like children in a sandbox. They were like these kids in the sandbox watching a friend walk away and saying, "You can't just do that! We decide who walks away and who doesn't. We will ex-communicate you because we are in control here, and you are not! We want everyone to know it!" Then they throw sand at the friend walking away. I have a lot of women in my program who have gone through this. I always tell them it is like you are the teacher walking away from the kids in the sandbox. It doesn't have to bother you all that much because you're headed to the teacher's lounge where you can have an intelligent, adult conversation with other adults over a cup of coffee. Let the kids have their sandbox. That's okay. Maybe they will grow up someday, but that is not your concern. Your concern and your

responsibility before God is you and your self-development.

For us to feel like the teacher instead of a rejected child, we're going to need to start thinking and believing in our brain that we are a mature adult woman. We need to start living into that. If you are anything like me, you kind of think of yourself like a child. If your brain is programmed that way, which is the way cults and totalitarian governments like their people to be programmed because it keeps the people controllable, your challenge is going to be to do the work to reprogram your brain. The women who have been in Flying Free or Flying Higher, my two programs, for any length of time will tell you they feel like they are growing up for the first time in their lives. They are becoming their adult selves. I'm telling you it feels so good. It not only changes your life, but it also changes the world. I recently recorded a video (we call them butterfly stories.) Every month in the Flying Free program, I interview by video a survivor who is out of her relationship. She tells her story of how she met her husband, what her marriage was like, how she got out, and what she is doing today. Recently I did an interview, and toward the end of the interview this woman shared how the Flying Free and Flying Higher program had helped her. I'd like to play a little clip of that interview right now.

INTERVIEWEE: Another thing I started doing during the divorce process was that I joined Flying Free. I remember during that first little video session Natalie saying, "You're going to go from sitting up, to crawling, to walking, to running, to flying." I thought, "There's no way. I don't see that ever happening." Then she said, "I know you think that there's no way, but there is a way. You are going to do it." I kept thinking, "Okay." My personality, I just dove in headfirst, kind of like that counseling thing. I thought, "I'm going to dive in headfirst. I'm going to do every journaling thing. I'm going to answer these questions. I'm going to watch the videos." It almost became like Netflix. I was binge-watching the butterfly stories and the coaching sessions. I had it on in my car. All this education just became so transformative for me. And she was right! I went through that process, and I was flying. When she started Flying Higher, I thought, "Of course I want to fly higher! Who wouldn't want to fly higher? Sign me up! I'm going to fly higher." I went through the whole year of that and that was so good for me. It instilled everything that I was learning to where it has now become a habit, and I am doing all the model stuff with my kids and helping them with that and being able to see. Even my neighbor across the street. We walk and I'm like, "Okay, well what is your circumstance? What are you thinking about that? Why is that so important to you?" It is just oozing out. But you can't do that unless you put the work in at the beginning. I just want to encourage all of you to dive in headfirst and just go for it because it works. I honestly feel like I got more out of one month of Flying Free than I did nine years of counseling.

Okay. Believe it or not, we have quite a few people who have given us pieces of feedback like that after they've been in Flying Free for a while, which is kind of exciting. If you are interested in joining Flying Free, you can learn more. All the details are at joiningflyingfree.com. That's for women of faith who are still in a destructive relationship or are maybe dealing with a destructive, spiritually abusive church, or spiritually abusive parents. Flying Higher is for divorced Christian women who are ready to take their lives to the next level. The work we do in both programs is self-differentiation. I teach you, train you, and equip you to be your adult female self. It's really leadership training, and it starts with being a leader in your own life. Then you end up being a leader in the life of your children, the life of your community, the life of your church, and the lives of everyone that you touch. I hope you'll consider joining. I'd love to see you on the inside. We have a lot of fun and there is so much to explore in those programs. If you think the podcast is good and you like it, the podcast is like a snowflake at the top of an iceberg. So dive in, and I'll see you on the inside. I'm all done. That's it for today. Until next time, fly free!