

HOW DO I MAKE AN EXIT PLAN?

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 136 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to answer a couple of listener questions, so let's dive in.

QUESTION: How does somebody break free when they do not have any job skills? I have two kids with special needs. I have exhausted all avenues. Two months ago, I finally decided that I was going to file for divorce. I called a lawyer; she got back to me four weeks later. She said I need an exit plan. Eighteen years in this marriage to the same man I was married to before, but I had a career. I had a job. But now I have more kids, more responsibilities, two with special needs. Eighteen years I've been home. What does a person do job wise? How do you break free when you are nothing? Do you just break free and hope God will take care of you? I am such a planning person. This is hard. I'm about ready to do that; to just hope that God will take care of you. What do people do in my situation where they are trapped? I feel like I have a chain around my ankle, and I can't get out. There are no doorways. There are no avenues. It's going to be hard, but staying is even harder. I'm ready to break free, but I need an exit plan. What do women like me do?

NATALIE: Thank you for your question. Getting out is very difficult on many levels. That's why many people stay. It requires you to go through a much worse and often prolonged intense pain before you actually experience any relief. That feels like too much logistically and emotionally for many people. I can't tell you how you will do it. I can only tell you that you will do it one step at a time when you decide that's what you're going to do and what you want to do. Your brain is actually working against you at first. New breakthroughs in science about how the brain works tell us that brains like to keep things status quo. They run efficiently on a program, and they are going to offer all the reasons why you shouldn't take risks, decide, or move forward. That's why so many people live their lives and never change or gain momentum. Their brain is literally the boss of them. Some of the most common reasons the brain will offer for why it's best for you to keep things the same are: It's too overwhelming; I could never do that; I don't know how; I will die; how do I break free; I'm so confused; it's not possible; I'm a planning person—that's just who I am; the odds are against me; it's too much; I can't

see how. We're all the same. We've all had these same thoughts and feelings. We think they are facts because that's what our brain has been believing for so long. But they are just thoughts. All our emotions are created by these thoughts. What kind of emotions do these kinds of thoughts create? Usually they create emotions like despair, hopelessness, fear, anxiety, and overwhelm. What do we do when we're feeling despairing and scared and hopeless? Most of the time, we shut down.

What do we need to feel in our bodies in order to be motivated to do all the things we need to do to accomplish our goals and create a future for ourselves? We probably need to feel emotions like empowerment, excitement, and self-confidence. What do we need to believe or think in order to feel empowered, excited, or self-confident? We need to look at those thoughts, because those are the thoughts that will actually move us forward. But your brain will not want you to think those new thoughts. Your primal brain wants to protect you from imminent death. That is the brain's main job. It truly believes that change is going to kill you. Your adult self must take over and rewire your brain if you want to create momentum and forward movement in your life. Think about everything you've ever accomplished in your life. Brainstorm a list of things. Maybe you graduated from high school. Maybe you graduated from college. Maybe you played a sport and won an award. Maybe you were a resident advisor in your college dormitory, or you had a role in a musical in school. Maybe you sang a solo. Maybe you led a Bible study or taught Sunday school or wrote a book or taught a class. Maybe you had children. Maybe you had a job that paid the bills. Maybe you bought your own car. Brainstorm all the things, and then look at your list. Did you know how you were going to do all the things before you actually did them? When you learned how to drive a car for example—(I've got a girl who's learning how to drive right now—actually two) do my girls know all the hoops they have to go through in order to get their driver's license before they ever do any of those hoops? They don't. They have to take the first step, and then the next step, and eventually they get their license. When you had a baby (for those of you who are moms), did you know how the first year was going to work out and all the things you'd need to do to be a mom? No! You just had to learn in the day-by-day process of mothering. The fact is we almost never know how we're going to do anything we do in our lives until we actually stick our toe in the water and start taking those steps, one step at a time, to do it.

Thirteen years ago, I started a soap business. I did not know how to make cold-process soap, and I certainly did not know how to run a business. But I just kept asking questions—what do I do now? Then I'd Google the answer. I'd find YouTube videos or articles online. I'd get the answers, and then I'd do that next thing. That next thing would bring up the next question—what's next? Now I need to find out how I do this. Then I'd do

more Googling. Ten years went by, and I had this lucrative soap business that I was able to sell to a third party. I used that money to finalize my divorce and help my kids go to college. I did that soap business all while raising nine children. I could have done none of that if I had allowed my brain to be the boss of me. If my thought was, "I could never do that," I would have never done that. If my thought was, "I can't see how I could ever do that. I don't know anything about those things," then I would have never seen how or found out how. If my thought was, "The odds are totally against me," I would never have been able to surmount those odds. Anything you do in your life—throwing your child a graduation party, getting a divorce, finding a job, or renting your first apartment—the only way you will be able to do that is if your thought is some version of, "I'm going to do this, and I'm going to figure it out as I go along. I can do this, and I'm going to do this for my future self." From that place of empowerment and excitement and vision for your future, you will begin to take those baby steps. Each step will then inform the next step you will take. You do not have to know how it's going to happen in advance. Nobody does. Literally, I know hundreds of divorced women of faith who got divorced against all the odds and who lost a lot along the way. Many of them perhaps do not live in a nice house anymore. They might be renting an apartment or living in government-subsidized housing. They might be eating on food stamps for a while. I'm not going to lie and paint a pretty picture of life after divorce because it really can be a long road to recovery.

Here's the other thing. There are many people who get divorced, and they don't actually do the internal work that is necessary to rebuild their lives and experience that new hope and joy and peace in their lives. They stay stuck! They might be out of their abusive relationship, but they are still stuck. Sometimes they are just as unhappy as a divorced woman as they were married to an abuser. Rebuilding is a lot less than getting a job and a house and a lot more about mindset, recovering your sense of self-confidence, and internal healing. The practical logistics are going to fall into place when you are focused on taking intentional care of you, who you are internally. But also consider that maybe divorce isn't the life for you. It doesn't have to be. You don't have to leave. I tell people all the time, "You're the one with the skin in the game." You get to decide what you can and can't do with your life. Maybe it's a matter of timing too. Maybe you will get a divorce eventually, but now is not the time. You could wait until you're in a better position financially, or you could wait until your kids are older. People do this all the time. This is your life, and you get to live it the way you think is best for you. This is simply being an adult and taking responsibility for your life. What I really want you to understand and take to the bank with you is that knowing all the "hows" of how you'll get something done in advance will never happen. I don't know anyone who has walked through divorce knowing how they were going to get to the other side. They've just decided that's what they want, and they figure it out along the way. They

just take that first step, then the next step, and the next step. A few years down the road (sometimes it can take a few years), they find themselves divorced.

The Flying Free program is going to help you with that mindset and healing and support, whether or not you decide to get divorced. You can learn more and apply for that program at joinflyingfree.com. If you are listening and are already divorced, and you wish you knew how to rebuild your life in the areas of your faith, your relationships, your emotional, mental, and physical health, your finances, and more, then consider learning about and applying to the Flying Higher program at joinflyinghigher.com. Let's listen to our next question.

QUESTION: Hi, Natalie. My question is, how do you deal with your own emotions when you separate from your husband, and you are thinking of starting a divorce? I say this because I have decided to start a divorce. My husband, of course, doesn't know anything. Right now, I'm at my parent's house in a different country, where I am from. He does not know that I'm going to ask for this while I'm here. I'm in the process right now of writing everything down he has done to me or said to me so I can create a history of the facts and give it to the lawyer. While I'm doing this, it is taking all my energy. I end the day weak, tired, in tears, and with a lot of anger. Also, it is manifesting physically. I have colon spasms and migraines. I know it's something I have to do, but I don't know how to deal with this.

NATALIE: Let's start by talking about what emotions actually are from a scientific standpoint. Emotions are just vibrations in our body caused by thoughts in our brain. That's it. Emotions feel pretty big, especially emotions like anger, overwhelm, confusion, hate, sadness, fear, and things like that. We often feel those big emotions and we can sometimes think, "Oh my gosh, I can't survive. This is going to kill me!" The fact is, human beings survive pretty horrific emotions all the time. When you realize that emotions are just vibrations in your body caused by your thoughts, a couple of insights occur. One insight is that vibrations in our body come and go. They are like waves on the sand. They wash in... If you're in the ocean, it can wash in and knock you down with its force. But then the wave flows away, and you get to stand back up again. If you can draw attention to your awareness of this cycle, you will be able to allow those waves of emotions without feeling like they are going to kill or overwhelm you. The other thing you need to know about this is if you fight the waves, if you fight the emotions, it will only make the pain of those emotions intensify. But if you allow the wave, it is a much less intense option.

When I was going through my divorce, I would sometimes think that I couldn't handle all of it. I had that thought, "I can't do this! I've got nine kids. I've got a church that hates me. I've been abandoned by my family. I'm trying to run a business. I cannot do this as a single mom! I just can't." I would feel physical pain as I fought that emotional pain. I fought my circumstances, I fought my emotions. But when I would just sit in those emotions and allow them to wash over me, I would think, "Okay. I guess this is what sadness feels like. I guess I'm just going to do sadness right now." Then I would feel sad. I would often just cry, and I'd feel better as the wave dissipated. Learning how to allow negative emotion will be a superpower for you. When you can allow negative emotion, you'll be able to take more risks and do more things that will bring some negative emotions with them. Usually we avoid taking risks and avoid doing things because we are afraid of one thing. We're afraid of how it's going to make us feel. We as human beings are terrified of our emotions.

The second insight you will have is to realize that it's not actually the circumstances in your life that are causing these intense emotions. Rather, it is your thoughts about those circumstances or what you are making those circumstances mean. When you recognize that and lean into that, then you get to take your power back. While we don't have control over other people and we don't have control over some things that happen to us, we do have control over our thoughts.

Let me give you a good example. In our Flying Free group, one member shared in our private forum that she felt overwhelmingly sad because she was anticipating the one-year anniversary of separating from her husband. She shared some thoughts she was having about that anniversary that was coming up. Her thoughts were just what she was making it all mean. She made it mean that life was horrible, that her life was tragic, and that all was not right with the world. That's an option. We can think that. "This is the one-year anniversary of my separation. Life is horrible. I can't believe this is happening to me." You get to make your circumstances mean anything you want them to mean. Nobody has a right to judge you or say that you can't do that. But when she talked about it in the forum, she wanted to feel better about that anniversary. That's what she wanted. That opened the door for us to play with some different ideas of what she could make that anniversary mean instead of making it mean all these horrible things. Here are some ideas that we came up with. It could mean that you took care of yourself this past year, that one year ago your past self did what needed to be done and you are in a brand-new place because of it. It could mean that you got one of the worst years under your belt, and things can only get better. Your one-year anniversary coming up could mean you are getting free and are evolving and taking care of yourself and your kids in new, incredible, and strong ways. Your anniversary coming up could mean you

are one step closer to changing the world in some way. Any of those thoughts could mean that her one-year anniversary was actually a time to celebrate. She tried some of those thoughts on, and she shared later that when the day of her anniversary arrived, she actually felt pretty good about it. She didn't have to change what she was making it mean. She could have intentionally chosen to be sad on that day. I've done that. I've decided to be intentionally sad on the anniversary of my dad's passing. Do you see the difference between allowing your brain to be the boss of you and give you all these programmed thoughts you don't choose but that create all this negative emotion you may not want versus intentionally choosing to be sad because that is what you want to do and because you are choosing to have thoughts that make you sad because you want to process things? On one hand, your brain's programming is running your life. Your brain is the boss of you. On the other hand, you are the boss of you. You are running your life. Also, when you practice thinking thoughts on purpose, that sense of inner control that you have feels so much better, and you realize just how much power you actually have. Again, not power to change your circumstances, but rather power to change your thoughts and emotions and how you show up in your life. You need to know that sometimes when you change your mindset, you can actually change your circumstances. That's not the goal, but sometimes circumstances do change when our mindset changes.

Let me give you another example from another member of the Flying Free program. This woman kept thinking, "I'm so exhausted." Guess how her body felt most of the time? Exhausted. Remember, our brains and bodies are connected. When you have thoughts in your brain, your brain releases chemicals, neurotransmitters, and hormones into your body, and then those things create those emotions, those vibrations in your body. I shared a brain trick with her that I used all the time when I was at home single-parenting my nine kids for four years. (I still use it, actually.) Some of those kids have special needs. I was also running a business and going through a separation and divorce, and I had zero support. I did not have the programs that I offer. I use this trick, especially in the afternoon when I would hit a wall emotionally, and I just wanted to shut down. I would say to myself... I didn't do this back then, but since then have learned to talk out loud to myself, and sometimes even to talk to myself in the mirror and look at myself. It sounds crazy, but it actually helps your brain. Your brain doesn't understand that it's actually you talking to yourself. It just thinks someone else is talking to you, and it takes the words in. It has a greater chance of believing things when you are talking to yourself and looking at yourself in the eye. Again, brain science; it's a brain trick. So I would say to myself, "I've got enough energy to get through this next hour. I'm the woman who shows up. Always have been, always will be. That's who I am. That's my identity. I'm not a giver upper. I've got just enough of what it takes to make it to dinner. I've got this." A pep talk

like that would keep me from feeling exhausted. That doesn't mean that I didn't feel tired. It doesn't mean I didn't wish I could have a break or look forward to going to bed that night. But do you see the difference between feeling tired and showing up and feeling exhausted and completely shutting down? What is the upside to saying, "I am totally exhausted"? You can say it, but there is no upside to it. Not one good thing comes from saying that or allowing your brain to loop repeatedly on that thought. But brains love that thought. It is such a go-to thought. My brain goes there all the time. You can train your brain to kick in another thought. When you get the thought, "I'm so exhausted," your brain is used to saying, "Yes, I may be exhausted, but that's okay. I can do this for one more hour. I'm just going to do exhausted right now. I've got this." Just see if that doesn't help your body feel more able to show up for your life instead of shutting down.

Of course, there may be physical reasons for exhaustion or weakness or illness that require a doctor, some tests, some medication, or other types of physical intervention or solutions. But I want you to remember that because our bodies are connected to our brains, which is really the biggest gland in our body, the brain literally lives in our body and not just in our head. So mindset can have a huge impact on our physical health. You see this in cancer patients or people going in for surgeries. Studies have shown that people who have a hopeful mindset, or a determined mindset, have better outcomes, generally speaking, than those who have given up hope. You see this when spouses have been married for decades and one of them dies. Sometimes, the other spouse will die within a few months. They literally die of a broken heart.

If you are struggling with anger, fear, or sadness, I want you to begin to notice the programmed thoughts that your brain is just looping through on a daily basis. Grab those thoughts and write them down on a piece of paper. You can get so many insights into your feelings, your emotions, by simply looking at your thoughts. If you regularly think thoughts like, "I am all alone. My life is over. I have no hope," your body is going to feel despair and it will shut down. You will miss opportunities to grow and develop because you are going into yourself in this misguided effort to stay safe. If you regularly think, "I am so stuck. I have to do what my church and husband say, or they are going to get angry, or I will not please God," you might feel angry and frustrated. That's going to cause you to experience a lot of tension in your body that will increase things like tension headaches or gut issues as you clench your way through life. Before my divorce, I was sick all the time. I was sick through my whole first marriage. I thought it was because I was a sickly person or that I had so many kids, and that's why I was sick all the time. Interestingly enough, once I separated (we were separated for four years before we got divorced, and then I got remarried) I rarely experienced being sick. Since I've

been married to Tom, it's almost been four years, I've only been sick once. I contracted the respiratory flu, but that was shortly after my dad passed away and I lost my family of origin right around the same time. So my immune system was totally out of balance, and my body became susceptible to illness.

Let me be really clear here. I'm not saying that if you are sick, it is in your head. I don't believe that at all. This girl isn't going to gaslight anybody. If you are sick, it is definitely in your body. But remember that your brain is in your body as well. God created us with the capability to minimize deep impact if we can gain control of our thoughts, renew them in the truth, and find some hope and peace as we lean into truth. Even if you can't find complete healing—and by the way very few people will go through life unscathed by illness, and eventually death will obviously claim all of us—you can find some relief by doing some of this work on your brain and working with your doctor to create best possible chances for healing and wholeness. I've heard so many testimonies of women who have said that some of the chronic illnesses that they experienced pre-divorce were alleviated in tremendous ways post-divorce and after they began to go through that healing process.

For the woman who asked this question, I would recommend that if you aren't already in the Flying Free program, join Flying Free. One resource you will gain access to is weekly coaching, which I do live with all of our members. I coach women on these exact issues and ones just like them. You can get access to our private podcast where you can listen to all the coaching replays on your phone. Changing the way that you think is going to change your life. I guarantee it. If this is something you want help with, I encourage you to apply to the program. We require an application process now to get in. You can learn more about the program and apply at joinflyingfree.com.

Thank you so much for listening. If you feel inspired to leave a rating and review on Apple Podcasts, my production team and I would be so grateful. Until next time, fly free!