

FINDING JOY EVEN WHEN LIFE HURTS

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 138 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Sara Richmond. She's been with me in the past, in a very recent past. We had so much fun that we thought, "Let's do it again!" Sara, what topic did you want to talk about? Sara threw out some topics she really wanted to talk about, and she picked this one as the first one. So what is it?

SARA: Joy, I guess. I would qualify that I'm really into humor, so that's what I mean by it. But I wanted to sound grown up.

NATALIE: Oh my gosh. We were having a great conversation before we started this podcast. Then we thought, "Wait a minute. We are actually doing the podcast episode right now, and we're not recording." So we hit the record button, and we're going to continue our conversation about joy and humor and the place that it has in our lives as abuse survivors. Does it have a place in our lives? Some people might say, "There is nothing funny about abuse," which I would agree with. So how would you address that?

SARA: I can understand that, especially in the current political climate and the fact that we are in the middle of a pandemic. There is this idea that if we are laughing, being jovial, or making light of things (especially things that relate to heavier subject matter) that we are somehow disrespecting it or are denying reality. I don't agree at all, because if we just sit in the heaviness and the weight of all the crappy stuff in this world, or even just the things that are happening to us, then we are bound to be overwhelmed. That doesn't lend any light or life to us. So how are we actually honoring the stuff that is heavy? What are we doing that is productive if we are just down all the time?

NATALIE: Right. This reminds me of... I'm in the middle of two shows right now. One is Ted Lasso. Have you seen that yet?

SARA: I haven't, but I know I have to watch it.

NATALIE: Oh my gosh, Sara! You are going to flip over that show. I am all about that show. It's got everything. It's got all the funniness and humor. It's hysterically funny, but

it is also super serious. You cry every other minute. I think it was in *Steel Magnolias* that one character said, "The best feeling of all is when you are crying and laughing at the same time." It's the best feeling in the world. I think that's like what we're talking about. *Ted Lasso* is a great show to watch if you want to see how to blend hard things in with humor because *Ted Lasso* has a lot of hard things happening in his life, yet he's one of the most heartwarming, funny people. He brings so much light and joy to other people. The other show I thought of is called *A Million Little Things*. That one is on Hulu. *Ted Lasso* is on Apple TV. *A Million Little Things* is a show that touches on topics of suicide, depression, infidelity, divorce, cancer. There are all kinds of... The pandemic is now in this season too. I love it when shows do the pandemic. It's like, "Hey, I was there! That happened to me too." It's kind of funny. Anyway, that show has also shown me how you can have all these hard things, but there are some characters in there that provide the humor. They are still going through hard things, but they can maintain their sense of humor. You can laugh and cry at the same time. I think it's important to get to a place or be around some people who provide that.

SARA: Yeah. Those are my favorite people.

NATALIE: You're one of those people, Sara.

SARA: I am.

NATALIE: You are. You're one of those people who can laugh and cry at the same time, and you are one of those people who can make others laugh and cry at the same time. That's one reason why I love you. I remember when I met you two years ago (we're just riffing you guys.) I met you... Was it three years ago?

SARA: I talked to someone else who I met at the retreat, and she said it was 2019. So I guess it was two years ago.

NATALIE: It seems like forever ago. But I guess. So 2019. That's what struck me about you. You were so funny but also very real and honest about your life. You had, and still have, a lot of hard things going on. You're divorced.

SARA: Yes!

NATALIE: Which is a good thing. But you've got kids with health problems. You've got health problems—like chronic, serious health problems. So how do you go through life with a good attitude and a sense of humor?

SARA: I don't always. I have times where I want to throw a tantrum and jump up and down.

NATALIE: Do you? I want to see that.

SARA: Every now and then, yes, I do. I think that's key—to not deny what you are going through. I'm not sure if it's natural or not, so I don't want to propose it as a special skill that I have that is unachievable.

NATALIE: Yeah. Though there are people whose personalities are more humorous than others. Some people are more serious than others.

SARA: I guess part of it is wanting to be honest about things. I went to the doctor last week, and he said, "So how can I help you?" I said, "First, you can help me stop pooping because I just can't stop." I seem to have some food allergies that have cropped up since a recent surgery. I don't know whether or not he appreciated my humor, but if I have to go in there and talk about going to the bathroom all the time, then I'm going to make it into something we can joke about because it's life.

NATALIE: Right. It is life. That's a really good point. I think when we're living in shame or we're super serious about life, you can't find the humor in it because there is so much shame in it. But if you accept it and embrace it, then it's like you can be self-deprecating a bit. I think there's a certain charm to that. I think Ted Lasso is like that. He's really funny. He's an American over in the U.K., in England. He's trying to coach a football team—soccer over there. They don't like him because he's not a soccer coach. He's an actual football coach from America, from down South. He's got a different understanding of things. The people over there think, "You came over here and you're going to ruin this professional team." Indeed, that is what the whole purpose is. That's why the woman hired him. She wants him to ruin it. But that's not what happens. (I was going somewhere with this, and I don't have any idea where.)

SARA: That happens all the time to me. Then I just tell the person I'm talking to, "I'm sorry. You're never going to get those two minutes back."

NATALIE: And there's no shame in it. I literally feel no shame in completely losing my brains.

SARA: Tell the audience they'll never get these few minutes back, and we're not sorry.

NATALIE: You won't, but you know what... What was the value to you? I don't know. You got to spend time with me. So if I have a good self-image, I'll be okay with that. If I have a terrible self-image, then I'll think, "Oh my gosh! I just wasted her time. That poor girl! She just spent two minutes with me doing absolutely nothing."

SARA: You were talking about not having any shame, and I think one thing I can relate to now that I've been out for four years that also relates to shame is that when I'm just being myself, that brings joy to me and a lot of times to others. I started running more consistently within the last year. I just ran the furthest I ever have—eight and a half miles. It almost killed me.

NATALIE: I could not even imagine.

SARA: To be honest, I look like death when I'm done running. I don't look pretty. I don't even know if I look like a woman or a human anymore. So I finished, and I ran it with my boyfriend. We were in the city center of the city that is near us. I was so proud of myself. I said, "Attention everybody!" I just announced it, and no one even reacted. No one gave a flying crap at all. I thought, "Well, all right." But that didn't upset me. It made me happy that I did it anyway.

NATALIE: Exactly! You enjoyed that. There are things we need to do because we enjoy it. "I'm going to make an announcement here that I just ran eight and a half miles, and it doesn't matter if everyone looks at me like I'm cracked. I really enjoy it that I'm making this announcement. I like it!" By the way, that's amazing. I can't run to the end of my freaking driveway, so I can't wrap my brain around running eight and a half miles.

SARA: I do it very slowly and sometimes complain.

NATALIE: Yeah. I was one of those kids... Well, maybe this happens to everyone. I would get such horrible side aches within thirty seconds.

SARA: That used to happen to me a lot when I was a kid, but it doesn't really anymore. I don't know why.

NATALIE: What is that from?

SARA: I don't know if it's true, but someone told me it's what happens if you run at an inconsistent pace. But I don't see how that's accurate because I don't run at consistent paces.

NATALIE: No, that doesn't make any sense at all. I want to know the scientific, physiological reason why the side of your abdomen would be in excruciating pain.

SARA: Your diaphragm is very angry with you for running, and it's punishing you. I don't know why.

NATALIE: I'm just going to listen to my diaphragm. We're just going to go with that because I don't want it to be mad at me. I want it to be happy with me.

SARA: For real.

NATALIE: So let's talk about joy. I was thinking about this before we got on. Some people, especially abuse survivors, would say, "Joy is unattainable for me because my daily existence is so overwhelming and so painful, and I'm just being beaten down regularly by this person I'm living with. My kids are all needy. I don't know how to keep up. I'm falling behind in everything. I have no support from church. I don't have any friends. We don't have a lot of money, or my husband controls all the money. Where's the joy in that?"

SARA: So they are still in their abusive situation, right?

NATALIE: Yeah.

SARA: I would say that's the hardest of all. I have a lot of empathy for them, and I think there is validity to what they are thinking and saying. But they are basically just declaring that their life is over. I know that despite the fact that I was in a marriage like that, I still laughed a fair amount. I think we also fail to understand that when it comes down to it, we really are the boss of the way we think about things. I think we feel robbed of that power when we're in abusive situations because we are robbed of so much. I remember being at a stoplight a while back and feeling really low. I was thinking, "My life sucks." (This was probably two years ago.) "My life sort of sucks. Everything is so hard, and my ex is a big, old piece of doody." But then I thought, if I worked so hard to get out, and I worked so hard to rebuild my life, why would I choose to be miserable any longer? I'm not saying that as a way to lambast myself or shame anybody else for the dark moments and dark days. But I think joy is a choice. It's not one that has to be just one more thing that you add to your ridiculously long list of things you can never accomplish. It can just be turning your thoughts another way. Or in the moment, maybe you are so ticked at your kids, and everything is going wrong. Sometimes all I do to change my day is to sing in a weird voice about what I'm really, really mad about. "Oh,

my children never listen to me. And why is my house always dirty?" You know?

NATALIE: Yeah. You started smiling when you did that, and I started smiling when you did it, too. I've read this. There is a science behind this—physiological science. (I'm not a science person, but I've read this somewhere.) When your face smiles, it sends signals to your body. Your body releases chemicals and hormones that cause your body to do a shift, and you start to feel a bit happier.

SARA: I bet it breaks you out of fight or flight or any of those things that are trauma responses because why are you going to smile when the tiger is about to eat you, you know? It must be okay.

NATALIE: Exactly. I was also going to say you had mentioned something about how they had stolen so much power, so it's hard to think that you've got any power over your thoughts—but you do. That's the one thing that you do have power over. You get to control your thinking. In fact, a lot of survivors—I'd say most of them—do an amazing job of this in order to cause them to feel like they should stay. They think positive thoughts about their partner. They make excuses for him. They will give reasons why the abuse is okay. It will help them feel better, especially a lot of Christians. I know I spiritualized everything. Everything always had a spiritual underpinning, and that would be my reason to think, "It's really good that this happened to me." Then I'd feel much better about it. I'd feel good about the abuse. I'd think, "Yeah, I'm bringing so much glory to God."

SARA: I think we're taught within the Christian community that we have to spiritualize everything, and if we're not, then we're not really growing, we're not mature, or we're not real adults. I completely disagree. I think if we fully embrace our humanity and we are growing, then we're less prone to try to fit everything into this box that says, "This is definitely the route to go if we're going to become this." We were taught rules for so long in abusive situations, and those are the things that held us captive. We just carry those into the future with us. Surprisingly, the things that grow us the most are not to be found in some kind of equation at all or anything that looks like it. I think they are found in freedom. I had a friend who was in a marriage that was very similar to mine. At one point at least two years ago, she was not out yet. I was out but not yet divorced. We took our kids to the park, and I said, "Get on the swings with me." We went over to the swings and got on. I said, "Whoever goes the highest the fastest wins." (I don't know what I meant by that.) So we swung and swung. I think I got higher than her and we're laughing our butts off. Afterwards, she said, "Sara, we need to do dumb things like this more often because I realized that I have nothing fun in my life. There is no fun." You come out of abuse and come into the recovery period, which is wonderful and good, but

it's also really hard because you have to contend with all the damage that has been done to you, all the grief you haven't processed yet, and probably even stuff that preceded your marriage. At some point, you have to take a break and just enjoy life. I think I grew up thinking that wasn't a part of real life; that somehow that was less. I completely disagree. When do our kids give us the most joy? When they are giggling, laughing, and having fun. If you draw it back to God, when are we being the most ourselves and bringing Him the most joy? I would say it's when we're enjoying ourselves and each other and the life He gave us.

NATALIE: Yes! Circling back to the point I wanted to make, you think you don't have power over your thoughts, but you actually do. That evidence that you do is that you can experience some tough criticism and rejection, gaslighting, and all kinds of narcissistic abusive tactics being flung at you, but because you are making it mean something else in your brain, you can live in that relationship for a long, long time. That's what I did. In some ways, you first need to change your thinking to say, "Actually, this isn't okay. I don't think it's okay anymore. I don't want to go through this anymore. I am going to change things up a bit either by changing my situation and getting out, by changing the way I think about it, or by not engaging in it anymore." But you can still think honestly about your situation—like this person is the way they are, and they will not change because that's just who they are. I will be honest with myself about that, and I have thoughts in my head about that which cause me to feel a lot of pain. I want to look at some of those thoughts I have about it and see if I can tweak them to create some joy in my life.

Let me give you an example. One thing I did when I was going through the divorce process, and everything was very dark... This was before I even knew that I could change my thoughts. I had never heard of that concept before. I had heard that you can read a Bible verse repeatedly until you felt better, right? I'd heard that before. I used to have Bible verses plastered all over my house to try to help me feel better. It worked. Verses like, "I know the plans I have for you. Plans to give you a future and a hope." That would give me a hope. But in my head, I always thought that was about heaven or that God was going to change my husband one day. I did not know that could mean something like, "I'm someday going to make you a badass woman who stands up and says, 'I will not do this anymore!' I'm someday going to make you a rebellious Jezebel, Natalie, and then you can get out."

SARA: I'm glad you did.

NATALIE: I never would have gone there in my brain. One thing I did back then and that I do now is when things get hard or tough because of something bad that is happening, I stop and look around me at what is happening right now at this moment. It could be as simple as, "I'm walking down the stairs." I observe the stairs. I might look out my window and see a tree, and there is a bird in the tree. I think about that bird in that tree. I think about how it's a sunny day or a rainy day and how beautiful the rain is. I'm grounding myself in the present moment and thinking about the beautiful things in that moment. It creates a shift in how my body feels so that my body isn't feeling quite so despairing. I can say to myself, "This is a hard situation that I'm in. I don't want this person who I love to be thinking about killing themselves, (for example, if I'd just heard that news.) But I can hold space for that and also say that this is a beautiful day that I've been given. I can walk down these stairs. My back isn't broken. I'm strong. I'm healthy right now. The world is still continuing to spin, and my loved one is still alive right now." A lot of times, our pain is in thinking about what the future might hold.

SARA: I like that. Sometimes I have the capacity and presence of mind to do things like that. Then there are other times where I'm so low and worn out that I just inject humor or levity into the situation—like I borrow it from somebody else. Maybe I'll read some ridiculously stupid—an immature list of memes that I see on Facebook that make me laugh. Or I'll turn on a show. These are things that in the past I would have felt guilt or shame over, but I don't. I'm not talking about binge watching for three or four days just because. I mean taking some time that borrows fun or funny from somebody else. Even that is good. I think I believed for a long time that I had to solve every crappy thought in my brain. Obviously, you can never reach a resolution when you are in an abusive marriage. There was no way to, especially because we were thinking about it wrong. We were thinking we had to do, do, do and do better, and then eventually things would work out.

NATALIE: We thought we had to resolve it or fix it.

SARA: Yeah. So that's not true. But also some leftovers from living that life are the negative thought patterns. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think they need to be reconciled. I think they just need to be replaced. They can be replaced by being interrupted, so if I don't have the capacity to take them to the side and give them a spanking, then I just say, "Ah, no!" and squash them with stupid Facebook memes. For me, one of the biggest struggles I have, because I have physical stuff, is trying to be present in my life. It's because of all the past triggers and things that come up. I get really freaking tired of it sometimes. Sometimes I'm tired of the amount of effort it takes

to try to live well and to not let what happened to me in the past be who I am or impact me negatively. Again, that may not be the best way to look at it, but I don't want my entire existence to revolve around that. Sometimes I just pull myself out of the equation.

NATALIE: Right. I think that's good and healthy even. For a while, I had to go on anti-anxiety medication. At first, I was still back in the shame mode of "Christians don't do that." But I did it because I was desperate and thought a lot about killing myself. I thought maybe going on medication might not be a bad idea. It was such a game changer for me. What you just described is kind of like that. Right now, I don't have the capacity to look at my thoughts and figure out why they are causing my body to shut down. So I'm going to do something to get me through this moment with the idea that later on, when I have more capacity to look at why I'm feeling this way, I can do it later. But right now, I'm falling apart, and I need a quick relief.

SARA: I think that is true self-care. If there is something you really do need to deal with, it's not as if it is going to disappear. It will keep popping back up.

NATALIE: Yeah, it does. I hope nobody thinks I'm saying, "If it feels good to just go out and smoke some pot to get yourself through the day..." I'm not saying you have to do that. I'm not saying you can't do that either. I'm not saying we should all go out and buffer and do whatever makes us feel good in the moment. I'm not a proponent of that. I don't think that's what you are saying either.

SARA: No! I don't think many people listening are the kind who will swing the pendulum that far over. We've been so caught up in a half-life because we were being abused and a half-life because we believed a lot of stuff that is just religious and not even true. It's not life giving but squelches. If the basis of spiritual abuse, for example, is the ability to control others, then you can bet they just gave us a bunch of rules that crushed our spirits and led us to hate ourselves and hate other people and hate life. I haven't seen... I used to think that if I gave myself grace, I would take advantage of it. I never wanted to. I thought if I just beat myself up all the time, I would eventually become a better person, and that was the right way to go, no matter what. That was the righteous thing to do. I've got to say that I feel pretty stupid at this point in a good way because I realize that if that worked, it would have worked before now.

NATALIE: In everyone's lives because most religions and most religious people have that belief. We would have so many amazing people walking around if that actually worked; and we don't.

SARA: It never works. That's something many people have lovingly pointed out lovingly to me over the past years. "You're so hard on yourself." That's something I still struggle with. "How is thinking this thought going to help you?" It's not. That's what ticks me off.

NATALIE: One thing I've talked about before on this podcast, but I want to go here now, and we may wrap up with this. Eventually, if you really want to find joy, you do need to change your thoughts. I know in the back of your mind you may think, "I don't know how to do that. Am I supposed to think everything is okay or everything is fine now? Then I'm supposed to feel great all of a sudden?" No! That's not how we change our thoughts. Our physical brain has to actually buy into a new thought. It has to actually believe a new thought. For example... Let's pick on you, Sara. Think of a recent example. What is the most recent time that you felt pretty down?

SARA: Let me use one that's not the most recent because that's still something I'm going through, and I'm not ready yet. I had to take my daughter in for an operation like two weeks ago, and it's based on a condition that is a lifelong thing. It's serious, and it sucks the big one.

NATALIE: What was your predominant thought about that whole situation? What was your feeling that you had if you could pick a one word feeling?

SARA: Helplessness.

NATALIE: What was the thought you were having? The thing I want to point out to all of you is it is not because of what is going on in our lives that causes us to feel things. Sara, it wasn't because your daughter had this life-threatening illness, and she had to go to the hospital and have this surgery. That's not why you felt helpless. You felt helpless because of thoughts that were going through your brain, which are very valid. Maybe you want to feel helpless. That is totally fine. But what were the thoughts that you were having? Or what is one thought you were having?

SARA: That no matter how hard I try, I can never do enough for her to live a healthy life.

NATALIE: Okay. No matter what I do, it will never be enough for her to live a healthy life. That would definitely make me feel helpless too. Did you want to feel helpless in that situation? How did you want to feel?

SARA: No. Again, what you said is true. It's valid and understandable, but I feel paralyzed when I lean into that.

NATALIE: Yeah, when you are paralyzed, how do you show up then?

SARA: There's an aspect to that. There's a grief to that. I try to be honest with that and let myself grieve sometimes when it comes up. It usually comes up when we're about to have another operation. At the same time, I'm paralyzed by those kinds of negative thoughts. For that sake alone, I think it's worth eschewing them and saying, "No, I can't embrace you." Are you asking me what other thoughts I have?

NATALIE: No, I was wondering how did you want to feel? We can't change the circumstances. Your daughter still has to go into surgery.

SARA: A lot more hopeful.

NATALIE: Were you able to come up with a thought that your brain bought in and believed that helped you to feel hopeful?

SARA: There were two things. One was more pragmatic. It was that I cannot operate under this kind of pressure. I can't live under the pressure that I'm responsible for all of this. That is something that is unsupportable long term.

NATALIE: Let's go there. Are you responsible for all of that? What's the reality?

SARA: To some extent, her diet makes an impact. But they're not sure about how much. It's rare enough that there isn't even a standard of care for this condition. But the other part is I don't believe that this is a death sentence. I don't believe it is a sentence of some of the other things that could happen because of it—that is for sure determined. I don't have to believe that. I could choose not to. That's not my denying reality. As much as it's easy to believe the negative, it really is as easy to believe the positive in that they are both just thoughts.

NATALIE: And possibilities. You can give them both equal airtimes. You could say to your brain, "Yes, it is true. This could be debilitating for the rest of her life, and it's equally true that she could live a normal life with this."

SARA: Yes. Definitely. If that makes her time more precious... I'm not talking about her dying or anything. I just mean it makes regular life more precious because there is some hard stuff on the other side, then it makes our time more precious. It sounds odd. There is a condition where people like having a sick child or they fake sickness.

NATALIE: Yeah. Munchausen?

SARA: I think that's what it is. This is not related to that at all. But I will say that I always arrange it so that I don't have to take my other daughter when we are doing this stuff because I can't take care of two kids at the same time when one is having surgery. But I really do like the special one-on-one time we have. I like that I get to demonstrate to her how much I care about her. There's another aspect of it I hate, which is that I'm always doing this alone. Her father is not involved with it. I don't think he even remembers her condition. Sometimes that stuff comes up. But I get to demonstrate to her how much I love her. We don't get much alone time together.

NATALIE: Even the thought, "I'm all alone in this." That would cause me to feel sad and maybe even anger. If you reframe that to, "I get her all to myself" that totally shifts the whole point of view and causes... If I were to have the thought that I get to have her all to myself, that would make me feel lucky.

SARA: Yeah. I do like it. I also think these things force me to slow down and realize how precious her life is—not because I'm constantly scared that there is a constant threat of her dying. We're not anywhere near that. But because it is serious, and it's not light and easy, I like that it stops me in my tracks, and I have to just focus solely on her.

NATALIE: All that is a great example of how a person can have joy while also being honest about the hard things in their life. You can have joy and sadness at the same time. I think that movie *Inside Out* shows the importance of that.

SARA: It also makes small things a big deal for a while. She will get so excited when she can eat again. Just little things like that. We get excited if the news is really good. This past time it was. I think we might be able to double the amount of time in between operations. So I'm pretty happy about that.

NATALIE: Wow. I don't know what people were expecting from this episode.

SARA: A bunch of jokes! We have failed them.

NATALIE: I don't think I expected that. I didn't know what to expect either. I just thought we should just talk about joy and see what comes up. I think there were a lot of good things that came up. Now you get to write the copy for it. You get to wade through it and figure it out.

SARA: World-renowned copywriter Sara Richmond talks about joy.

NATALIE: Oh my goodness. Do you have anything else you'd like to add that you were hoping to bring up before we say goodbye?

SARA: I think I would say that a lot of who we truly are is crushed when we go through abuse. It's not that it's gone forever, but it is really crushed, closeted, and cloaked. If you have the impulse to be weird, tell fart jokes, make a meme, or send a weird, wacky email —just do it. Fully embrace those impulses unless they are going to hurt someone somehow. Those are the things that make all this less lonely. Somehow, even though they are small, they make life worth living. So just do it. I think that's a key part of our healing and a big part of joy.

NATALIE: Yes. I think watching comedies really helps to make our own sense of humor sharper, and I think we get funnier when we watch comedies.

SARA: That's my only goal in life.

NATALIE: With that, Sara and I are both going to go watch some Netflix now. I encourage you to do the same. Just kidding. It's kind of a weird episode, but I think we wanted it to be a bit strange and sideways. Go out and have some fun. Until next time, fly free!