

WHEN ALL YOUR THOUGHTS ARE DESPAIRING AND HOPELESS

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 141 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I thought we'd do something we've never done before. I thought we'd feature some questions I get in the private forum the ladies in the Flying Higher and Flying Free have access to. What we do in the private forum is that you can ask questions and get answers from myself, from the other coaches, and from one another. There are a lot of very wise women in those groups. Then you can share your stories and share prayer requests. We talk about our faith journey. We talk about parenting. We have conversations about divorce and separation. We have conversations about staying. We have rants and raves. If you get a toxic text from your spouse, ex, or soon-to-be-ex, you can share it and people will share what their insights are. Just stuff like that, and it's kind of fun. I get a lot of questions in the forum, and I spend a lot of time every day answering those questions and working with people. By the way, people will send me emails or try to message me on Facebook. I don't have time to answer emails or to get into it on Facebook Messenger. The reason is that this is where I am spending my time. I'm spending my time in this private forum with these women who are part of these programs. If you want to have access to me and to some other coaches, I highly recommend you join that program. The forum is just one of many features in these programs that will be a helpful resource for you.

Now, when I share these questions, I'm going to leave out anything that might expose these women to anyone on the outside. I'm changing some words; I'm changing some facts about the question so that we don't have any exposure of these women. But we can get the gist of what their question is, and I promise most of you will be able to relate to some of these questions. So here's the first question.

This woman says: "I feel I lack the strength to fight through this mess. I'm sad. I feel crazy, like maybe I'm the problem. My situation is so covert. I just want to curl up and die. My life is wasted. I've lost everything. My kids have lost everything. I wasn't the mom I should have been. I had no joy. I don't feel loved. I've lost my faith. I've closed off the entrance of the lifeline to Jesus."

That's a lot, isn't it? Can you relate? I'm pretty sure a lot of you can relate. What I'm seeing here is a normal human brain stuck on a few destructive feedback loops. Here's what I like to do when I hear these kinds of sentences running through my brain or

someone else's brain. One of the first questions I like to ask is, "What if I'm wrong about this?" For example, you can take the sentence, "I feel I lack the strength to fight through this mess." What if I'm wrong about that? What if I do have the strength to fight? "I feel crazy, like maybe I'm the problem." What if I'm wrong about that? What if I'm not crazy? What if I'm actually pretty normal? Maybe I'm not the problem. "I just want to curl up and die." Do I really want to curl up and die? Not really. I don't really want to die. What I really want is... (fill in the blank.) What I really want is to feel like someone cares. Or I want to feel like I can keep going. Or I want to feel like there is hope for my future. That's what I really want; I really don't want to die. I just want some hope. Do you see how when you dig in and start asking yourself questions, you can get your brain off the feedback loop and start going down a different track in your brain. So that's the first thing I ask: what if I'm wrong about all of this? What if I'm just a normal human being having a normal human experience? I think some of us in survivor circles think that we're going through this unusual and heavy thing. It is a heavy thing, but it's definitely not unusual. It's actually pretty normal as humans to experience the kinds of things we've experienced in our relationships. Many people (possibly even most people) have experienced what we've gone through to one degree or another, maybe not as long-term as some of us. Twenty-five years of a marriage is a long time. Maybe some of us were born into families where there was a lot of gaslighting, emotional abuse, or physical abuse going on. Some of us maybe grew up in families like that, then got into a marriage like that, and maybe experienced something like that with someone in our church or with friends, so it has been a lifelong thing. But someone else has maybe experienced a taste of it. If we're going to live life on planet Earth, most people will run into some dysfunction in the world. There's going to be other human beings who don't handle themselves well and misbehave in ways that leave a lot of destruction in their wake. So I think saying, "This is so terrible. My whole life is wasted. I've lost everything." Really? I've had that thought, so I know what that's like. It's totally normal to have that thought. But I like to stop and say, "Really? My life is wasted? I don't know. I've learned a lot of stuff that other people don't know. I'm not sure it's wasted. But I've definitely had a normal life experience. Some of it was pretty cool, and some of it was really pretty horrible." That's what we bargain for when we live our life on planet Earth.

One of her thoughts was, "I'm not loved." I have to say, that is one of the most devastating thoughts. I've had that thought—I'm not loved. I had that thought when I was a little kid a lot. "I don't think anyone loves me." I remember vividly the feeling I get in my body when I think that. It hurts. It literally hurts in my gut. It creates despair in our bodies. Then we often act in ways that are not loving to ourselves. So not only do we think the thought "I'm not loved," but then we take actions to prove we're not loved by doing things that are not loving to ourselves, not taking care of ourselves. People need to belong. We need to be connected. Without that feeling of belonging and

connection, people literally can die. Some people do. I know a teenager who believes she is ugly. She is tall with long wavy hair, and she is absolutely drop dead gorgeous. But she believes 100% that she is ugly. She kind of slouches a little because she is trying to hide. She thinks she is too tall. She wants to be like the other kids. It doesn't matter what anyone tells her; her brain is totally invested in this belief that she is ugly and that she's too tall. I think she's 100% wrong, but she refuses to see the evidence in front of her when she looks in the mirror because she believes this so strongly in her brain.

Do you see the power of the thoughts in our brain? When we have these thoughts in our brain and they are on this loop, it is very difficult to get them off. It's difficult, but it's not hard. What I mean by that is that it is simple to get our brain off the loop, but it's difficult. What do I mean? All we have to do is to decide. It's as simple as deciding to change the thought by literally changing the sentence. Thoughts are just sentences. That's all they are. They are just sentences that we choose... Actually, a lot of the sentences we don't choose, but they are default sentences. Once we notice them, then we can grab them and choose different ones to replace the ones we don't like that aren't serving us very well. So when I read all those things she wrote, those were all sentences in her head. Those were all her default programming. "I feel crazy. Maybe I'm the problem. My situation is so covert. I want to curl up and die. My life is wasted. I've lost everything. My kids have lost everything. I wasn't a good mom. Et cetera." All these are what I call a thought download. You sit down and set a timer for like five minutes. If you just sit down and think, "I need to do a thought download," you wonder when it is going to end. Your thoughts will just keep coming, and you'll never be done with it. So I like to set a timer and write my thoughts down for five minutes. Then my brain settles down. So you write down all your thoughts. This is like going fishing. You put out the net, and you get a bunch of fish. Those are your thoughts. Then you pick out one or two of those thoughts to look at more closely. What you do is to ask questions about that thought to figure out where it came from, why you think that way, and what would happen or what would your life be like if you let that thought go and didn't believe it anymore. This opens the brain up to other possibilities.

Let's take one thought this woman shared. Let's take the thought, "I closed off the lifeline to the love of Jesus." The first thing I would ask myself, if I had written that down, is: Is that true? Have I closed off the lifeline to the love of Jesus? Can people do that? Is that even possible? Is there a lifeline to the love of Jesus that can be cut off? How do you cut that off? Is the love of Jesus that impotent that it can be easily cut off or is it hard to cut off? What did I do to cut it off? What happens next if I've cut off the love of Jesus? What happens to other people when they cut off the love of Jesus? You just keep asking yourself these questions and dig into it a bit. What it often does is show your brain that some things your brain wants to believe are ludicrous. A lot of these

thoughts are things the brain believes because they've believed them since we were a child. We don't even know where these thoughts came from. We need to stop and think about them. "Really, brain? Is this really true?" This thought isn't true, but her brain is looping on it.

Have you ever had some version of this thought? I have. "God doesn't love me." I remember sitting in church one Sunday and we were having communion. My ex-husband (my husband at the time) and I had had an altercation that morning before church. (Raise your hand if that's ever happened to you.) I couldn't take communion because I believed, and my church taught me, that if you had any sin in your life that you couldn't take communion because that was blasphemous. So I knew I couldn't take communion because I had been upset with my husband that morning. My husband took communion every time it came around. It didn't matter what he had said or done to me or the kids, he always took communion because, in his mind, he did nothing wrong. Everything was always my fault. But I always took responsibility for everything, so I didn't take communion. I remember thinking to myself that Sunday, "I must be a Christian wannabe." I used to go to Bethlehem Baptist. It was John Piper's church. He was the pastor at the time. He taught this belief that God picked who would belong to Him and who wouldn't. So I thought... I had this horrifying... I literally felt like I was falling into an abyss when I realized I perhaps... You guys, I had loved Jesus since I was seven with a passion! I told everyone I knew about Jesus. I was voted most likely to become a nun my senior year. That's how "religious" I was and how open I was about my faith. Here I was in my forties thinking, "I must be a Christian wannabe. Maybe I've always only wanted to know Jesus and to love Him and to belong to Him, but God hasn't chosen me. I'm not one of His chosen ones." I wept, and I was devastated. So I have had a version of that thought—I've closed off the lifeline to the love of Jesus. I didn't know how. Back then I thought nobody was worthy of the love of God and that we were all just wretched, disgusting little worms that... I remember reading in high school Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. We were like the little spider that God was holding over the open flames with a diabolical look on His face like, "I could drop you into these flames at any moment." When I think back, it was so confusing because I loved God so much and I trusted Him. He was really my best friend during many years when I experienced some pretty bad bullying for several years in grade school and junior high. Jesus was my best friend, and we were so tight during those years. He was my everything. I used to stare out the bus window when the boys were calling me, sometimes sitting next to me and pushing me against the edge of the bus, throwing mud at me, or smearing my coat with mud. I would sit and stare out the window while they did that to me, and I'd think over and over in my head, "The joy of the Lord is my strength. The joy of the Lord is my strength. The joy of the Lord is my strength." And I believed it. I loved Jesus, and He was my strength. That was

in my brain. Somehow, thirty years later, I was sitting in church wondering if I was a Christian wannabe because of the horrible theology this church taught, which is so spiritually abusive, and the way I was being treated at home by my husband. Pretty sad.

I had to stop and think, "What is the upside to believing that?" There is no upside to believing that. It doesn't motivate me. It doesn't make me a better wife, a better mother, or a better friend. It does nothing. All it does is destroy me and everyone around me. That thought didn't encourage me or motivate me to live the amazing life that God gave to me. It didn't help me lean into the love and grace of Jesus Christ that was mine, all mine, for the taking. I was swimming in it, but because I didn't believe it at that moment, I was falling into a black abyss. The reality was that I was held. Nobody was dangling me over the open flames. But God was holding me. I was His little lamb. He was holding me in His arms and loving me while I was having a pretty bad nightmare. Have you ever held one of their kids while they are having a nightmare? You know they are safe in your arms and that everything is okay, but they are still kind of in the nightmare. They fully believe they are in danger. They are scared and sad. They think they are all alone, but you are right there holding them. "You know I love you so much. I'm right here." You just have to wait for them to wake up.

Anyway, I recommended that this woman look in the mirror three times a day. I do this. (I don't do it three times, but I do it when I look in the mirror to get ready for the day or when I'm getting ready for bed.) I will talk to myself. One thing I recommended she say out loud to herself is, "I love you, and I have your back. Jesus loves you, and He has your back. You are a precious woman. You deserve to be taken care of. I'm going to take good care of you from now on. I promise." That does a couple of things. First, when your eyes are looking into your eyes in the mirror, your physical brain doesn't understand that you are talking to yourself. It picks up on your facial expression and the tone of your voice and it reflects back. It thinks someone is encouraging it, and it actually feels better. Smile at yourself in the mirror. You will notice a significant shift in your body and in how you feel. Try it! Smile at yourself in the mirror and talk nicely to yourself. Start doing that a lot. If nobody else is doing this for you, you've got to do this for yourself. Start there. Tell yourself the truth three times a day or every time you look in a mirror. Then when one of those thoughts comes to your brain, "I closed off the lifeline to the love of Jesus," at least give equal airtime to a different thought that could also be true. You can even say, "Yeah, maybe I did. Maybe we can cut off the lifeline to the love of Jesus, and maybe I did. But you know what? Maybe I didn't. Maybe it's possible that there is no way anyone can cut off the lifeline from the love of Jesus. Maybe that lifeline is stronger than human beings. Maybe the love of Jesus is bigger than me or my circumstances." A thought like that can create an incredible feeling in your body. Your body is counting on you to help it heal.

I was waiting for years for someone to rescue me. I remember sitting on the floor of a hotel room and God saying, "Natalie. Natalie. Look at Me. Natalie, I gave someone to you to rescue you. I gave you to you to rescue you. You're the one. Now do the job I've given you to do." I got up from that hotel room, and I did. My life has not been the same ever since. So I highly recommend that you help yourself. You are helping yourself by listening to this podcast; by getting the truth, you are helping yourself. So kudos to you.

That conversation kept going for a bit, and she came back and said, "I'm deconstructing some things about my faith. I'm wondering if some of the Jesus moments I've had in the past were manufactured by emotions in my mind. Those moments were life-giving, or so I thought. Maybe they simply perpetuated my denial."

So I want to talk a bit about faith because faith is just deciding what you are going to believe. It's as simple as that. When we choose to believe in a loving and powerful Creator, it is going to create amazing things in our lives. Then that is going to turn around and create amazing things in the world. I believe God set it up like that in our brains. We link our universe... By universe, I'm talking about our brain because it is like a little universe inside our skull. You can actually Google pictures of the brain, the synapses and neuron connections in the brain, and it looks like pictures from the Hubble telescope of the universe. It's crazy and cool. So we link our brain, our universe, into His. They are already linked. We are already inextricably connected to our Creator, but we don't get to experience the fullness of that link in our bodies and emotions until we believe. That is faith. That is a choice that we have the privilege of making. I talk about this in great detail in episodes 105 and 107 of the Flying Free Podcast. It's like part 1 and part 2. (Episode 106 is an interview I did that interrupts those two.) If you go to flyingfreenow.com/105 that will take you to episode 105, and if you go to flyingfreenow.com/107 that will take you to episode 107. Or you can just go to Apple iTunes and look for it there. Those are the two episodes where I talk about this, and I highly recommend you go listen to those if you haven't already. Or go and review them because in my personal opinion they are two of the most life-changing, important principles that you will ever hear on this podcast.

The power of faith and the power to choose what we will believe is incredible. So yes, those Jesus moments that you had started in your brain with your belief. That created feelings in your body which built faith momentum. So when we think something, our brain will start noticing all the things that will prove our thought. If we say, "I believe God is with me," our brain will start picking up on the evidence that God is with us. I think I've mentioned this in the past, but one thing I did was every

time I saw a red cardinal or a butterfly, it would be God's way of saying, "I'm here with you, Natalie. I love you, and I see you." You would not believe how I started noticing red cardinals and butterflies all over the place: in stores, outside, I started decorating with them in my house. If you come over, you will see butterflies and red cardinals in different places in my house. That's just a little, practical way of keeping your brain focused on what you want to choose to believe. The reverse can happen as well. If you are telling yourself, "There must not be a god. He must not love me. God must have abandoned me because I'm stuck, and everything looks so hopeless." Then guess what is going to happen? Your brain will look for evidence of that. Things are going to happen that would have happened otherwise, and you are going to interpret them as "Look at that. God must not love me anymore. See. That just happened, and it proves it." You will frame the whole experience and spin it in such a way that it will be evidence of what you believe—that He doesn't love you. That will more deeply embed that belief in your brain, which will more deeply embed those emotions of despair in your body. It's a very vicious downward cycle. Do you see how you can either cycle up or down? The incredible thing is that you get to decide. You might say, "I don't know how." Sure you do. If you're deciding to go one direction, to go down, then you do know how to decide. Everyone decides. Even small children know how to decide. It's not difficult to decide. It is as simple as looking in the mirror and saying, "I am going to decide to believe this. Why? Because it serves me better. Because it makes my life better." You know what? If I die and find out I was wrong, oh well. At least I lived an amazing life.

I want to offer that if you consider our thoughts create our feelings, and you aren't feeling like God is near you right now, it's because your brain is giving all the airtime to some version of the thought, "God isn't near me. I'm alone. I have nobody." Naturally, your body is going to feel that emotion of isolation and aloneness. Then your brain will say, "See! See! Proof that what I think is true." That's the vicious cycle. If you want (and only if you want to), you can change how you feel by intentionally selecting new thoughts and practicing them. I say this a lot—at least give some equal air time to some new and better thoughts that will serve you better. For example, when your brain's programming says, "I'm all alone; even God isn't with me," just stop and notice that. "That's interesting." Don't judge it. Don't think, "Oh my word! There I go again. I'm so stupid for thinking that stupid thought." Don't do that. That just shuts us down. Judgment does not help anybody. It doesn't change anybody's mind, and it certainly doesn't change ours. Stop and notice it and say, "Look at that. That's interesting. There's that thought again that my brain likes to go to. You know, brain, maybe you are all alone. Maybe God isn't with you. But you could be wrong about that. What if He's actually closer to me than ever before?" Or you could say, "I know I'm wrong about that. God keeps His promises, and He's promised never to forsake me. He is my best

and most faithful friend and companion. I love to know that He is here with me right now." Also, remember that the brain doesn't know the difference between reality and fantasy. That's why so many women stay stuck for so long because we are so used to constantly thinking about this imaginary version of the person who we married, this person with all this potential. He ended up not being that person, but our brain is still stuck on thinking that's who he is. So the brain thinks that is reality. That fantasy we've created in our mind is thought by our mind to be real.

But you can use this brain feature to your advantage by using your imagination to imagine Jesus being with you. If you can't feel Him, why not imagine Him with you. I do this all the time. There's this place where I meet Jesus in my imagination. I meet Him by a stream. I've got this whole thing in my head. We sit on this old tree that has fallen down, and it makes a really nice seating place. I put my head on His shoulder, and we just sit quietly. I imagine the sounds of the stream. I imagine the sounds of birds, frogs, and the sound of the leaves blowing through the tree. When I do this in my brain, my body feels close to God. I create this, and I believe it is good because my brain, my universe—the universe between my two ears—is connected to the Spirit of God, to the brain of God. This is how I connect with Him—one way I connect with Him. I like to imagine this Spirit aspect of God encompassing my child and me in the same space, even when my child isn't with me. I imagine we are always together.

There was another woman in the forum (actually I think it was the same one) whose one child had gone off to college, and she was feeling so alone and sad about that. I thought about this regarding that as well. I have a child... He went off to college, and then he came back and decided he was going to do online and go to college in January. So I got mine back, but I also had a daughter who moved out and got married this summer. That was really sad and hard for me as well. But I imagine her still being in my same space where God has His arms around all of us. I have a couple of other older kids who are either married or on their own, and that's how I imagine that. It makes me feel good. It makes my body feel close to my children and to God. I like it! Someone could come along and say, "That's so stupid, and that's not true." I would just say, "Okay. Whatever. It makes me feel good, so I'm going to keep those thoughts. I'm going to keep those beliefs because I like them. They make me happy, and I want to be happy. I don't want to be sad all the time." Now, there are times I do want to be sad. But when I think about my kids who are growing up and spreading their wings and flying, I want to feel happy and good about that.

When I started off this podcast I was thinking, "I'll just do five or six questions from the forum." I think I did two, and I think they were from the same person. But at least you can see some of the conversations that we have and some places that we go.

Maybe we'll do this again in a future podcast.

If you are interested in being part of this forum and interacting with these incredible women who are doing this hard work together, then go visit joinflyingfree.com. You can learn all the details. All the information is there: how much it costs, what is involved, what you get out of it. There are tons of reviews over there on that page. Then you need to go through an application process. So fill out an application. We send you some goodies in the mail when you do that. When we open it up next, we send you an invitation to join.

Here's the thing. You get one invitation to join every six months, so if you don't accept your invitation, you won't get another invitation for another six months. The reason for that is that we want people to be really ready to join. We don't want you to come in if you are unsure if you want to do it. We don't want you to join when you're not ready. We want you to be like when you are starving and have eaten nothing for a couple of days. Maybe you're on an intermittent fast of something, and you're going to sit down to a rotisserie chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans for dinner—the whole works. Or maybe a turkey Thanksgiving dinner. You are starving, and you can't wait to dig into that first bite of turkey, mashed potatoes, and gravy with some cranberries on the side. That's how we want you to feel about joining this program—that you cannot wait to get in and take your first bite because it is pretty amazing. But if you are already stuffed and aren't very hungry, when you sit down to a turkey dinner, you're like, "Meh!" You aren't really going to appreciate it, love it, and need it the way you will need it if you are really hungry for it. So if you don't accept your invitation after you've gone through the entire process of filling out the application and waiting, then you'll have to wait for six months. We want you to be really hungry for the program.

Flying Free is for you if you are a woman of faith and are in a marriage that is painful and confusing. We're going to help you with all the stuff. We're going to help you get strong. If you like this podcast... This podcast is a bit of a taste of what's inside. We do a lot deeper work inside the Flying Free program. If you're a woman of faith who is already divorced, then I recommend you join Flying Higher. You have to be divorced to join Flying Higher. People constantly ask, "I'm in the middle of my divorce. Can I join Flying Higher?" While you can, I don't recommend it. Flying Free will support you through that divorce process if you are going through a divorce. It will also support you if you are staying in your relationship. We don't talk about abuse much in Flying Higher—hardly ever—because people are out of their relationships. We don't talk about divorce. We do not support you through your divorce process. If you join Flying Higher and you are still in the process, we love you to pieces, but we will not be coaching you on that because that is in the Flying Free group.

Flying Higher is for Christian women who are already divorced and are rebuilding. You can be divorced and remarried. That is still rebuilding. We can talk about your new relationship. We talk about kids a lot there and adult children. We talk about career growth and finances. We talk about our physical health and all the things—organization, emotional adulthood. We've had some great courses in Flying Higher.

If you want to join that, there's an application process for that too, and it's the same thing. You need to go to joinflyinghigher.com and fill out an application. There's a bit of a longer wait for Flying Higher. But once we send you an invitation, you'll have a small window of time to join. If you don't join then, you'll get put on hold for six months as well. Again, we want people to be ready to join these programs and to do the work. That creates a community of people who are all in and it makes for a dynamic, active, and energetic community. I love that. If that's you and you want to be part of something like that, we'd love to have you.

That is all I have for you for this week. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!