

THREE FALSE BELIEFS MY ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP GAVE TO ME

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 143 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Becky Ferris. You probably remember her. She's been on the podcast in the past. But she is actually with me in my office, and we are sharing a mic and trying really hard not to make noise as we shift back and forth on our feet. It's kind of funny. She came to visit me this week, and we've been having a blast. We went to the Minnesota State Fair together. I took her to the Mall of America. Why don't you tell us what you think about Minnesota, Becky? You have been here before, but tell us what you think about your experience this time.

BECKY: Hey, Natalie. So great to be here. Minnesota is amazing. First, the temperature is about thirty degrees cooler than Nashville, so that was pleasant. The Minnesota fair was amazing. I had never had cheese curds before. If you've never had cheese curds, you've got to visit the Minnesota State Fair.

NATALIE: Okay. I thought we could talk about... Actually, this wasn't my idea; it was Becky's idea. I said, "Let's do a podcast episode. What should we talk about?" Actually, what I said was, "You're putting your makeup on. You come up with an idea to talk about." And she did! She came up with a great idea. Her idea was to talk about things that we allowed our abuser to define even after we got out of our abusive relationship. This is something I actually wrote and taught a course about in the Flying Higher group, which is my program for divorced women of faith. The course is all about how we abuse ourselves. We get out of this abusive relationship, yet we continue to live in an abusive environment because in our brains we carry with us the messages that were downloaded into us by our family of origin or by our abusive partner. Then we have to deprogram from those abusive messages. I thought this was a great idea. Becky had three things she thought of that she had to deprogram from. Do you want to tell us about the first one?

BECKY: Sure. My story is that I was married for twenty-one years, and then I got out. I remarried a little over a year later. I think the first thing my abuser defined for me was that marriage would be completely ideal without him—meaning that I had this idea in my head that all my problems, all the boundaries I needed in life, were only because he was an abuser. He was a toxic person. But if I got out of it, any relationship going

forward would never need boundaries because I would choose healthy people to be around. So I got married. I love my husband. He's an amazing man. We've been married for five years now.

Just in the last year, I started realizing that I need to put down boundaries even with really healthy people because we only go as far as the other person allows. I was so used to allowing everyone to take the fifteen mile stretch on me I didn't realize I needed to vocalize. Here's the difference, though. If I vocalized a boundary with my abuser, it was twisted. It was turned. It was used for word salad and gaslighting. But with a healthy person, just voicing your boundaries, which sometimes for me is, "Honey, this really stresses me out," or "This really feels like it's more than I can handle," he would say, "Oh yeah. Well, don't do that." It was eye-opening. It was very pleasant. But boundaries were definitely the first thing. I also went through a stage, between divorce and then remarriage, where I realized that a lot of my friends and employees were toxic people as well. Here I was working hard to get toxic people out of my life that I didn't focus too much on setting boundaries with good people. I think I've learned that in the last few years. Even good people need boundaries.

NATALIE: That is so good. Can you give one or two examples of what you mean by a boundary that you had to create with a good person and why that was so eye-opening for you?

BECKY: Okay. I'll share one or two with my husband. One would be that he has a lot of health issues with his digestive tract, not to share too much. But he requires a lot of special food. We were going through this season of his being sick a lot and not knowing what the problem was. Every time I made a meal, his response to the meal was making me a nervous wreck. I didn't know if I was making the right thing, not doing the right thing. I would have conversations with him, but he was so sick and so exasperated. He really couldn't give me the right answer. Finally, I came home one day and said, "I love you. I want to cook for you. I want to be there for you. But at this point I can't handle the stress of whether that meal is going to be right. You could go out to eat. You could buy things."

He was a bachelor for many years. He knows how to make food for himself. What's interesting is that as soon as I voiced that concern, not only was he totally okay with it, but he realized he hadn't been great at communicating with me and he was putting me under stress because one day this item was okay and the next day it wasn't okay. So we figured out what the problem was and now he basically loves anything I make because we know what the problem is, and he realizes that his attitude or response to what I cook really affects me. That's how I show love. I cook for people. So that's one.

Another one was... I guess my husband's sickness prompted a lot of this boundary stuff. Maybe that's what happens with other people. Sicknesses show what we can and can't do in life. I'd like to think I could hold up the Empire State Building, but I can't. The other one was because he was sick all the time. He didn't want to go out and do anything. Of course with COVID, we couldn't do anything. But when we get our vaccines, doors start to open. Movie theaters start to open. All these things open up, and I want to go out and do stuff. He doesn't.

It got to the point where I needed to stay home 24/7 to make him happy. I thought, "No. That's not right. It's a boundary. I should be able to have my own time and my own life apart from him. If he doesn't want to go out, then he can stay home. I'll go out, and then I'll come back because we aren't one life. We're two individuals living together." As soon as I expressed that, because he's a good man, he realized it. He didn't realize how much I was staying at home just for him. He was very pleasant about it. I ended up going to the movies one night. I was just going to go by myself, but he ended up surprising me and showing up. Without boundaries, if we don't stand up and say something, if I don't voice what I'm really feeling, he's never going to know. He's a good person. He wants to know so that he can respond correctly. I guess those are two examples.

NATALIE: Those are great examples. I think this will help listeners who are wondering, "Am I in an abusive relationship or not?" The way you will be able to tell is when you finally say, "I don't think I can handle all this pressure, or I can't do all these things. I think something has to give because I'm burning out in different ways." When you voice that to your partner, if their response is, "I didn't know that. How can I help?" Or "I'm so sorry." They step back and have some self-reflection about some ways they may have contributed to it. Or maybe they didn't contribute, and it was all in your head, but they didn't realize it was such a strain, and they actually want to help and alleviate some of that. That's how you know you've got a healthy partner and maybe you were taking on too many things and needed to set some of those boundaries for yourself.

Unfortunately, for a lot of our listeners, if you try to set a boundary with someone who is not healthy, they are going to get upset about that. They will make it about you and your problem and why you can't keep putting out for them. That's when you know there's something not quite right about this relationship.

What is another area, Becky, that you thought would be perfect once you got out of your abusive relationship and then found out you needed to work on that area yourself?

BECKY: I'm going to add one more quick thing about boundaries. What I also realized in

the process is that the reason I didn't put down boundaries was because I was so used to doing it all. I just thought that's the way it was, and it's not that way. It's not my responsibility to hold up the Empire State Building. It's my responsibility to work together as a team to get the job done, whether that's with my husband, with an employee, with a friend in a relationship—we should be equal. Period. So those were boundaries.

The second thing was that I think my abuser defined my ideals. I have twenty-one years of very difficult time. I'm putting it very lightly there. You know how when you're in a difficult marriage and you go to church or out in public, you see these other couples and think they look so idyllic? They are so happy. They are loving towards each other. They share responsibilities. They take responsibility for their actions. You get this idea that it's all because I'm married to a toxic person. At least, when you wake up, you realize that. Then you think you're getting out of that, so everything will be ideal.

I went into the second marriage thinking we would never fight, we'd never have a disagreement, we'd never have difficulties, and I'd never have discomfort. Those are the three D's. I love doing D's. In reality, we are human beings, so we will have difficulty. My husband has had a triple bypass since we've been married. A big difficulty there. We've had disagreements. A lot of times they have to do with me trying to do too much, ironically. Of course, there has been discomfort in not wanting to broach certain subjects. That is 100% normal. This idea that getting out of an abusive marriage means my future relationships will be idyllic—no. Now they are way happier. They fulfill. You look forward to every day. It makes life completely different. But it's not without difficulties. It's not without disagreements.

NATALIE: I love that. I will add that in my relationship... In my prior relationship, which was abusive, nothing could ever be resolved. You have these difficulties and all these D words that she said. You have all those things, but nothing would ever ultimately be resolved. Whereas in my marriage now, Tom and I have been married for almost four years, we'll have a disagreement, but we'll be able to work it out and bring it to resolution. It's not this thing that is swept under the rug that you can never deal with. We work through it even if it is painful sometimes. We work through it until we are both satisfied with the conclusion and we both feel good. We actually feel closer than we were before the thing happened. I think that's another key difference between those two things. What is the third thing you came up with?

BECKY: I want to give you one more. I always think of new things when you are talking. When it's difficult... I want to share something very transparent. I have three daughters who are married. My middle daughter and I were sitting down a few days ago over

lunch and were talking about this idea of disagreements in marriage. She said, "Sometimes I worry I'm going to lose my temper and yell and scream." I said, "Because you learned that from me?" First, you always say that to your kids. Don't say it's because of your ex. Own it if it was you. I was exasperated after twenty years. I was exasperated after eight years. I yelled and screamed. She said, "Yeah, but you've never yelled and screamed since you've been married to your new husband." I said, "Right, because difficulties should not bloom into an atomic bomb." There is still this underlying sense of peace when it is a healthy person. When I was talking about my ideals, that is with somebody else.

But the third thing was my hopes and dreams. I thought that by not being with my ex, my career would be easier because I wouldn't have him as an obstacle. I thought I could get to my goals faster. I thought my children would be healthier. In many ways they were, but it wasn't without complexities and difficulties. With my kids, there will be issues for many, many years, even decades, because abuse leaves a lot of ruin. When I think of my kids, I think of a World War 2 scene of a building, city, or town that has been completely demolished. That is what we started with. We can't rebuild that overnight. The idea that we are going to get out of this marriage, and not necessarily find a new guy, but by just getting out of the marriage, our kids will be resilient and bounce back. It will be great. Yes, in certain areas and at certain times, but not all at once.

As far as my career and goals, I had to remember I had a lot of devastation and destruction to clean up before I could go forward. It took me four years to clean up the mess he had created in my own business before I could go forward. I would get frustrated. I think I was a little disillusioned that life without him would be immediately better. It wasn't; it took a lot of time. It is still taking time.

NATALIE: I think that's a wrap for this one. I've got to get her to the airport. Becky mentioned how making food for other people is her love language. She's at my house, and I've been able to make food for her. But she has been helping. She doesn't just sit in the kitchen and let me make food for her. She has made food for us, too. She made some amazing... We should put together a cookbook. She made some amazing mashed potatoes for our steaks last night. That really is her love language, and I'm so glad. I wish we lived closer, but she lives in Tennessee and I'm in Minnesota.

Anyway, I want to say one last thing. This episode is geared toward the idea of getting out and the aftermath of getting out of an abusive relationship. A lot of you are not in that place yet. But I hope this gives you some idea of what life is like afterwards if you are contemplating that possibility. It's not a bed of roses, but it is better. It's definitely better.

Both Becky and I would agree that we have no regrets, and we love our lives now. But if you are a divorced woman or are in the middle of a divorce and are on your way out already, I want to remind you I have a program I've developed just for you—for Christian women who are divorced—called Flying Higher. If you want more information, you can go to joinflyinghigher.com. There's an application process to get into the group. You can read the information and fill out the application.

We'd love to have you join us. It's a smaller group of women, and we do some hard work on ourselves in the areas of our personal lives, our physical health, our emotional and mental health, our financial health, rebuilding careers, re-establishing relationships with adult children (a lot of women are older and have adult children and are starting over in their lives and careers,) re-establishing relationships with other friends (often new friends), and we even talk quite a bit about dating and getting into a new relationship if that's what you want. So check that out. We have a lot of fun. We do a lot of great work together. I'd love to have you join us.

That's all I have for you for today. Thanks for listening. Until next time, fly free!