

MANAGING THE HOLIDAY BLUES

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 148 of the Flying Free podcast. I want to address a very hard reality in the lives of emotional and spiritual abuse survivors this week, and that is how difficult the holidays can be. Often in emotionally destructive relationships, the abuse ramps up during the holidays, vacations, birthdays, or other special occasions. The abusive individual tends to stir up more drama, makes a bigger deal out of things, sabotages your efforts to create peace and joy for yourself or your family, and they just tend to be more dysregulated than usual. So when we bring expectations to the table for how we wish things could be, the holidays can sometimes highlight or showcase the fact that what we wish for just isn't our reality. And this is disappointing. There's probably not a word that fully captures it. It's also very sad. We feel sad for ourselves and our lost dreams and our desires. We feel sad for our kids who don't have the family life that we had wanted so much to offer them.

And all of that is totally out of our control, no matter how hard we try to make it otherwise. We can also feel lonely and like there is something wrong with us when we see other families from church or social media posts. We'll see these posts on social media where all these happy families are showing themselves baking cookies and having holiday family fun. Or even just getting those Christmas pictures and letters from others in the mail that highlight their awesome lives and beautiful families, and we just feel like ours is barely limping along. I used to put a lot of time and thought into our yearly family photo and Christmas letter. I really loved to write, so it was a big deal every year. And I would try to highlight all the funny things that the kids said and did. I tried to make my letter humorous and upbeat. Deep down inside, I was just hoping that everyone would see and believe what I so desperately wanted to believe: that we were a normal, happy family that was fun to be with and fun to know. I wanted so badly to be loved and thought well of.

You guys, something I've learned over the years is that every family is struggling in one way or another. You know why? Because every family has humans in it, and humans are messy. Period. When we can drop into compassion for ourselves and our own messy families and lose the criticism and the judgement, that's when we get to look at the images of others and instead of feeling jealous and like, "Oh, they've got it better

than I do," we can feel compassion and love and understanding for them as well, because we know that they're just as flawed as we are, and they're also just doing their best in this world to make it through and be as happy as possible, just like we are. But life is hard for everyone in different ways and at different times.

Anyway, it can feel lonely, even when you have your family around you and your family is intact, because the feelings of loneliness don't come from our external circumstances. Those feelings come from our thoughts, and honestly, when we think about our reality, we're likely going to feel sad and lonely, and that's normal.

Now, if you're newly separated or you're going through a divorce, it can be devastatingly lonely. I remember my first Christmas as a separated woman. My ex had moved out in September of that year, so it was still really fresh and terrifying and sad, and I was full of despair. I fell apart and cried every night after I put my kids to bed, and then I would wake up to eight kids and a business to run, and I would wonder how I was going to make it through the day, let alone make the holidays special for my kids.

Now, if you're rejected by your church family or friends because you were separated like I was, you're going to feel even more desolate and alone. I imagined that my church was like this walled city, and my neighbors and my family just voted to put me and my kids outside the walls where the wolves were and where the thieves were and where no food or shelter was. I honestly questioned the faith of the people living within those walls. I didn't waver in my own faith, though. That would come later down the road on my journey. But during this initial phase, my faith was very strong and very mighty, and I just knew God was sitting on the outside of those walls with me. But you may really be struggling with where God is in all of this, and the feeling that God Himself has abandoned you. And that just makes all of it even darker and lonelier than ever. I know. I have experienced that. I get it.

My second Christmas as a separated woman was only slightly better. Only slightly better because I was starting to get used to all of the pain from day to day. That next year had been a rollercoaster of things happening, as my church had at first taken me back within the walls of the city, and they had apologized to me. They acknowledged that they had made this colossal mistake, and they tried to make amends, which for them, meant trying to change my husband so that we could be together and there could be this beautiful happy ending to the story that they wanted to write. But before another Christmas had the chance to roll around, they were once again frustrated with me for not agreeing with them that my husband had changed. He said he had changed, and that was good enough for them. But I kind of wanted to see the change. I was looking for just one thing by that time, and that was to see if he could take full

responsibility for his behavior, and he wasn't able to do that. So, once again, I found myself outside the gates with my kids. "You're too picky!" they told me, and they gave me the boot.

So no Christmas miracle that year either and again, I found myself crying in my eggnog every single night. I was emotionally exhausted and I could see no hope in sight. Is this you right now? Does the month of December feel dark and lonely, like you've been swallowed up by a whale and now you're just sitting in the stench and the darkness waiting to just die already? I want you to know that I see you and you're not alone. It feels dark and it is, but in that darkness, if I could light a candle, you would see so many other women sitting with you. You don't see each other right now, but you are all listening to this podcast right now together, and God sees every single one of you. I can assure you that you are all there together.

So I want to give you three practical things that you can do to relieve some of that pain that you're feeling. And to do that, we're going to look at three of the most common things women in your situation are thinking and believing about themselves, because what we think and believe is what causes our feelings and emotions. Now this is really good news, because we actually have some control over what we think and believe. We don't have any control over our husbands, over our kids, over our circumstances, over our churches, or over our pastors, but we do have control over what we think and believe, which means that we can do some work on changing our feelings if we want to. You know, we don't have to. There were times, and there are times now, when I have negative feelings and I want to keep them. I want to feel sad. I want to feel mad. But I just want us to know that we do have some control over that, and we don't have to feel certain ways if we don't want to, and it's available to us to change some of that if we choose to do that.

So, one of the first things that women in your situation are thinking is, "I am alone." We've already talked about that a little bit. Of course, that belief that you are alone is going to create a very empty and desolate feeling in your physical body. Now, you don't even have to be thinking that thought on a conscious level. Your subconscious brain can actually be looping on that belief without your awareness, and it's still going to cause your body to feel that desolate feeling. Now, how I would describe it for me when I'm feeling that way is like a black hole in my abdomen - it almost feels like it's going to swallow me alive and like the force of the pain is actually sucking inward and I have to fight not falling into it and drowning.

How you experience loneliness in your body may be different, though. So the next time you feel it, I want you to allow yourself to become aware of it. Don't fight it or push it

away. Just let it come and notice how your body experiences the feeling of loneliness. Where is it in your body? Think about what color that feeling is. What is the texture of loneliness? Is loneliness big and overwhelming, or is it small and tiny? Is it sharp or is it dull? Is it concentrated in one area of your body, or does it cover a larger area? I want you to become familiar with the feeling of loneliness so you can recognize it when it occurs again and you can name it. "Oh. I notice that my body is experiencing loneliness right now." And allowing that feeling and naming that feeling is going to help you gain some agency over it and thereby, you will alleviate the intensity of it a little bit. It's not going to go away, but when you fight it and you resist it, it makes it bigger and more painful, but if you allow it and notice it and name it, it helps take some of the bite out of it. Now, when we feel the feeling of loneliness, people tend to isolate when they feel that way and they shut others out, even people who might be safe, and then this leaves us feeling lonelier than ever. So the next thing that you can do is ask yourself some questions. You're asking your brain, really, some questions to loosen up your beliefs a little bit. So here are some good questions to ask:

- What if I'm not alone?
- What if it's okay to be alone right now?
- How would this holiday season be different if I was okay with being alone this year?
- What if being alone was a really good thing for me this year?

Here's another exercise you can do. Look in the mirror so your brain can see another face making eye-contact with you. Your brain doesn't know the difference between fantasy or reality. It just recognizes that there's another face looking at it, okay? Look deep into your eyes and smile at yourself and then talk to yourself out loud. Tell yourself that you are not alone. You could say, "I am with you. God is with you. I promise to have your back. I promise to take good care of you. That is my job to take care of you, and I'm going to do it. I've got you." So with this eye contact that you're making with yourself and saying these words out loud so that your ears can hear them, you are engaging all these different parts of your brain. That's going to calm your brain down and create some neural connections that are going to cause you to increase your level of inner peace and even love for yourself. Now, if you don't believe yourself at first, that's totally okay. This takes time. Sometimes it takes days or weeks or even months of doing this every day before your brain has got a brand-new, automatic response of love and connection with yourself. Now please know that God, your Creator, is always connected to you, even when you don't believe it or feel it. But you can also learn how to connect with yourself in this way. I want you to give it a try. I mean seriously, what do you have to lose? Don't give up on yourself. You are too important. You are too precious.

The second thing that women in your situation often think is, “I have failed myself, my husband, my kids, God, and everyone. I’m a failure.” And when we think this thought, it creates a feeling of shame in our physical bodies. So what does shame feel like in your body? I want you to get familiar with this feeling so that you can notice it when it comes and name it. For me, when I feel shame in my body, I feel flushed. I feel hot. I can feel my face getting red. I can feel myself starting to sweat. I want to hide. I can feel myself contracting inwards. There’s also this element of despair, again, in my gut as I feel small and unwanted and meaningless and unloved. I kind of feel like I’m disappearing. When we feel shame, we do tend to get small, and we tend to hide. And you know what? We end up failing ourselves. We end up failing to be the women that we want to be, the women that we were created to be. We end up actually proving our belief that we are a failure, just not in the ways that we believe. So some good questions to ask yourself when you think “I’m a failure” and when you notice that shame feeling are:

- What if it’s okay to fail?
- What if I’m just a normal human?
- What if failure is how people grow?

Think of all the people who failed over and over again, and God just loved them so much. I mean, two people that came to the top of my mind right away from the Bible are David and Peter. Colossal failures, you guys, on so many levels, both of those guys. And God loved them. So, what if failure is how we learn and evolve into the people we’re meant to become? Or what if I haven’t even failed? What if I’ve done a great job with what I had to work with and it wasn’t a failure? What if failure and success look different for each person? How would this Christmas be different if I were free to fail? If I could have compassion on myself no matter what? If I just allowed myself to be human and to be me? Sometimes I’m terrific and sometimes I’m a hot mess!

A third thought that women in your situation might think is, “Nothing will ever change for me. I’m stuck.” Now this thought, I think, creates fear in our physical bodies. For me, when I’m feeling fear, I feel like I’m choking. I feel it in my neck. It can be really, really intense. It tightens up, I find it hard to swallow, I sweat, my heart races, I used to have panic attacks. When we feel fear, we shut down. Or, sometimes, I would react like a cat who’s trapped in a corner with a big dog barking at her. And when we shut down or we react from our little corner, things don’t change for us. Our brains keep things the same. It’s so ironic, but they are afraid to change for fear of running into more danger and hardship than we’re already experiencing. It is our brain’s way of protecting us, but we end up proving what we believe: that we’re stuck and that nothing’s ever going to change for us. So when you notice this thought, “Nothing’s ever going to change for me — I’m stuck,” I want you to ask yourself:

- What if I'm wrong about that?
- What if things could change for me?
- What if I could make some small changes for myself?
- If I could, what would those changes be?
- What do I not have control of that I need to let go of?
- What do I have control of that I could actually take my power back over?
- How would Christmas be different if I believed I could make some small changes in myself and in my life, even between now and Christmas?

I want to go back to my story. By April of the following year (so this is after those two really terrible Christmases) I had filed for divorce, and by May I had gone on anti-anxiety medications because of some panic attacks I was having on the road while I was driving my kids where I would have to pull over because I would start blacking out. And so those anti-anxiety meds kicked in and did their work, and by July I had a whole new lease on life. So all of the personal work that I had been doing to get strong and change my brain's programming was starting to pay off. I kind of just needed that little nudge from the medication to kind of get my hormones back in balance. I was feeling hopeful. I was starting to enjoy life again that summer. And again, I do think the meds had a lot to do with that as well. After two decades of emotional and spiritual abuse that nobody but the kids and I could identify, I just think that my hormones and my immune system were pretty wonky. So the medication evened things out for me so I could get some traction in my therapy, and I did.

Now in August of that year, a boy I had known from elementary school reached out to me on Facebook, and I thought he was gay, so I didn't really think it was a problem for him to send me some kind comments. He sent me a movie recommendation one day. He sent me a corny meme one day. I always thought that a friendship with a gay man would be helpful for me to heal from my trauma that I had experienced with Christian men, mostly pastors, and then with my husband. Well, I ended up marrying that man a little over a year later, because it turned out he wasn't gay after all. Needless to say, the next Christmas was very different, and I could feel my raw wounds healing over.

You guys, life is like this. Sometimes it's a little like walking over stones of fire while screaming. And sometimes it's like dancing through the Swiss mountains singing, and I'm in on all of it. I want to live. And living means joy and pain. It means success and failure. It means cake and crap. It means love and loss. There's a song by One Republic that I love. It's called "I Lived," and the lyrics go like this:

"I hope when you take that jump you don't fear the fall. I hope when the water rises you've built a wall. I hope when the crowd screams out, it's screaming your name. I

hope if everybody runs you choose to stay. I hope that you fall in love, and it hurts so bad. The only way you can know, you give it all you have. And I hope that you don't suffer, but take the pain. I hope when the moment comes you'll say, 'I did it all. I did it all. I owned every second that this world could give, I saw so many places — the things that I did! Yeah, with every broken bone I swear I lived.' I hope you spend your days, but they all add up. And when that sun goes down, I hope you raise your cup. I wish that I could witness all your joy and all your pain, but until my moment comes, I'll say, 'I did it all. I did it all. I owned every second that this world could give. I saw so many places — the things that I did! With every broken bone, I swear I lived.'"

You guys, we only get only one 2021 Christmas, and we will never get it back again. I look back on those two years when my life was at its very lowest, and I remember how I leaned into the pain. I really didn't try to avoid it or stop it. I embraced it. I cried a lot because I wanted to grieve fiercely. I tried not to think about the next day but only focus on getting through the day at hand, and I think that's how I survived those seasons. Sometimes it was one hour at a time. Some of my kids have special needs, and there was a lot of chaos going on. When the pain eased up and I would watch my kids playing nicely or enjoying Christmas music or hot chocolate or building snowmen in the backyard, I would grab those moments too, and I would live in them with great fullness and joy. I knew the pain was probably going to rush back at any minute, but I really tried hard to stay as present as I could.

And that's all you can do too, my friend. Stay present this season, and allow all the feelings while also questioning the beliefs that are driving those feelings so that you can create some small shifts. If you want to do more of this work with hundreds of other women just like you in the Flying Free Sisterhood program, check it out at joinflyingfree.com. Just a few weeks ago, one of our members wrote in the forum,

REVIEW: "If you're wondering if this program is worth it, if it will help, if the madness and confusion and pain and suffering and misery will end, if you will find peace and happiness and enjoyment and fulfilment in life, it IS, it WILL, and you CAN. I am living proof that it is possible. I am in awe that life can be so incredibly sweet. Don't give up. You are worth it."

NATALIE: That's all I have for you this week. Until next time, fly free.