

## HOW DO I GET MY KIDS TO BELIEVE AND UNDERSTAND THAT I'M A VICTIM OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://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 149 of the Flying Free Podcast! We are one week away from hitting Episode 150. Can you even believe that? That means three years — we've been doing this for almost three years. I just want to share a couple of the reviews that came in on Apple iTunes and thank those of you who have left reviews over there. They are so much fun to read. Here are a couple of them:

REVIEW: "I don't really have the words to describe how much 'Is It Me'" (that's the book that I wrote) "and this podcast as well as being part of the Sisterhood have really helped me — counseling too! I walked away from an abusive marriage I thought I would be bound to for the rest of my life. I also left my church. This probably sounds terrifying, but it has been so liberating. I'm still in transition, but I finally feel free from my own judgment, unhappiness, and legalism. Thanks for making this material available, Natalie and team, because it has really validated my deepest heart cries that I thought would never be heard. I know you have and will continue to receive a lot of flack, but it's only because the enemy knows you're out there making a dent in his sordid plan."

NATALIE: That's my favorite part. Oh my goodness. Thank you so much for leaving that review. Here's another one:

REVIEW: "I have been binge listening to this podcast for the past month. I love Natalie's voice. It is peaceful, calm, reassuring, and wise." (Tell my kids that.) "I love her sense of humor." (Tell my kids that too.) "Most importantly, I listen because I need help. I'm struggling with dealing with the family system I grew up in. I have a lovely family — husband and young kids — that I've fought hard to change generational patterns in. I'm now feeling strong enough to tackle the patriarchal system I grew up in. I find so much useful information about spiritual abuse and being who God wants me to be. Hearing Natalie talk about how I can still be loved by God and not suffer with abuse is truly helpful. I listen to gain confidence in saying 'No more' to my father. I'm not there yet, but it is happening slowly."

NATALIE: I love that. I love that this podcast is helping not just women who are in abusive marriages but also women who are just detoxing and healing from abusive

families of origin, because there's that too, right? All right. That person's name was "An Apple a Day," and I think there was a number after it, but when I read it, I was like, "An apple a day plus the Flying Free Podcast." And here we are together again.

All right, you guys. I also have a place where you can ask questions and then sometimes I do an episode where I answer your questions, and this is one of those episodes. So, I'm going to be only answering one question this episode because I have a lot to say about it. But hopefully this will be helpful for you. Let's listen to the question.

LISTENER: Hi Natalie. I'd like to ask a question about emotional abuse when the children don't really recognize it as emotional abuse. They don't understand what's going on and they're confused. How much should I say to my children and what should I say when they still see their dad as a loving person and they don't really seem to believe you and they've been manipulated by him? Anything you could give to help with that would be great. Thank you! Bye!"

NATALIE: Okay, so, I understand the extreme anxiety that this can cause in a woman and here's why. She has been invalidated by her partner and possibly by her family of origin and possibly by her church as well. Her experience, her opinions, and her perspective have been dismissed and ignored and even pathologized. In other words, people around her have told her that just the fact that she would dare to speak up about her experience demonstrates that she is inadequate as a woman or as a Christian — as a human being. Her voice doesn't count. She is erased. Basically, everyone around her is gaslighting her. They are telling her that she is making up her experiences in her head, and because she is already questioning her own reality, she feels like she's going crazy.

So to solve for this problem, she will believe that she needs to make herself more clear. She needs to get these people to see the truth. She will try to explain to her partner in a million different ways what he is doing to her. She will try explaining kindly. She will try explaining in a loud and desperate way. She will cry. She will plead. She will yell. She will go to others in hopes that they will believe her and help her, but they don't. She will plead with them. She will send them articles and books. She will buy her husband books. She will try marriage counseling and Bible studies and marriage retreats and marriage intensives. She will try giving him what he wants in hopes that he then will see how hard she is trying and will want to meet her halfway. She 100% believes that the answer to finding peace and wholeness and truth and rest is in being seen by all of these people around her, being seen and heard, and this includes her kids. How do I know this? Because I lived it.

I know that desperation. I know that crazy feeling. I know that deep desire to pull my hair out by their follicles and to silently scream into my pillow at night begging God to literally put me out of my misery. All of my well-being and happiness depended on all these other people seeing me, knowing me, understanding me, listening to me, and believing me. My brain believed this, and it could not believe anything other than this until I hit rock-bottom and woke up to the reality that I was letting all these other human beings control me and my life and my joy. I was giving them all of this credibility and I was giving myself zero credibility. I was actually buying into their reality and their manual for me, and I was erasing myself. And that, my friends, was the real problem.

Now, I've told this story before, but I'm going to tell it again. One day I woke up and looked in the mirror with deep resolution and I said, "Natalie, starting today, I'm going to have your back. Starting today, I'm going to take care of Natalie. I'm going to let everyone else believe what they want and do what they want, and I'm going to believe what I choose to believe and do what I choose to do. And they will call me a rebel and a Jezebel and only God knows what else, and guess what? I am all in on supporting you, Natalie. You have two beings in this universe who will rise up on your behalf: your Creator, and me. He's got you. And now I've got you, too. So let's do this." And you guys, I never looked back.

Now, that doesn't mean that my brain wasn't still looping on the same programming that it had been looping on my entire life. That programming included thoughts like "You're wrong and they're right." "You aren't worth much unless you're making others happy and doing what they want you to do." "You don't really know what's best." "You make dumb choices and you have dumb ideas." "You will fail." "People don't like you for you." "You all by yourself are not lovable." My brain still wanted to go to all of those thoughts. Those neural connections were hard-wired into me after years of hearing those kinds of messages. But I started noticing those thoughts, observing them kind of from a bird's-eye view or a third-person perspective, and that helped me to start questioning those thoughts. I started digging into them. And then I was able to introduce and practice new and healthier thoughts once I could see these ugly thoughts that I was just buying into, that my brain was buying into.

Now, I first learned how to have my own back with those outside of my family. I was able to more easily let them go, okay? Now, it still hurt like crazy and I grieved fiercely, but I was able to allow them to have their perceptions and know that they just couldn't possibly know the truth. They had never been able to live with my husband even for a week, let alone twenty-two years. They just had to make up their own stories, whatever their brains wanted to believe based on their programming and their indoctrination,

and I really needed to accept that as a reality. But my kids? That was a harder pill to swallow. My kids had lived with it too. They were frustrated as well but in a different way and on a different level. This wasn't their husband; this was their dad. Plus, their brains were still developing and to them, this was all normal. I mean, they didn't like it, but it was familiar to them. It was all they had ever known, so it felt safe in kind of a twisted way.

Now, at one point I sat down with my four older kids and their dad and we all poured our hearts out to dad, begging him to hear us and to stop some of his destructive behaviors. My oldest son who never cried, cried. It was heart-wrenching, and I thought "Surely, if anything could reach this man's heart, this meeting would." But you know what? He dug his heels in deeper and he mocked us and made fun of us for several weeks afterwards. Also, he accused us of ganging up on him and accused us of not taking responsibility for our own behavior but instead making our problems all about him. Isn't that fascinating?

Well, that's when I realized "Okay. This really is hopeless." This guy was who he was, and there just wasn't anything anyone could do to change it. So we just all kind of hunkered down and endured. Fast forward a few years, by the time I was actually separated from him, my oldest was twenty years old and he was getting married (I know that's pretty young, isn't it?). When he got married, his dad, newly separated from me, began to reach out and build a relationship with this boy, a relationship that this child had needed his whole life. To this day they have a decent relationship, and this son trusts and defends his dad. I kind of became this unforgiving mom who refused to see how much dad had finally, at long last, changed. This is what this child needed to believe and what he needs to believe, and that's okay. The other kids were so sad to see dad moving first into a camper. I had offered to pay for his apartment with my soap money (I made and sold soap), and then he eventually moved from the camper into an apartment. Now he was sad, and they felt terrible for him. They would spend Saturdays with him and swim in his apartment swimming pool. In the meantime, I was single parenting all of the other days of the week. I was taking the kids to their therapy appointments, their doctor appointments (there were nine kids, you guys. Well, eight, because one of them had moved out and gotten married), driving them to their different schools, I had a child with autism, I had another child who was eventually diagnosed with BPD, I was making all of their meals, doing their laundry, dealing with this daughter who was eventually diagnosed with BPD and my autistic son who at that time was a runner (a runner is a young child who runs. Like, if you let him go anywhere, he just runs. He will just run right into the street, he'll run away, he'll run into the woods, he'll run into the lake, he was a runner. He required all eyeballs on deck 100% of the time). And I had all of this going on and more that I can't even think of because

it's such a blur, all while continuing to make and sell and ship homemade soap so that I could pay for their school and my husband's apartment.

I was the parent on duty, and dad was the fun parent who could just relax and swim with them on Saturdays for a few hours. Now, guess which parent they enjoyed more during that time? Now that he wasn't with us all of the time they only saw him for a short period of time, and of course he was able to put on his very best side, and he had a very good side to him. They missed him; they loved him; they desperately wanted us to be a family again, so their brains were searching for evidence that dad was different and mom could take him back and all would be well. But much to their dismay, mom wasn't getting with the program. She wasn't agreeing with the plan. Mom was still saying that dad hadn't changed. What was her problem, anyway? Couldn't she see how nice he was now? In spite of this confusion on their part, I was still the parent they knew they could count on. I would always be there. I would come through. I would take care of them. They knew that. This is because I was very consistent in my reliability.

Years later, some of the older ones told me that they had that perception of me, so don't underestimate the power of being present with your kids when you've got them, of being consistent and reliable and trustworthy. They really need you to be stable. They will often get angry about what's happening, and rightly so. They're going through some very difficult times, it's very confusing for them, they don't understand it. They're going to take out that anger on guess who? On you. Why? Because you are the safe parent. They instinctively know that if they confront the abusive parent, what's the abusive parent going to do? He's going to criticize them; he's going to reject their feedback; he's going to blame shift; he's going to turn it back on them; he's going to yell at them; he's going to basically treat them poorly, all right? So, what do they do? They take all of their fears and all of their anxiety and all of their frustrations and they dump it on the safe parent. Now, if you can understand that and hold space for that and try not to take it personally, because it's not personal, then that's going to help you and them. And remember, always remember, this is a long game. Things aren't going to change overnight, so you're going to have to do this for a long, long time.

Now, that was during the time when I was separated from my husband. I thought that we were going to be getting back together again. I thought "We'll separate, he will miraculously change, and then we'll get back together. End of story." That's what my church thought. I don't know why everyone thinks that story is how it goes down because it never goes down that way. I shouldn't say it never does. It rarely goes down that way, but for some reason, that is our collective programming as a church culture even though it never works that way, or rarely does. So anyway, after I was separated for almost two years, I thought that when I filed for divorce that my kids would take it

in stride. We had gotten somewhat used to our new normal. It had been almost two years by that time, for crying out loud. Dad had been living in his apartment and we were living in the house. But you know what, when I filed for divorce, they were sad all over again. I know now that is normal, because they were still hoping deep down inside for reconciliation, and now that I had filed for divorce, that hope was really gone. I suppose it's like watching someone die of cancer. Until they're gone, there's always this irrational hope that a miracle is going to happen. So, some of those kids believed that I was making a big mistake. I had raised them, after all, in a very conservative, homeschooling community, and divorce just wasn't an option. They had learned well. My littlest kids didn't know any different. The three youngest couldn't even remember what it was like when dad had been living with us so for them, it really wasn't a huge thing. It was kind of all they had known. But the older ones did struggle. And yes, when this happens, just expect that if you are the one who filed for divorce, you are the one who is going to look like the bad guy, okay? You're going to have to take it like a man, woman. That's the gig, my friends. It is hell to get out, and this is just one of those layers of hellishness, perhaps even the very worst of the layers for many moms.

So, I have three pieces of advice for you.

Number one, as I mentioned earlier, this is a long game. Divorce is kind of like an earthquake. It's kind of like a lot of things, but right now, we're going to think of it as an earthquake. It swallows up some things, and it levels everything else. But what happens after an earthquake? A community rebuilds. And eventually, things go back to a new normal. Is it ever going to look the same? Of course not. It's going to look different, but it can still be good. I'm four years past the finalization of my divorce. My divorce took almost two years as well so basically, we are almost six years past my filing for divorce, and a lot has happened in those six years. My kids have done a lot of growing. They see things more clearly now that the dust has cleared. I've gotten remarried. They love their stepdad. I've done a ton of growing. But if you would have told me six years ago that life was going to look like this someday, I would have had a very difficult time believing you. Now, six years might seem like a long time to you, especially if you just want relief today, but that's not how this game is played. You invest in tears today, and you reap in joy down the road. This is a long game. Be ready to play for a while.

My second piece of advice: let go of your kids, and you will have a better chance of getting them back. This is not a guarantee, and if you let go just so that you can get them back, that might not work out for you. You really need to let them go because they deserve the same respect and freedom and autonomy that you do. They don't have to agree with you. When you can hold space for them to have different experiences and opinions from you, you will find yourself in a better place to gain joy

and love and peace in spite of the fact that they may be angry with you. We can understand why they are angry, right? They have their own pain to process. I highly recommend that you get them into therapy if you can afford it and if they have a desire to do it. If they don't have a desire to do it, if we're talking about teenagers, I would not force it on them, but I would always make it available to them.

I've had to let go of my kids in different ways and for different reasons. My oldest son and his wife wouldn't have anything to do with me for two and a half years when they found out I was dating Tom, so I had to let go and give them space to feel their anger and frustration and work it out on their own. That was one of the most painful things I have ever experienced in my life; I'm not going to lie. But eventually they came back. I call it a miracle, and I get to enjoy them again. My second son has also had his own journey away from many of the things that I've taught him. I've had to let him go and take that journey and try not to pull him back or manipulate him into believing what I want him to believe about God and faith. That stuff doesn't work anyway, right? I've had to let go of my fifth child, a daughter with very serious mental health issues that involved the police, years of therapy, many scary, scary situations, physical abuse, and other horrific things that I really don't enjoy remembering. I had to force her out of my home when she was only fifteen years old and send her to live with her dad in order to protect my four youngest and help them recover and heal from the ongoing trauma that her mental illness had caused them. She's now eighteen years old and she's going to graduate from high school this year. She has limped along but she is making it, and we have a good relationship now. But again, it was a painful, scary letting-go process. I've had to let go of other things in other ways as well. I had to let go of homeschooling, I had to let go of taking them to church and raising them the way I was raised with a church family who loved and cared for us. I had to let go of trying to control the narrative in their mind of how everything went down. When they would come home and tell me that their dad had told them, for example, that I had stolen all of the fire detectors out of his home, I had to tell them "No, I did not," and then be okay with them believing their dad if they wanted to.

Can you guys hear the dogs in the background? We have three Morkies and they're just the cutest little things, but there must be something going on downstairs. I'm just going to leave it there because we're just going to keep it real, okay? All right.

All I can do is tell my kids my experience, and then they have to decide for themselves who they want to trust. Now, over time, as they've observed and seen things go down over and over again, they've decided that they can trust me. But do you know how that trust was built? I just keep showing up for them day in and day out. I am relentless. Dad can do whatever he wants. The church people can do whatever they want.

Grandma and aunts and uncles can do whatever they want. They can all be fickle and abandon my kids when they just can't make things work on their end, but you know, I just keep showing up like a rabid dog with a bone. I decided long ago that's who I am. I'm the mom who shows up. Always. I have boundaries and limits, but the foundation is faithfulness and consistency, and honestly, I'm proud of that. I'm proud of how I've chosen to live my life, how I've done my duty no matter what. But if my kids don't see that, it's okay. I'm still gonna be who I am, because who I am does not depend on anyone else's opinion of me. It all depends on me.

The third piece of advice is this: it's actually okay if your kids love and believe their dad. Your relationship with them literally has nothing to do with their relationship with their dad. Now, you might think it does. You might tie it all together because dad's talking smack about you. But it doesn't. If you can get your focus off of their relationship with their dad, which is something that is not your business and not in your jurisdiction anyways and just focus on your time with them and being present with them and reveling in whatever time you get with them with gratefulness and joy and peace, that energy that you bring to your relationship with them is going to show, and it will make a difference. If they can see that you are confident, full of peace and love, and all in on their joy and happiness, they are going to be attracted to that, and they are going to gravitate towards you like a bee to honey.

Now, how do you get to that place? That is the work that I help women do in the Flying Free program, and then I help divorced women do it in the Flying Higher program. Here's what one member recently wrote:

REVIEW: "Thank you for this program. It has helped me and my kiddos with so many coping skills I never had in my teens. They are showing up and this mom is so proud."

NATALIE: You guys, that's actually something I hear a lot. Women are amazed to see how the work they are doing inside the Flying Free program is changing them in such a way that it actually trickles out and down into the lives of the ones they love. This is the kind of power that I would love to see you practice and acquire. And if you'd like to join us in this empowering work, you can find out more and apply by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com)

So, thanks for the question, and if any of the rest of you have a question you want to ask, if you go to [flyingfreenow.com/149](http://flyingfreenow.com/149) (that's this episode - you could actually go to any of the episodes. It's just [flyingfreenow.com/](http://flyingfreenow.com/) and then any number up to 149. That'll take you to any one of our podcast episodes), on every single podcast episode page there's a link to the place where you can actually leave a question. You can leave a

recorded question just like these ladies have. I don't answer all of them, but if I feel like "Hey, this is a question that a lot of people have," I will answer that question in an upcoming podcast, okay? I would love to hear what you want to know about. All right you guys, that's all I have for you for today. Until next time, fly free.