

DURING SEPARATION, HOW DO I COPE WITH AN OVERWHELMING WORKLOAD AND NO SUPPORT?

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 15 of the Flying Free Podcast. This is Natalie Hoffman, and it's just me again today. Rachel and I are having a hard time connecting to do another recording, but we are working on that. In the meantime, I thought I would just talk off the cuff a bit about an article I'm in the middle of writing for the Flying Free Website. I thought I'd talk about some of my ideas here. The subject is going to be what a woman goes through when she first separates from her abusive husband, if she decides to go that route. I think we instinctively know we have all these things to face if we do separate, and it's what makes us not want to separate. There are so many practical, pragmatic reasons not to separate from a spouse.

I wrote a blog article a while ago called "Ten Steps Out of Relationship Hell." If you go look up "Ten Steps" on my website, you'll find it. It basically talks about the hot ladder rungs of getting out of the pit of abuse. Those ladder rungs are so hot that every time you step on one, it's so hot you'd rather let go and fall back down into the pit of abuse again than keep trying to climb. It's just so, so, so hard to get out. But there are so many women on the top of that pit who are cheering you on. If you are just starting to contemplate making that climb, I for sure am cheering you on.

I help women get out. I've made the climb myself, and I know how hard it is. I recently saw a meme on Facebook. It was "Called to Peace Ministries" who put a meme out that basically gave a checklist. I'm trying to remember what she called it... "A Survivor's To-Do List," that's what it was. She had very few things on there. When I read it, I thought "Yeah, that was on my to-do list along with about 500,000 other things." The to-do list for a survivor absolutely never ends. Here are some of the things that were on my to-do list. See if you can relate to some of these.

First of all, I had a lot of kids. It doesn't really matter how many kids you have. I guess the more kids you have it gets a little bit more complex. But even if you only have two or three kids, it still is very complicated because those kids have needs. Usually when you are living with your partner, even if they are emotionally abusive, they are picking up some of the slack. You're not doing absolutely everything. But when you separate, you find out one of the ways they get you back is to put everything in your lap. You were doing almost everything before, but now you've got to do absolutely everything. It

gets overwhelming.

Here are some things I put on my to-do list: number one, you still have to do all of the things that you did before. (I'm going off my experience and the experience of most of the women that I've worked with, but your experience may not be exactly the same.) You are still doing all the laundry. You're still doing all the meal planning, all the grocery shopping, all the meal preparation, and all the meal clean-up. You're still doing all the appointments: the doctor's appointments, the dentist appointments, the orthopedics appointments, and other normal things. You're going to the parent/teacher conferences. If you've got special needs kids, you're taking them to their appointments. I had one with speech therapy, an autistic child going to evaluations, and I was filling out mounds of paperwork for him and for another special needs child. I had IEP appointments. I was going to the doctor a lot because I had anxiety and depression related symptoms in my body. I had heart palpitations. I was having asthma attacks. I had developed GERD. I was having extreme muscle pain in certain areas. I had insomnia. I was having migraines and vision problems. I had to take care of all the house repairs because he wasn't coming in to do that anymore. That means I had to pay for it. I was working a full-time job in the home, and I had to keep doing that. I had to take care of and pay for my own car repairs and oil changes. I had to separate our finances, and then manage my own finances.

I had one lady friend just drop in on me out of the blue and give me a lecture on how I was living life wrong and that I was not loving my family in the choices that I was making. I sat there listening to that, overwhelmed by life, and thought, "This person has absolutely no idea who she's talking to or what my life is like or what I am trying to hold together by myself." Instead of bringing me encouraging words or praying with me, she brought me a lecture. She wasn't the only one who tried to convince me that I was not serving my family well. All I was doing was really trying to follow Jesus Christ and be obedient to Him in the face of tremendous opposition from all the people that I loved the most in my life.

Not only are you doing all those daily things, I don't think I mentioned cleaning the house. I don't think I mentioned dealing with kids and all their issues. That's a whole other layer. There are layers and layers to this. The kids have their own emotional issues because of what they have observed in your marriage and what they've experienced themselves. If there is emotional abuse in your marriage, there is emotional abuse going on in their lives as well. Your life is falling apart, so you have a lot less patience with what's going on. Your stress tolerance level is very low. You are physically exhausted. When you are exhausted, you have very little hope for the future. It is tremendously hard to deal with extra stressors that children naturally bring to the

table because they are children. God meant for children to be raised by two people who are working together to meet not just the physical, but those deep emotional connections that those children need.

A lot of times women may not have a job in the home like I did, but they are desperately trying to find jobs. They are working multiple jobs. Not career-type jobs, but odds-and-ends kind of jobs that are perhaps great for when you are in college, but not so great when you are forty-eight years old and you are trying to feed a family. A lot of times the spouse that separated is not meeting you halfway. They aren't meeting at the table and trying to continue to provide for you. They are pulling out the rug from under you because they are getting you back. If you aren't going to stay with them, collude with them, meet their needs, tell them they are amazeballs, tell them that you are responsible for everything, and let them off the hook for everything, if you're not going to do that anymore, they are going to make sure that you pay. But they will make sure you pay in very underhanded ways that you can't really point your finger at and in ways that, if you try to point it out, other people will make excuses for it.

That's the other thing. What other people are seeing when they look at this whole situation is a woman who is in fight mode. She may have been in flight mode before, but now she's in fight mode because she is fighting for her emotional and spiritual well-being. She's fighting for her life on a level that is different from fighting for your life if a tiger is running after you, but it is the same thing. Because she is in fight mode, she is desperately trying to survive, and she's looking to community to help her with this. We were not created to be alone or to be lone rangers. We were created to be in a community that would come together, support one another, and help each other through the hard times. But this is the time that the people that she needs the most, the people she has poured her life into over the years, will abandon her. One of the reasons they abandon her is because she is breaking down their comfortable structure that is the status quo by her truth telling. Because she is fighting, they don't like it. It doesn't look very good.

When women fight, our culture doesn't like that or accept that. What they are seeing him do, on the other hand... he has no scruples when it comes to lying, pretending, or faking, so he comes across as the victim. He's crying all of a sudden. So whereas she's spent years crying on her bathroom floor begging God for help where nobody can see her, now she's not doing that anymore. He is crying, but he's not doing it in secret on his bathroom floor: he's doing it in front of the people that he knows are strategic to cry in front of. He's doing it in front of the people that he knows will feel bad for him when they see him cry. They will see her fighting and him crying, and what are they going to think? Of course they will think she's the one with the problem.

The reality of all those years is that it doesn't matter what happened to her, they are going to believe the exact opposite. This is probably the most traumatic thing that you will go through. It's bad when your Christian friends turn their back on you. It's even worse when your family turns their back on you, and it's exponentially worse when your own children take sides in the whole thing. Just know that it's a very real possibility. Does it happen to everyone? No, but it happens to more people than it doesn't happen to. Every child is going to be different. Some children, depending on their ages, personalities, and individual relationships with each parent (and many other factors such as how rooted they are in the way they view life), will react differently to you and the situation. Some will do well through the whole thing and some will completely fall apart.

I think it's important to get help for them as they will not get an objective view from either you or your husband. You are going to be panicked, which will ruin your credibility to them, and your husband will be manipulative and they are going to fall for his games, more than likely. If they have not felt loved or accepted by him in the past, this is especially true. If he is going to use them to hurt you (and they often do this, unfortunately), then the kids are very vulnerable and susceptible to that kind of manipulation because they desperately want to be loved and accepted by their dad. They will go along with what their dad is saying because when they do that, he showers them with love and acceptance.

Here's the thing: if you are going to be like him and be a conniving liar, you could probably convince people much more easily than being a panicked cat in a corner. Why is this? It doesn't make any rational sense. I believe that when we are dealing with abuse it is a consequence of misogyny in our culture (certainly in the Christian culture), and this is a spiritual battle that is being fought. We can't see what is going on in the spiritual realm, but we can see what is going on in the earthly realm. Just like people can't see what happened to you behind closed doors, people can't see what's going on... I love Madeleine L'Engle's book, which was just made into a movie, "A Wrinkle in Time." These people go through this wrinkle in time into an alternate reality, in a different world. In my imagination, that is what eternity is like. It's right with us. We are actually just a wrinkle in time away from eternity and away from that spiritual realm that we can't see.

Wherever you are in your life, you are part of something that is so much more profound and much bigger than you can possibly imagine. You are a casualty in a war that is astronomical, and it is being fought out on a universal scale. So what do we do about this? How do we deal with this traumatic experience? How do we deal with the pain of so much rejection from the people that we've loved and trusted even while we

are in the midst of literally drowning in responsibilities? (I didn't even mention in that to-do list that she's also making appointments with her attorney, trying to gather up enough money to pay for legal fees, making appointments with mediators, making appointments for children to visit a guardian ad-litem. It's just so overwhelming that I can't even remember all the things I did. I just remember at that time feeling like I was drowning and suffocating and I couldn't see how it would ever end.)

Should we leave it there? "And that's the way life is. That's it for today! Fly free!" No! I'm not going to leave you there. I'm going to give you some ideas for how to view your life right now. First, you need to see this time in your life as a season. It is not going to last forever. My mom always used to say, "It's always the darkest before the dawn." I think that's a famous quote, but I don't remember the famous person who said it. I just remember my mother saying it. It's always darkest before the dawn. Just like all good things come to an end, all bad things come to an end as well. You do need to expect that things are going to get worse before they get better. Expect that. Things are going to fall apart. I've described it like this and heard others describe it like this as well. It's like an earthquake. The earthquake hits and does a great deal of damage at first. But then there are aftershocks that you aren't always expecting. The aftershocks can also do a lot of damage. The earthquake is when you first leave your home or he leaves your home. Then there will be aftershocks that keep coming for several months after that, possibly even years after that. I'm still experiencing aftershocks and I'm a few years out.

Second is to use the internet. Let Google become your very best friend. Every time I had a question about the divorce process, finances as a single woman, divorcing a narcissist, about custody stuff, every single question I had, I Googled. I was Googling all day long. Well, no, I wasn't Googling all day long because I was doing all those other things! I was Googling late into the night. The internet is an incredible resource and there are bazillions of people who have already gone through what you are going through. They are answering these questions in forums and writing articles. They are doing YouTube videos. Every question you have you can find an answer for on the internet. Now, are they all great answers? No, but there are some good answers out there. We all must be discerning. We can read ten different answers to a problem, and we must use our discernment and discretion as to what is the best answer for us. Someone may say, "Just take a bunch of pills and be done with it." Well, you don't really want to do that.

Third, I use my imagination a lot. I've always done that since I was a kid. When I was a kid and things got really boring, I would pretend that I was Laura Ingalls Wilder from the "Little House on the Prairie" show that I used to watch. Her life had to be kind of boring

too. Think about it. She went to school, she did chores, and she dealt with Nellie Oleson. That was probably the most exciting thing. The show always had some kind of adventure, so maybe her life was more exciting than mine. But while I was going through this, I would try to imagine myself as a queen. Right now my girls and I are watching "Victoria" on Netflix about the life of Queen Victoria. She went through a lot of tough things, but she was always queenly. Sometimes she did fall apart and get emotional. She went through postpartum depression and she had problems. Her life wasn't peachy as a queen. Some of her problems were bigger than others, but she maintained a sense of composure even in the midst of very difficult situations. I tell people to survey the landscape and make the decisions you need to make today. Make those decisions today and leave tomorrow's decisions to tomorrow. You cannot take on the burden of the entire year in front of you today. There is no point. You must keep your head down and get done what needs to get done today, and tomorrow you can worry about tomorrow. Of course, God teaches us that in the Bible. You know that if you are a woman of faith listening to this. (If you are not, just Google it!)

Number four, if you make a mistake (and you will)... For example, one of the mistakes I made was to try to convince other people that I was telling the truth. I view that as a mistake now. I even tried to share details. You know what emotional abuse is. It is so inane. I'd say, "He told me that this didn't happen, but I know that it really did." How is anyone going to know if what you are saying is true or not? It's a he-said/she-said thing. You cannot prove emotional abuse. You can't prove that your husband did or didn't do something or said or didn't say something. It's something that you and I need healing for to be able to stand in our reality regardless of whether anyone believes you. You know God saw it happen, you saw it happen, and maybe your children saw it happen. Although, they will have a selective memory as well because they are children and they are forgetting.

Speaking of that, that's one of the ways this is so traumatizing. I just read an article that said through brain studies on people who have been emotionally abused, the amygdala, which is the small stem part of your brain in the back of your skull that controls your fight/flight/fright/freeze reaction, actually gets bigger so that you are triggered much more easily. Something as simple as calling someone who has been abusive to you in the past on the phone is terrifying. In reality, can that person kill you over the phone? No. But for some reason you are terrified to call them because of the little things they may say or the tone of their voice, which are very terrifying because your amygdala is big. The other thing these brain scans showed is that your prefrontal cortex, which is the center for your reasoning, thinking, and short-term memory, shrinks. It physically shrinks. So your short-term memory basically sucks. You can't remember things. You might have an altercation with your husband or your child, you

could go to your room and try to write it down... You should go to your room and write it down because you will never remember it later. Sometimes I couldn't even remember it by the time I got to my room. So many times I had to ask one of my other children, "What just happened? Do you remember the details? Do you remember what was said?" They've had to tell me. They don't even remember a lot that has happened because they were traumatized and they shut it down. If you try to tell them what happened, they don't remember.

So it is pointless to try to convince other people. You are having a hard time convincing yourself unless you write it down. Again, write these down in your journal. It's not keeping a record of wrongs. You are trying to gather your sanity and your senses about you so that you can see what is actually going on in your relationship with this person. Get help for your kids. I've mentioned this before, but get outside help. You need to get help for your kids, meaning outside help. Bring in people who understand trauma, who understand emotional abuse and spiritual abuse. Have your kids talk to these people whether it's a professional licensed counselor if you can afford it or your insurance will pay for it or a friend who understands. They need to be able to talk about what is going on. They need to be able to hear that it is going to be okay, that they are going to be okay, that they're not going to die, that their life is going to go on, that what is going on is not their fault, that it is not their responsibility to take care of their mom and their dad. That is their mom and dad's responsibility. They need to learn good boundaries and resiliency skills. There's a website called "Big Life Journal." They have downloads and printables, and you can buy posters and things that actually teach resiliency to kids. That's what your kids really need to learn, but it would be nice if they could learn it in a context not where you are teaching them but where someone else is teaching them.

I don't think I finished the queen thought. Think of yourself as a queen. That's how you should think of yourself. But I think one of the problems we run into is that we view other people as bigger than God and bigger than us. We kind of see ourselves as either these stupid children, vulnerable children, or helpless/hopeless children, and we see these other people as adults who have it all together. They must know and they must be the rational intelligent ones. But that's actually not true. You're not actually a child, and they're not actually a rational adult. Here's the reality. We are all sheep, and some of those sheep are actually wolves in sheep's clothing. Jesus is our shepherd. Get the other picture out of your mind: all your mommies and daddies with you as the little kid. That picture must go. Replace it with this picture of Jesus Christ as the Shepherd and you are one of His sheep, one of His lambs. Maybe you can picture your children as one of His little lambs and you as a mommy sheep. These other people in your life who are manipulative or are abusing you are these wolves in sheep's clothing who are secretly

trying to bite you in the rear end. You are saying, "Look! It's not a real sheep! There's a wolf hiding under there." Then all these other sheep who are real sheep are saying to you "No, it's not. This is my friend. This is my son. This is my brother." But you are saying "No, you don't understand. He's actually a wolf!" and they are not believing you.

Here's the thing. It doesn't matter what the wolf in sheep's clothing thinks. They are always going to hate you. It doesn't matter what the other sheep think. They aren't going to like you if you don't agree with them. The only thing that matters is your Shepherd and what He thinks. Imagine yourself as this sheep, and just go over to your Shepherd and lay down next to Him. Imagine He is sitting on a big rock and He's got your little lamb in His arms. He's singing to your child. He's got another hand on your back or your head stroking your little woolly hair with His fingers and telling you how much He loves you. His opinion is the only one that counts. I know you're drowning. I've been there and I know it's scary. But I also know that you are in good hands and Jesus Christ will never, ever abandon you. He will never, ever disbelieve you or discount your feelings, your emotions, or your experience. He knows your experience better than you do. In fact, He knows that you have minimized the trauma of your experience in order to survive. He knows it's far worse than you could probably imagine, but He is with you and He's going to walk with you, and not just at the beginning. He's not going to walk you through just the middle. He's not going to leave you at any step of the way. He's going to walk with you all the way to the end, and when it's all over He's going to welcome you home. He's going to make sure that the truth of what's going on in this world today is revealed. He promises that. There's a verse (again, I'm horrible at references) that says that all things that have been hidden will come to light. That's all I have for you today. Fly free!