

HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH AND I CAN WALK AWAY?

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 158 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have a listener question, and it's a question that I hear a lot in our private community forum: "How will I know when it's time to be done? How much abuse is necessary before it crosses the line and I have permission to leave? How will I know it's over?" By the way, for only \$29 a month, you can be part of the Flying Free Sisterhood and get personal questions like these answered 24/7 in our private community forum. Plus, I do live coaching every week, plus, we have a live two-hour Q&A every month, and that's just part of the program where you can ask questions and get help and feedback and support. There is so much more to the program than that, but I wanted to let you know because I do answer questions here on the private podcast a lot, and if this podcast has helped you, I just think you need to know it's a fraction of what's available in the program. You can learn more about what's inside and how it can help you get stronger and feel more emotionally stable and sane by going to joinflyingfree.com. Okay, let's listen to this listener question now.

LISTENER: My question is where do you draw the line and say, "This is the last time I'm going to allow this. We're getting a divorce." I have been married for twenty-five years. I have seven kids, so I have a lot holding me there, including family. We came from a cult church. We did get out of that five years ago, praise the Lord. My whole family is out, my immediate family. But he has packed his bags, I'm pretty sure he's had an affair, he has had fits of rage, physical abuse, and I every time I let him back in. So stupid of me, but I did it because I was afraid. And now I see the light through your book, through counseling, through life coaching. I see the light, and I still, you know... having tons of those little cuts daily, every other day, whatever, the moodiness, all the things, and I'm so tired of it. He understands that I'm not going to have a reaction and so... anyway. It's just a lot that transpires after you see the light. And so now I'm in the middle of this anxiety-ridden relationship and I'm going, "When is enough going to be enough?" So my question to you is how do we decide "I'm walking away today"? I know that's probably different for everybody, but.

NATALIE: Thank you for sending this question in. I don't think that there's a right or wrong answer to this. I don't think that there's a line that everyone comes up to and then just knows "Yes, this is the line! I've reached it! It's time to go!" There are probably

millions of different reasons or ways that a woman might decide “enough is enough.” And the timing of this will be as individual as each person themselves are. What one woman is willing to tolerate or able to tolerate based on various factors in her life like her personality, the kind of the abuse that her husband is doing to her, her upbringing, whether or not she has children, her age, all of those things, is going to look very different from what another woman is willing or able to tolerate based on the factors in her life.

So for example, one woman might be twenty-seven years old without kids, maybe married for a year or two, and she might’ve been hit once and then just decide then and there that she’s done, and she will move out and that will be the end of it. Another woman might be forty-five years old and have six kids. Maybe two of them have severe health problems, she dealing with very covert abuse, it’s hard to know what’s up and what’s down, she needs the financial support because of the health of her kids along with some other financial considerations going on in her life, and she might decide that she needs to hack it out for a few more years. And then you might have another woman who’s fifty-eight years old with three adult children who’s in the middle of getting her nursing degree. And she’s got this raging, bull husband who doesn’t hit her, but he screams at her and calls her terrible names. And she doesn’t want to end the relationship until she has a job as a nurse.

So I hope you can see that these kinds of decisions are yours and yours alone to make. Who decides where the line is for you? You do! Not anyone else. You are an adult. You don’t need permission to stay in your relationship or to leave your relationship. I’ve just been flabbergasted to see how church leaders or Christian friends are so confident in believing that they know the answers for another human being. It would be almost funny if it weren’t so tragic.

One of the things that this listener said in relation to taking her abuser back again and again and again is she said, “I’m so stupid.” This is simply not true, my friends. Taking an abuser back is what survivors are programmed to do. So it is not stupid, it’s just programming. And interrupting that programming is very difficult. It requires a lot of support and it takes time. Many women join Flying Free just to learn how to interrupt that programming.

Part of the abuse dynamic is that the abuser now takes up real estate in the victim's brain, so his voice and opinions and worldview are now inside her neural pathways. He pretends that she’s dumb and treats her that way until she believes it. Now, he doesn’t even have to be around. He can control her thinking and feelings and actions from a distance just by having programmed her brain that way. One of the first steps to

reprogramming is to simply observe or notice our thoughts without any judgment. When we judge ourselves the way our abusers do (“Oh, you’re so dumb,”), we lose any chance of getting any traction over those thoughts. Why? Because human beings shut down under criticism and shame. We just do it, that’s the way we’re wired. So when we think, “I’m so stupid,” our bodies are going to feel shame in them. And shame always makes us run and hide and shut down. It’s what shame does. It’s natural. It’s how we protect ourselves. But when we run and hide and shut down, things stay the same. Circumstances don’t change, but we also don’t change. We give up all of our agency and power, which is exactly what the abuser wants and needs in order for his little universe to operate the way he wants it to. And that’s not just the abuser that we live with, you guys. It’s also the abuser of our souls, the devil, or whatever you want to call it. Evil.

What if we could just observe our thoughts without judging them? Let’s say this woman thinks, “I will be alone and I may not make it if I get divorced.” So she feels fear in her body. And this fear is so visceral and so real that it drives her to stay with her abuser, to protect herself, right? And the result is that she is living in fear all the time, anyway. But when we slow all of this down and see what’s really going on here, we can get some agency over it and decide if we want to keep that thought or introduce some new thoughts into our brain. Now, there are hundreds of different thoughts that we could replace this thought with. This original thought is, “I will be alone, and I may not make it if I get divorced.” I’m just going to offer you some different thoughts, okay? “If I get divorced, I may not be married. This is true. But I will never be alone, because God is with me.” Also, “I’ve got my own back.” Also, “I have so and so and so and so who will support me.” “If I say ‘no’ to an abusive marriage, that means I could potentially say ‘yes’ to a healthy one someday if I chose to do that.” Here’s another thought: “If I get divorced, I may not have a lot of money and I may have to work to make ends meet, but I will survive. I’d rather live in an apartment with peace than live in a big house with turmoil and heartache every day.”

Okay, so do you see how these new thoughts, they don’t deny the reality of the difficulty of divorce. But these new thoughts reframe that difficulty so that we can see that it isn’t impossible or the end of the world if that’s what we end up deciding to do. So, this listener has been married for twenty-five years and isn’t sure if she should leave or stay. My guess is that she is looking or waiting for permission from someone or somewhere. This is where I was at, you guys. And that’s what she is never, ever going to get. Not even from God, because God isn’t going to treat her like she is seven years old. He treats us like the adult women we are. He entrusts us with the care and well-being of our bodies and lives, and He only asks that we make choices.

Do you guys remember the parable of the talents? I talk about this a lot, the parable of

the talents in the New Testament. Jesus said that the master in that story only got upset with the one man who did nothing with his talents. This is the story where the master is going to go out of town and he leaves one of his servants with one talent and another one with two talents and another one with five talents. And the guy with five invests his talents and ends up with ten, and the guy with two invests his talents and ends up with four, and the guy with one is like, "I don't know what to do with this. I don't want to make a mistake," so he just buries it in the ground and does nothing with it. Well, the master comes back and he's totally fine with the guys who just invested. One got ten and one got four. He didn't really care how much they made. That wasn't the point. The point was "Did you do something? Did you make a choice?" Even if they had made a mistake, he would have been fine with that, because they were taking initiative and doing something.

I really think that this story is trying to make the point that God expects us to make mistakes and get messy while living our lives. Just like you expect your infants, if they are healthy, they're going to poop their pants, or they're going to fall down when they're learning to walk, or they're going to break your music box collection. (Guess where I got that idea from?) You have permission from your Creator to live your life the best way you can, to do the best that you can, of course knowing that you're going to make mistakes and mess up sometimes. You have permission from God to not be perfect. You have permission from God to not be Him. By the way, remember the original sin was that Adam and Eve thought it would be best if they were like God, knowing good and evil. But God didn't want that for them. He just wanted them to be free to enjoy Him and His creation. So you not only have permission to not be God, but you actually are not supposed to want to be God-like, okay?

Just imagine with me for just a minute, what would life be like if we could embrace a life like that? If we could embrace ourselves like that? If we could embrace a God like that? If we could trust a God like that? If we truly knew that for Him, it didn't matter if we stayed or left? He's never, ever going to leave us or forsake us. Then, when we had the thought, "How do I know enough is enough?" we would know that the answer is this: "When I decide it is." And that, my friends, is your privilege and your responsibility. I always tell survivors, the one who God is going to use to rescue your life is not your husband, not your pastor, not your parents or your friends or your church. God fully intends to use you to rescue you. And when you decide to step into that role for yourself, everything changes.

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