

WHAT IF I HAD AN AFFAIR WHILE I WAS MARRIED TO MY ABUSIVE HUSBAND?

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 162 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we're going to answer a couple of listener questions. One is about how to deal with family members who just don't get it, and the other question is from a listener who had an affair and is struggling with shame. So let's start with the first question.

LISTENER 1: Hi Natalie. I was married to a narcissistic, alcoholic, abuser husband. Two years after my divorce, I was contacted by a brother from my family of origin who called me and asked if I didn't see my way back to remarrying him. Needless to say, I was shocked. But I wonder if you have any advice about how to deal with family members who just don't get it. I realize that there may be a time when trying to help a family member understand, you just have to let it go. And this could be one of those times. But I would like to hear your opinion about that. Thank you.

NATALIE: Okay, this is quite typical for family members to want the couple to get back together. I mean, think about it. If you've been married for any length of time, your family is going to think of your partner as being part of the family, right? They're not going to be privy to what it's like to sleep with him, deal with his abusive behavior on a daily basis, endure his criticism, his bad moods, his demands, his emotional meltdowns, his silent treatment, all the arguing, the stonewalling, and all the other things he's doing to you behind closed doors.

To them, from their perspective, he's a great guy. And most humans really don't want to know or believe anything more than that basic information. People believe what revolves around their brain. What experiences they are having. What they can see, smell, touch, taste, and feel. Not you. Them. End of story.

So from their perspective, you divorced a family member, and "Could you please just get remarried so we could all feel comfortable and go back to normal?" You are the one who messed it up because you are the one who initiated the divorce. Again, they don't know all of the other stuff. Now if you're like me, you think "Well, all I have to do is give them enough details so that they understand the situation from someone else's perspective, namely, mine. And once they are able to get into my shoes for just a moment, the lightbulbs will come on and they will understand why I had to file for

divorce. They will support me and we can all move on from this painful part of our history." And wouldn't that be lovely if all humans had the capability of doing that?

Here are the hard cold facts: Most humans are not able to do that. The ability to put oneself in another person's shoes requires a level of emotional maturity that a lot of people, frankly, don't have. We see this on the road when we come to a four-way stop and someone chooses to blow past everyone else even though it isn't their turn. We see this in restaurants when we overhear someone have a conniption fit because their lemonade was supposed to be an iced tea. We see this when people steal or cheat or lie to get their own way. We see this when otherwise nice people lose their shinola on Facebook because someone doesn't believe what they believe about COVID and masks and vaccines. We see this when people judge others for not looking like them, talking like them, dressing like them, acting like them, being just like them.

Everyone has a manual for how others should be. And we do this because we think that if everyone just did what we think they should do, which is anything and everything that makes us feel good and comfy, then we will be happy. If people just moved out of the way when we're on the road, we'll be happy. If they just never made mistakes, then we can be happy. If they let us win all the time, then we can be happy. If they believe all the same things that we believe, then we can be happy. If they just gave us what we asked them for without arguing, we could be happy. If they just believed everything we said, we could be happy. If they would just wear the kinds of clothes that we think are godly, we could be happy. Because our happiness is what matters, and we are always right.

Yeah, that's the human brain for you. It's like a toddler with a chef's knife. Very dangerous. Emotional adulthood recognizes that having a manual for others is actually disrespectful of the human rights of others to have their own thoughts and feelings and ways of doing things. Emotional adulthood allows everyone to be exactly who they are and doesn't try to change them. Emotional adulthood takes responsibility for self and my own choices, and allows others to take responsibility for themselves and their own choices. It's like an adult with a chef's knife. They know how to use it to bring delicious things into this world.

Sometimes we can think, "Well, why not take the chef's knives out of the hands of the toddlers so they aren't quite so dangerous?" And wouldn't that be lovely to get rid of all abuse by controlling abusive people? And why doesn't God just do that? And "I, of course, would be one of the adults He would choose to wield the knife. I'm sure of it." But that is also abusive. God doesn't control us. He gives us agency and He gives abusers agency. He isn't going to rescue us from entitled people. Instead, He wants to empower us to exercise our own responsibility and agency to make our own choices

for our own lives. This person is the way they are, period.

Now, who am I going to be? He is the kind of person who chooses to scream and swear at his wife. Who am I? What are the choices I will make for me? We can't change other people. We can only change ourselves. We can't make other people's bodies go away. We can only remove our own bodies from their presence if we want to. So it sounds like you did that. You divorced your ex and moved on, and now naturally your family wants you to change back. "Go back to who you were before when you let all of us tell you what to do for your life, when you looked out for us, when you did what we wanted you to do! We depended on you to live according to our rules and our manual. Our happiness depended on it. We can't manage our own emotions because we are emotional children. We need you to manage our emotions for us." So what are you going to do? Enable them to remain stuck in emotional childhood or give them the respect they deserve as adult humans and allow them to manage their own emotions?

If you remember the model I told you about in Episode 160, you'll notice that you are simply the circumstance in their model. So their model would look something like this: the circumstance would be, "Sister divorces her husband." I'm pretending I'm the brother, okay? And the thought that this brother would have is, "Sister shouldn't have judged her ex so harshly." And then the feeling that I would have is anger. And the action is that I would call up my sister and tell her what to do, ruminate about how uncooperative my sister is, snap at my coworkers, drink too many whiskey sours, and binge "Law and Order" on Hulu. And the result is I'm judging my sister harshly.

But do you see that you as his sister are simply the circumstance in his model? Nothing you do actually has an effect on his emotions unless he makes your behavior mean something to him that is upsetting to him. He could choose to be an emotionally mature adult who holds space for others to make their own choices about their own lives, in which case, when sister gets a divorce, his thought could be, "Sister gets to make her own choice," which would then create a feeling of acceptance in his body. And then from that feeling he would support his sister, talk kindly, and grow in his capacity to manage himself. And then the results of those actions are that he is behaving like an adult, capable of making his own choices as well.

But, it sounds like he didn't choose to think that way, and now your question is, "How do I deal with that?" The answer is, you may have guessed, that it isn't your business to deal with his thoughts and his emotions and his behaviors at all. That's his business. That's his model. Your only business is what you want to make it all mean for you.

So let's run the model with your circumstance. Your circumstance is, "My brother says

‘You should get back together with your husband.’” And your thought is, “I need to get him to understand so he will back off.” And when you think that thought, you feel anxious in your body. And when you feel anxious in your body you explain, you defend yourself, you get snippy, you ruminate, you question past decisions, you argue. I’m just guessing here. I don’t know what you actually did. I’m just guessing as a way to illustrate what we could potentially be thinking and feeling and doing. And the result if you did all of those things is that you still don’t understand and you won’t back off of the situation, okay?

Do you see how the result reflects the thought, “I need to get him to understand so he’ll back off”? And then you do all these things and then the result is that you don’t understand and that you don’t back off. You don’t understand that he’s not going to understand. You don’t understand and you won’t back off on trying to defend yourself, even if you’re just defending yourself in your own mind. I do that all the time, okay?

But what if your thought was different? What if instead of thinking, “I need to get him to understand so he’ll back off,” what if you thought this: “Well of course he wants me to get back together with my ex! That’s okay. He can want that. Maybe one day he’ll get some help for his troubled emotions on this issue.” And your feeling about that is peace because you’re letting him own all his stuff, okay? And then your action when you feel peace in your body is you answer back kindly, “I’m happy with my choice.” And you accept yourself, you accept your brother, you accept reality, and you go about your business. And the result is that you continue to live your beautiful adult life, holding safer space for yourself and others the way God does.

Okay, let’s listen to the next question.

LISTENER 2: Hi Natalie. I struggled for a long time because, in the midst of my abusive marriage, I had an affair that my husband never knew about. It was the first time I’d stepped out of what my church and my family upbringing expected of me. Eventually, I felt guilty for my actions, and I did end the affair and I tried to mend things with my husband. But he continued to be abusive. The experience showed me for the first time that I was free to make my own decisions in life, and it gave me the conviction to file for a divorce. I confessed my sins to God, but I’m still very ashamed of my actions, and I often feel that I can’t talk about my experience with other survivors of abuse because I feel like I stooped to my husband’s level. What advice do you have for me and other women who may be in this situation?”

NATALIE: First of all, I have worked with several survivors over the years who have a similar story to yours. One of them shared her really powerful story inside of the Flying

Free Program, and that story has helped hundreds of women understand the heart of God. God is not afraid of this story. Jesus wasn't afraid of this story. We see this story in the Old Testament, we see this story in the gospels. Your story is not unusual or horrific or unforgivable. In fact, God is all about this story. This is exactly the kind of story He is telling through every single human.

There is no perfect human. The only human who doesn't get to experience the beautiful grace of God in this lifetime is the one who has to pretend to be perfect in order to cover up the intense shame they feel on the inside. But that's not you. You didn't pretend to be perfect. You confessed your choice and then you chose to move away from it and try to make things right. And that's everything, literally everything that we can do right there, and you did that.

So what comes after that? Pure grace. Pure love. Pure God. Pure safety. Pure joy. Pure redemption. But you aren't experiencing that in your life because your brain is looping back on default programming that probably runs on some version of the thought, "There is something wrong with me and there shouldn't be," or "I'm not worthy." I'd like to offer to you that there is nothing wrong with you other than the fact that you are a human person with a human brain, and you are worthy. Not because of what you do or don't do, but because of Who created you and because He says you are worthy, always, no matter what.

Now, humans who believe that, like really believe that and lean into that and trust that, start to reflect the character of God, which is pure love. Pure love and safety. Love that casts out fear and judgment and revenge. Love that accepts and embraces the beloved, even when she's covered in mud because she just tripped over a rock on a muddy path, or because she chose a road that led to a dead end.

I'm really glad that you separated the two things, the affair and the abuse, because while they may be related as far as the fact that many women who are living in an abusive environment are treated like garbage and they might be warmed and attracted to someone who treats them with respect and kindness... Sometimes that's all it takes. I mean, she's starving for that and then a man comes along. It's usually not a healthy man. And then he offers her those two things and she takes them. We can understand that. But we also know that she's still not taking good care of herself. She's still not able to think clearly about her future or her life, and she's just going from the frying pan into the fire at that point.

What we want her to see is her finding her way out and away from both the frying pan and the fire so she can live her own amazing life, the life that God created her for. And

the way to do that is to no longer seek to solve for her emotional pain in the arms of dysfunctional, selfish men but to heal from the inside out so that she will have self respect and always take good care of herself, having her own back at all times, living into the fullness of who God created her to be. And that means saying “no” to abusive people, including the ones that we mistakenly said “I do” to many years ago.

So as I see it, this listener made a mistake and accidentally married an abusive man who mistreated her. And in her unhealed state, she solved for her emotional pain by looking to have her needs met by another man who mistreated her. I’m sorry, but I don’t think that men who are sleeping with the wives of other men are treating anyone, including themselves, with respect. And now she has gone through the hoops of asking for forgiveness, but she is unable to forgive herself. She’s still hung up on that deep, inner belief that there’s something wrong with her and she’s not worthy, and that is the issue here, 100%.

As I said (I kind of went down a rabbit trail there), I’m glad she was able to separate the two things, the abuse and the affair, because in doing so she was still able to file for divorce, addressing that particular issue and not allowing the affair to trip her up from taking care of herself by exiting that particular abusive relationship.

But now she’s left with this relationship she has with herself which, next to our relationship with God, is the most important relationship to cultivate. People who have a healthy relationship with themselves, who have their own backs, embrace their strengths and their weaknesses, are all in on being human, don’t judge and condemn themselves but live and breathe in the grace of God, those people also have healthy relationships with others, have the backs of others, embrace the strengths and weaknesses of others. They are all in on the humanity of others. They don’t judge and condemn others but instead extend grace and love to others. God always uses people just like that to love and help His other children. Not perfect people: flawed people who are okay with being flawed.

This is why the Bible talks about loving others the way we love ourselves. Where you see people hating on other people or judging other people, there is a person who hates themselves and judges themselves, but they are pretending that they are amazeballs in order to cover up their profound shame and fear of being seen and known. Now we can have compassion on people like that while also steering clear of them, knowing that their pathology will destroy us if we get too close. I mean, Jesus even kept His distance, not from the humble but from the arrogant. He didn’t keep His distance from the sinners but from the ones who pretended that they were without sin.

I hope that this is good news for this listener. If you're a sinner woman, join the club called the human race. And if you are all in on letting God be God and accepting your place as a humble human with issues, then you will be able to truly fly free in your life.

And that's all I have for you guys today. Until next time, I hope you will fly free.