

HOW DO I KNOW WHAT IS REAL OR TRUE WHEN MY HUSBAND GASLIGHTS ME?

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 165 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to answer a listener question, but before I do that, I just want to say thank you so much to those of you who have left a rating and review on Apple iTunes or Podcasts. I think it's called Apple Podcasts now. Those ratings and those reviews are not only super encouraging to read for me and my staff, but they are also really helpful for other people who are considering listening to this podcast. And they also help Apple iTunes or Podcasts — or whatever they're called now — they help them decide whether or not to show this podcast in front of other people who are scrolling through and looking for potential podcasts to listen to.

So it's one of the ways that, if you're enjoying this podcast and it's really benefited your life, it's one of the ways that you can help to get this in front of the eyes of other Christian women, just like you who need to hear the things that we talk about here at Flying Free.

Alright. I have one listener question I'm going to answer, and it's a really, really good one, so let's listen to it first, and then we'll dig into our show today.

LISTENER: I would like to listen to a podcast on how to know what's real, how to know what truth is. I've been married for four years to my husband, and he's been a covert abuser the whole time and I'm just now being enlightened to this. He tries to twist things back onto me and makes me feel crazy, and I just don't really know what reality is and what's true and what's real. I want to trust and believe and hope. It's just, right now, I'm kind of wary and I just don't know what to believe, so it's just really hard to give my mind clarity and to know what needs to happen, I guess.

NATALIE: I love this question because I've heard some version of it several times a week for years, actually. And I'm really glad that this listener articulated it so well for this podcast episode, and I'm really glad to be able to address it here. First of all, if you are new to this podcast, you may want to go back and listen to Episode 160 to learn about the model that I use for my coaching practice and in my programs, because I'm going to show you how we can use that model to gain insights into absolutely anything and everything we experience or think or feel or do in our lives.

Here are some of the things survivors, including myself, believed or told ourselves about our relationship after our partner did things like maybe swore at us, criticized us, told us we were stupid or that something was wrong with us, blamed us for their behavior, told us everyone believed them and thought we were a bad wife, held us responsible for their emotions, held us responsible for the home and the kids, refused to give us access to money, and any other number of overt and/or covert ways of relating. Those are just scratching the surface of what could have possibly gone on in your own relationship.

Now, when they would do these things, our brain's programming would give us messages. We would have sentences in our heads about these things that were happening to us externally. Here are some things we might be thinking: "This is all my fault," "I should do better," "I'm a bad wife," "I wish I was dead," "He has credibility and I don't," "He is my head. I should be submissive," "He knows better than I do about who I am," "He has good reasons to be frustrated with me," "I don't deserve love or respect," "I'm a woman, so this is just my lot in life," "I made my bed by marrying him, so now I need to lie in it for the rest of my life," "There is no way out," "My heart is deceitful above all else, who can know it? Certainly not me," "I'm selfish for thinking about how much I would love to leave," "I'm unfaithful for having thoughts of getting away," "I'm a bad Christian," "If my husband is disappointed in me, God must even more so be disappointed in me."

So notice how the behavior of the husband is what it is, and it's destructive for sure. But what is actually creating all of the problems for us is what we as the survivor are making it all mean for us. Notice how instead of looking at his behavior objectively and accepting that, "This man is really quite an asshole," she's so caught up in his universe that she is doing what he is doing and making his behavior and choices and emotions all about her. All her responsibility. And when she does that, when she has this core belief in her physical brain, she feels a lot of emotions in her body, emotions like shame, fear, anger, despair, confusion, defensiveness, dejection, hopelessness, and so forth.

When she feels these kinds of emotions and lives with this kind of feeling in her body every day, she is going to begin to behave in certain ways. Her emotions will drive her behaviors. Shame will drive her to shut down. Anger may drive her to yell and slam the bedroom door. Fear may drive her to play small and stay quiet. Despair may cause her to sleep a lot or overeat. Confusion might cause her to stay stuck. Hopelessness will keep her in a state of not loving or respecting herself. Do you see how this works?

And when we shut down or yell or stay quiet or overeat or stay stuck, we prove to our

brains what they already believe: there's something wrong with us. We are bad somehow. We don't deserve love and respect. We are stuck. I want you to notice that these results in our lives do not come about because our husband is a selfish jerk. Do you know how I know? Because I've watched literally hundreds of women with selfish jerks for husbands get totally different results in their lives once they take back control of what they can control, which is their own brain space, and they begin to believe new things, more truthful things.

Their husbands or ex-husbands, as the case may be, are still selfish jerks. Abusers, if you will. But these women are no longer giving their abusive partner credibility. Instead, they are giving themselves credibility and choosing to believe differently about themselves and about God, quite frankly, than their husbands do.

In other words, women who detach from their abusive partner's universe get to create their own healthy universe. I call the space between our ears our universe. It's where we live. We are either living in our own space, making conscious choices about what we believe and how we want to live, or we are living by default in the space that others are creating for us, and we're just playing the role that other people have determined for us.

I recently read a book by Viktor Frankl called "Man's Search for Meaning." He was a Holocaust survivor but also a psychiatrist, and he was able to walk through his experience in the Nazi death camps and think differently about those experiences than many of his peers did. This enabled him to learn so much about himself, the human race, and even about God and the meaning of life. And that is because he lived not in the death camps where he had no control, but in his own headspace where he had total control of what he was going to make this whole experience mean. I highly recommend this book if you haven't read it.

So how do we know what is real? We decide. How do we know what is true? We decide. Now, I know. I know as Christians we believe in ultimate truth, and I'm not talking about that, okay? Truth is truth regardless of what humans believe. But if we are intellectually honest, we have to acknowledge that we know very little about ultimate truth. Unless you are God or have embodied the mind of God, you're just like the rest of us. We accept by faith the mystery of life and the mystery of our Creator.

My husband recently showed me an image taken in outer space. It looked like a picture of the night sky with a million stars, only it wasn't a picture of a million stars in our galaxy. It was actually a deep space image of a million galaxies. Each star-looking thing wasn't a star. It was an actual galaxy. Okay. And we think we've got the skinny on God

and ultimate truth? In my opinion, anyone who thinks they know is an arrogant fool. An adorable baby babbling cutely and crapping his or her pants. So, that's just a little bit of my opinion on ultimate truth.

But the kind of truth that I think this listener is talking about is her truth. That means her experience of life. So when she asks, "How do I know what is real? How do I know what is true?" I think what she is asking is, "How do I know if what I'm experiencing is real or not? How do I know if I'm interpreting my experiences correctly?"

This is particularly difficult for people who were raised in homes where their caregivers told them to shut up and go away, or spanked them and screamed at them, or slapped them around, or threw them on the ground, told them their ideas were stupid, criticized them, told them their emotions were bad, weren't there for them, gave them the silent treatment, played favorites and so on. And then also told them, "I love you. I love you so much. I always wanted a child. When you're good, you're wonderful to have around, just as long as you don't argue with me or have ideas of your own. And always remember, I just love you." Pretty freaking confusing, huh?

As adults, we can look at that and see what's going on, but kids? They can't do that. This is all they know. They equate love with abuse. Now, they are hard-wired to believe that if someone really loves them, they will criticize, shoot them down, and mistreat them. Those two things are hard-wired together in their physical brain. Love and abuse go together. Do you see how this works?

So then the child grows up and marries someone similar to the abusive parent. So the question they have is, "My husband mistreats me, but I believe he loves me. So what is real? The mistreatment part doesn't seem like it should be love, but he says he loves me and he gives me flowers after he mistreats me, so I think he's just mixed up himself. He needs me to help him, to be patient, to be like Jesus for him. This is my duty as a wife and godly Christian woman." The answer is that you get to decide what you believe is real.

I will say this: I have several friends who are in normal marriages, you know, just your garden-variety marriage, and I'm in a normal, garden-variety marriage too. I promise you, none of us are Googling, "How do I know what is real in my marriage? Am I being abused? Is this real? Am I crazy?" Not a single one of us is doing that. It would never even cross our mind.

Now, in my former marriage, we didn't have the internet when we got married in 1992, but I can tell you this: I was asking all of those questions in my head right out of the

gate. And I was writing them in my journals and I was praying about them, because I was living in it. I didn't know that I could choose what to believe. I didn't know that I could give myself and my own experiences credibility.

I gave all the credibility to my husband, my pastors, the pastors' wives, small group leaders, deacons, and other spiritual leaders who obviously knew better than I did because they either had a penis or were pulling a paycheck from the church, or they were married to someone with either of those qualifications. But me? How could I know my own heart? It was deceitful. If my husband told me his behavior was all my fault, it must be true, because how would I know? I'm an easily deceived woman.

Do you see how I not only had to stop giving other people credibility to know what was going on inside of me, but I had to stop believing the stories they were telling me using the Bible, of course, because they knew I revered the Bible and I loved Jesus. The stories they told me kept me from owning my own life and believing my own experiences.

This listener said in her question, "I want to trust and believe and hope, but I don't know what to believe, so it's hard to give my mind clarity and know what needs to happen." What do we want to trust, believe, and hope in? That is the magic question. If we want to trust a man who lies to us, we can certainly do that. We can believe lies. People trust liars all the time. If we do that, we have to do that by lying to ourselves, and then we end up not being able to trust anyone, including ourselves.

What do we want to put our hope in? That one day this person who mistreats us will suddenly have an epiphany and decide not to? That he will morph from a jerk into a kind, loving, respectful person? I know hundreds of women who are hanging on to hope for this miracle. They put a spiritual spin on it and say "Well, God can do anything!" And they're right. If their god is abusive and controlling, he just might change their husband. Oh, wait. Then the husband would be amazeballs, but their god would be problematic.

Goodness. Do you see what's happening here? We're putting our hope into changing our external circumstances. Maybe if we argued enough, we could change everything. Maybe if we got our pastor to hold our husband accountable, everything would change. Maybe if we gave our husband more sex, it would all change. Maybe if we kept the house cleaner, it would all change. Maybe if we weren't so angry. So we try and try and try to change things we cannot change. And we refuse to take control over the one thing we can control, which is our own mind, our own emotions, and our own life.

What if we could put our hope in our amazing God and the way He made our brain and body to work together to serve us well if we would just accept His gift and steward it? The enemy does not want you to know what you can control. If you knew, you would change your life, and that would change the world. We can't have that, so let's make sure that you believe that your brain is broken and full of deceit and your body is wicked. Let's get you so riddled with shame that you shut down and are neutralized, changing nothing. Not yourself, and certainly not the world.

A little rabbit trail here: those verses about the heart being deceitful are in Jeremiah, and they're referring to all the horrible things that Judah was doing at the time. So if we take that verse to mean that we're all a bunch of liars, then why in the world are we even here? What hope is there? What is our meaning and purpose? We're all just a bunch of liars. We're a bunch of lying maggots crawling a senseless existence in the corpses of dead things. You guys, it's just so dumb to take a verse like that out of context to control women. Let's be done with this kind of ridiculousness. We should call it what it is: It's spiritual abuse.

The reason our mind doesn't have clarity is because we haven't decided yet who to give credibility to. It's as simple as that. How do we decide? We just decide. Has your husband given you ample evidence that he's a trustworthy person, a man of integrity, wise, honoring, emotionally mature? If so, great! Decide to trust him. Now, if he hasn't given you evidence of those things then ask yourself, "Do I want to choose to trust him or not? Do I want to trust a person who does not have those things?" Maybe you don't.

You might not know what to trust because you don't have anything better to trust. Maybe you don't give yourself any credibility either, and this, this, my friends, is where your work lies. As you heal and connect with your true self, the self that God created you to be, then you will learn to trust and honor and love her, and this will help you show up for your life from a place of emotional adulthood, stability, and wisdom. Then you end up changing your life and the world.

Do you need help with this? This is the exact work we do in the Flying Free programs, Flying Free and Flying Higher. Flying Free is a program for Christian women who believe they are in emotionally abusive relationships. Now, you may be experiencing other kinds of abuse as well. Most of the women in that program are living in covert, emotionally abusive relationships, which are also spiritually abusive because there's the Christian component there where their husbands or their churches are using God and the Bible to basically gaslight them and keep them stuck. And that's the kind of work that we do in Flying Free.

Now, you may be a victim of other kinds of abuse as well. Financial abuse is also pretty common in that group. You could be a victim of sexual abuse or physical abuse. Most of the people are in covert abusive relationships and it's very difficult sometimes, and this is why I loved this question, because this person is obviously, that's the kind of relationship that she's in, and the biggest question that women in that situation are asking themselves is, "Is it me?" which is why my book is called "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage. A Christian Woman's Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse."

That is my area of expertise, and that is the work that we do. It's concentrated, amazing work that we do, and it changes lives. I get emails every single day from people whose lives are changing because of what they're doing in that program. I keep it super low cost so as many people can join as possible. If you're interested in joining or learning more about, just go to joinflyingfree.com. There is an application process to get in.

The other program that I have is for Christian women who are already divorced. Not to say that the people in the other program are on their way to getting divorced. Some of them are. But some of them aren't. They just want to stay in their relationship. They just want to get stronger in their own brain and in their own thinking, but they want to stay, which is totally fine.

But the Flying Higher group is for women who are divorced. You have to be divorced to be in that group. And we just take the work that we do in Flying Free and we do it, it's sort of a different way. We focus more on rebuilding our lives in seven key areas. I'm trying to think off the top of my head what they all are. Our relationships with other people, our relationship with God, our finances, our physical space like our home, office, and car, our career or the meaning and purpose of our life, what we're doing with our lives. So if you are interested in learning more about Flying Higher, it's joinflyinghigher.com. That's where you can learn about it and fill out an application. And again, Flying Free is joinflyingfree.com.

And that is all I have for us today. Thank you so much for listening and until next time, fly free.