

AM I RESPONSIBLE FOR FIXING MY 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 167 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to bring to you a couple of questions that I got in the Flying Free Sisterhood program a couple of years ago, actually. I just went back through my archives. One of the things that we have in the Sisterhood is we do a monthly Q&A. We've been doing this for several years, so we have this huge vault of past Q&A sessions, and I went through some of them and I was like, "Wow, these are some really good questions," and they're questions that I hear over and over again.

I just thought, "Maybe I'll answer a couple of these in one of the podcast episodes." So here's two I found. There's two questions I'm going to read to you right now, and they're both very similar. So I'll read the questions, and then we'll dig into some ideas of ways to think about this.

The first one is, "I can't seem to be able to stop feeling responsible for him. I've always felt a deep responsibility to fix or rescue everything broken in the world, especially my loved ones. I know deep inside that it is truly God's responsibility, but I can't seem to shake it off no matter how much I try." So that's the first question.

Here's the second one: "I've been detached from my husband without giving him any reasons why, so now I'm feeling guilty. I still want our relationship to work, but detaching is a way of protecting myself. My concern is: What if I detach too much or for too long without telling him why?"

Alright, both of these questions have to do with something called "self-differentiation." According to ChoosingTherapy.com, "Differentiation of self is a psychological state of being in which someone is able to maintain their sense of self, identity, thoughts, and emotions when emotionally or physically close with others, particularly within intense or intimate relationships."

So basically, this means that you are self-differentiated when you are completely you and the other person is completely themselves, and you can be close and yet maintain your own identity. Now, the other person might not want to be completely themselves. They might be trying to engulf you, but it's where you can hold your own identity

separately from theirs no matter what their drama is. You don't get pulled into their vortex.

So another way to think about this is the difference between emotional adulthood and emotional childhood. When we are leaning into and operating out of emotional adulthood, we are living out of our core — the core of who we are, our adult self — while we are still connecting with the other person in a way that we feel safe with. This means that even if they are going off the rails, we're still able to remain emotionally stable because we're not getting sucked into their emotional state of being. Or we're not getting sucked into their belief system in that moment or their behavior or their results. We are separate from them.

Now, this does not mean that we don't empathize with them or care about them. It just means that when they are drowning, we don't jump in the pool and drown with them, because that doesn't help anybody. And yet, this is what we do a lot, isn't it? I know I'm the queen of jumping in the pool with people, okay?

Let me give you an example that you can maybe relate to if you're a parent or you've ever babysat a child. You know how kids or even teens (maybe even especially teens) can fall apart sometimes? Now, they might believe that because they didn't get the sucker they wanted or the outfit they wanted or the boyfriend they wanted or the car they wanted or whatever, that their life is over, and "It's all your fault!" of course. That is their belief in the moment. They're making those circumstances mean that life is unfair; it's not going right; everyone is against them; it will never get better; and so on and so on and so on.

Now, if you're like me, sometimes you'll jump in the pool with them, and your brain will buy into their story. You'll think that what they're saying has some truth to it. Your brain might be going, "Yeah. You're a bad mom. You're not providing for your child's needs. It's all your fault. If you were a good person, you'd make her happy."

And then you'll feel guilty or shame or angry or annoyed, and when you feel like that, you might yell back; you might defend yourself; you might cry; you might talk about how life wasn't fair for you either; you might do some blame shifting back on them; and so forth. It ends up being a big mess with both of you falling apart, right? You guys are both drowning.

We expect kids to be operating out of emotional childhood, right? I mean, they're children, after all. They get to. But adults? Have you had this happen with your husband? Maybe he didn't get the sex that he wanted or didn't get meat in his meal or

didn't come home to a nice, quiet, clean house, or maybe his wife is sick and needs him, and all these things make him think, "It's not fair. I deserve better than this. This is how it always goes. I got a raw deal. Nobody cares about me. I can't do it all. I have needs." And then those thoughts will cause him to whine; he might manipulate to get his own way; he might lie; he might swear; he might blame his job; he might blame his wife; he might blame his car; he might blame his boss — and basically he has an adult temper tantrum.

The fact is that abusers are operating out of emotional childhood most of the time. And by the way, we all do this, alright? We all, at times, revert back to this kind of childish way of thinking and this childish behavior. But abusers in particular will make an art and a habit of it. So again, if we buy into their storyline about life and about us, then we'll end up getting sucked into the vortex of their thought patterns. And I often see women who have actually been out of abuse for a long time still kind of hanging on to those thought patterns in their brains, and therefore, they're still kind of stuck in the abuse cycle in their life, because they haven't ever really rewired their programming.

So that's what detaching is. It's being able to stand outside of the situation and observe it objectively instead of actually being part of the other person's story. It would be like standing at the edge of the pool and trying to help by maybe throwing a lifeline or something, but you don't actually jump in the pool and drown with them.

We do all of this work, you guys, in our brains, in our heads. They can actually stay in that emotional childhood place, but we get to let go of trying to snap them out of it. We actually go into emotional childhood when we think, "Oh, I've got to get them out. And if I don't, then I'm a bad person and then this whole thing is bad and the world's falling apart." We have to let go of trying to get them out of it and just be present in our own emotional stability and our own adulthood.

Why is this important? Because when we've got two people involved in a relationship, both people are vital to that relationship, and for that relationship to be healthy, they both need to be healthy by themselves. You need to be healthy separate from your husband, and your husband needs to be healthy separate from you.

Now, abusers are not going to do this work. This is where you're going to run into problems if you're actually in an abusive relationship. Now, I'm remarried. My husband is just, you know, he's a wonderful guy, but he's like, a normal guy, okay? And we have a normal relationship. But, my husband now, he's willing and desirous of working on his own stuff. And he does it by himself. I never have to tell him, "You know, you really should work on this." I don't have to tell him that. He knows. I can have a talk with him

about something or we can be having an altercation (usually very mild), and then he picks up on stuff and then he goes apart by himself and he works on his own stuff because he's an adult and he operates out of emotional adulthood.

So when we talk about detaching, we're talking about detaching from actually trying to control them, trying to make them change, trying to make them be the husband that we think they should be. We detach from trying to fix them. We detach from trying to manage them and their emotions. We detach from their view of us. They get to have their own little pretend world where we're just this little Lego character that they think they can control. We can detach from that. We can let them think that. It doesn't mean it's true. We can detach from their drama.

Edwin Freedman in his book, "Failure of Nerve," says that, "Maturity is the willingness to take responsibility for one's own emotional being and destiny." And this is the crux of what we do in the Flying Free Sisterhood and even in the Flying Higher program. We learn how to take this responsibility for our own emotional being and destiny and how to let go of taking responsibility for our husbands. That never works. Why not let go of what we can't control and take back control of what we can? Because we kind of tend to let go of control of our own lives when we try to control their lives. And that just never works.

This is one of the biggest problems, honestly, that I see in survivor circles, and even just in human life circles. I mean, we see this on Facebook – this is a problem I've had in my own life. It's just a human problem, and it's the cause of all stuckness and lack of movement in any of our lives. It is the cause of fighting and panic. It's the cause of despair and self-loathing and overeating and overspending and over anything. And it's why everyone feels so out of control, and it's also why it also feels like everything around us is out of control as well. And the problem is not abusers or bad churches or terrible bosses or lack of money or health problems or a house that's falling apart or kids that don't care.

The problem is inside of us. It's inside of human beings, and it's the fact that most of us grow up physically but we never grew up emotionally. Now, I'm going to be actually sharing a class, sharing some of the things I taught in one of my classes that I teach in Flying Higher. So you're going to get just a tiny little micro-taste of what we do in that program. I know if you're thinking, "But I'm not divorced. Why...?" This doesn't have anything to do with divorce or anything. Trust me. This is applicable to everybody whether they're married or not married or divorced or not divorced or whatever. This is applicable to everyone.

So some of you may have heard me say in the past, I know I've said this — when I turned fifty, I looked in the mirror and I was like, “Why do I still feel like I'm a little girl? Why haven't I ever grown up? Why does everything still feel like I'm playing pretend, like I'm playing pretend grownup?” I really think it's because I was still, at that time, hanging on to this and leaning into this place of emotional childhood where we try to control our surroundings.

Now, when we're stuck in emotional childhood, that doesn't mean that we don't function as adults, because we do. I mean, we get married; we have kids; we become grandparents; we get a job; we make money; we purchase a car; we purchase a home; we make decisions. It also doesn't mean that we've having temper tantrums all day long. Most of us have gotten very skilled at holding in our emotions and keeping it together, at least on the outside, so that we can stay safe and sane.

But we still feel, inside, like we've kind of out of control. We have these strong, internal emotions when someone doesn't do things the way we think they should. We feel anxious about the future. And we second-guess ourselves, and we live with guilt and regret and self-deprecation. We expect perfection from ourselves, and when we fail, we feel hopeless and despairing and we give up. And we expect perfection from others, and when they fail, we get angry and shut down.

So let's talk about children again. Let's go back to the children. What are children like? Here's a list of things that children are like. Think about this now.

1. Children need help.

2. They look to adults for guidance. I want you to think about this in terms of yourself, because this is what I did. I actually thought about this. I thought, “I kind of feel like I need help all the time. I kind of feel like I look to adults for guidance. I look to my small group leaders for guidance. I look to my pastors for guidance. I look to the Bible study leader for guidance.”

3. Children think that they know more than they actually do know. I pretty much thought I knew everything. I mean, I wouldn't have said that, but I was a homeschooling mom, and I thought I was pretty good.

4. Children have very little ability to emotionally regulate themselves. Now, as grownups, we kind of learn how to do this, but sometimes we fall apart, especially when I was having arguments with my husband at the time. I had a very difficult time emotionally regulating myself, especially towards the end. I felt like I was going literally

insane, because I was still hanging on. I was doing that because I was still hanging on to the belief that he could and should change. As soon as I let go of that, I didn't have a problem with this anymore, once I let go of him and just let him be who he was.

5. Children have catastrophic thinking. They tend to think like if something goes wrong, everything is going wrong.

6. Children tend to be fearful of what they aren't sure about, what they don't know about.

7. Children have a hard time communicating clearly.

8. Children are unaware of their brain's programming. They're not aware of what they're thinking. They don't have that ability that we have as adults to look at our programming and make conscious decisions about whether or not we're going to keep it.

9. Children don't understand that their perspective is very limited and that there's a big world that they're unaware of. I think I was like that when I was in my church situation. I really thought that the church was everything, that it was the world. When they excommunicated me, it really felt like... I mean, I was beginning to get out of it by then, but at the time it kind of felt like, "Oh! My world just turned me out!" And then once I realized, once I thought about it, I was like, "Wait a minute. This is just one little church of a million. So the world has not turned me out. Just this one church turned me out, and that's really not that big of a deal."

10. Children are egocentric.

11. Children want things now – they don't like to wait for things.

12. They're highly reactive.

13. Children stick together in school cliques for protection.

14. Children blame others for their problems.

15. Children run away from chores and homework.

16. Children run towards snacks and treats and fun times.

17. Children are unable to plan for the future.

18. Children have a low threshold or tolerance for pain.

Now, if you asked one-hundred people who appeared upset, "Why are you upset?" they would almost always tell us something outside of themselves that is causing them to be upset. "I'm upset because he said this." "I'm upset because this thing happened." "I'm upset because whatever," — something outside of themselves. And when we believe that the things outside of us — our circumstances — are the cause of all our emotions, that leaves us with only one choice if we want to feel better, and that's to control our circumstances.

We think if we can control them, we will be happy. But that doesn't work, because we can't control other people. We can't always control our circumstances. Also, there's this underlying belief that children have and that we have... When I say this, I'm not trying to demean anybody. I'm putting myself right in there. And there are still, I still notice, I mean, I don't know how many times a week I notice, but I notice, "Natalie, you're having an emotional childhood moment here." And then I'll stop and go, "Okay, what am I believing? What am I thinking that's causing me to react this way?"

There's also this underlying belief that we're supposed to be happy all the time. Kids think that. They think that life owes them a living. "I'm supposed to be happy — you're supposed to always give me what I want." And that's not true. As we grow older and we grow in maturity, we realize that life is 50/50. Sometimes it's happy and sometimes it's not happy. Sometimes life is beautiful, and sometimes it's really, really, extraordinarily painful. Now, when we think about adults like the ones we know and respect, maybe adults we thought we'd be like when we grew up, then we will come up with a different list.

Now, when I was in college, I was a nanny for one of my English professors while she was writing her doctoral dissertation. She had just given birth to her second child and she was on maternity leave, so she hired me to take care of her children during the day so she could write. And I thought of her as an adult. Now, when I look back, she was only in her mid-thirties at the time, but even to this day I think of her like an adult. And I couldn't see myself that way until, you know, five years ago.

So here's how I would describe her and her husband as adults. They saw what they wanted and they went for it. They did not second-guess themselves. Now, maybe they did, but I didn't see this or notice this about either of them. They didn't make their decisions based on what other people thought. I had opportunities to watch their lives

for three months while I lived with them, and I didn't see that. I noticed that they respected the opinions of others, including me.

You guys, I was an uber-conservative college student, and they were so respectful of my hyper-patriarchal ideas, even while they tried to very gently and very kindly introduce me to others ways of thinking about things. I never heard them speak poorly of anyone. They were part of their church, but they were also their own people. They were self-aware and humble. We could have deep conversations and they were open to hearing me, and I was just a college student. They were not afraid of anything. They loved who they were. They loved their home and their life and their choices. They loved to learn. They recognized that there was so much to learn. They ran toward hard things in order to better themselves and their future. They enjoyed life.

I'll just give you a little example. She had the new Amy Grant album at the time, and I felt so guilty for listening to Satan-music, but they were so in love with Jesus and life and they were fine with that music, and I couldn't understand it. I couldn't figure it out. But I really wanted that kind of freedom. I wanted to know that God loved me even if I loved listening to Amy Grant. That's how sick my brain was because of my upbringing.

When things went wrong, they took it in stride. They were kind and patient. They never cared what I thought about their food or their schedule or their lives, and they had to know, you guys, they had to know that I was judging everything they did. They knew who they were and they just loved themselves, which is why they were able to love me so well.

Now, even though I was exposed to people who had self-leadership skills (because that's another word we can use to describe this emotional adulthood, is self-leadership), I continued to blindly choose my conservative, patriarchal views of life. And here's how my emotional childhood expressed itself.

1. Like a child, I believed things were black and white. There were good guys and there were bad guys, and I was going to be a good guy.

2. If I was a good guy, I would be loved and accepted. I needed my parents and my teachers and my peers to love and accept me. So I would carefully figure out what they were looking for, and then I would provide that for them. Teachers were looking for good grades and good behavior; my parents were looking for good behavior; my mom was looking for me to agree with everything she said; my peers were looking for the right clothes and being cool (of which I could not provide), but they were also looking for fun and a funny sense of humor and to be noticed, and I would provide that for

them. If I made them feel good about themselves, then they would hang out with me. If I did what they wanted me to do, then I noticed that they would want me around.

I would make my decisions and choices based on how I was gauging whether others around me would approve or not approve of me. When my mom would get mad at me, I would literally think, "My mom hates me, and I just want to die." And I really did. I wanted to die. I was in deep, emotional pain a lot of the time. If my family members were smack-talking someone, I would join in just so they would accept me. I followed all the church rules. I looked down on those who were dressed scantily or flamboyantly. I was critical of moms who put their kids in public school. I was critical of moms who did the un-schooling thing in the homeschooling circles or who didn't use the curriculum that I thought was best.

You guys, this is pretty ugly. I just want to be honest with you here about where I was coming from, okay? I was critical of families who had troubled kids. It was obviously a parenting issue. Oof. That was going to come back and bite me. I was critical of moms who nursed their babies around the clock. I had mine on a schedule, and they all slept through the night by three months. Towards the end I didn't do that, but that's what I did with the first six.

If something went wrong, I immediately felt shame, and then I quickly found a reason why it went wrong and it was always someone else's responsibility. I felt like I was trapped and had no choices. But do you guys see what I'm describing here is a cage of my own making? It was a cage that I built up in my mind based on my brain's programming. I felt like I had to have permission for everything. I couldn't make my own choices. I needed permission from my husband or permission from my pastor. I felt guilt and shame 24/7. That might be an exaggeration, but I felt it a lot.

I had this ideal self that I had to measure up to, and I felt that I was constantly failing at being that perfect wife and mother. I felt angry a lot. I felt sad a lot. I felt tremendous fear. I felt out of control. I felt vulnerable. I felt unloved. I felt unseen. I felt alone. And if I compared myself to that professor, I would have said that she was an adult because she had a nice husband and a nice house and two nice little kids. I would not have understood at that time that that professor was an adult because she took 100% full responsibility for her own adult life. She did not give her personal power or autonomy over to anyone else.

So in the Flying Higher program, I did this whole course on emotional adulthood, or self-leadership, because I believe that when we live into that, it not only changes our own lives, but it changes the world around us in very profound ways. And because I've

experienced living into more and more emotional adulthood and less and less emotional childhood, I have found myself feeling better, making better choices, having better relationships, and being more successful in different areas of my life.

Now, that doesn't mean that I don't still have the same problems. I do. I've got many of the same external circumstances. Some of those circumstances have also changed as a result of living into self-leadership. I am no longer married to my ex. I made a choice to get remarried to someone who was of a different religious affiliation than the one I grew up in.

But even with the ones I haven't been able to change, the circumstances that I haven't been able to change, I've been able to experience a level of success and satisfaction in my life that was, before now, totally unattainable. Where once I used to be critical of myself and others, I am now totally accepting of myself and others, for the most part. I'm still growing in this, but it has changed. It's a night and day difference.

Where once I had these expectations that others should help and accommodate me because "It was the polite and humane thing for people to do, and I did it for them, right? So now they owed me," well, I now expect others to do whatever they want. And I expect me to take care of me. Where once I used to expect friends to be the kind of friend that I strove to be, and I used to be internally upset when they didn't show up that way, I now just expect my friends to be who they are. I just take them wherever they're at. And I decide if I want to hang out with them or not. I literally have zero expectations. And also, I don't show up for them just so they'll show up for me anymore. I will only show up for them because that's who I've decided I want to be. I do it for me so I can live authentically aligned with my core values.

Where once I had to be liked and validated by other people, now I like and validate myself. And that's enough. Where once I needed my kids to be good and have good reputations in order for me to feel like a successful mother, eh. I'm now fine with my kids having problems, because I'm the mom who loves them no matter what. Where once I had to follow rules to feel like a good girl and a good Christian, now I just follow Jesus to feel empowered and loved.

Where once I used to cow-tow to my family of origin so they would like me, now I live without their drama in my life every day. Where once I looked down on Christian women who were not like me, I now really admire Christian women who are not like me, and I enjoy learning from all kinds. Where once I limited myself to certain books, certain authors, and teachers, I now learn from Christians and unbelievers alike, because I know now that all truth belongs to my Creator.

Now, there are some people who join the Flying Free program and when they work in that program, the main work is just to figure out what's going on in your Christian marriage, learn how to accept that reality, and then learn what you can and cannot do about that. These women will learn that sometimes their husband wasn't the man that they thought he was. And then they kind of have to rewire their brain in order to see their husband for who he has shown them that he is, based on his behavior. And once they do that, then they're able to make decisions from a place of knowledge and understanding instead of from this place of denial and fear.

Sometimes they learn that their husband is sort of off his rocker and he's not very normal. He's not living by the normal human rules of interaction and respectful, kind relationships. These women will learn that their husband did not respect their boundaries, that he believed that they and everyone around him should automatically believe what he believes and buy into his perspective on everything. And these women will learn that he was unable to relate to them or anyone unless those people agreed with him.

But guess what? We do the same thing, you guys, when we live in emotional childhood. We may not abuse people, but here's what we do: First of all, we interfere in the relationships and business of other people. We may not do it in a mean way. We might do it in the nicest and most well-meaning way. I mean, after all, we really are only trying to help our sister or our mother or our friend or our child, and if they would do what we think they should do, then their problems would be solved and they would have relief. They would be doing it right. And we get upset with them when they don't follow our kind and loving advice. And we get upset with ourselves for not getting through to them so that they can get help and feel better.

The second thing we do is we want others to have our point of view. We want others to believe what we believe about Jesus or vaccinations or presidents or masks or homosexuality or purity or church or divorce or parenting or all the things. And we get on Facebook to make sure that we are doing our part to convince others that our way is the right way. And sometimes we even use our experience as victims to drive our points home even further.

The third thing we do is we surround ourselves with people who agree with us, even if they are toxic. We'll take the toxic as long as we're on the same page about hell, rapture, and the great tribulation. We'll shut out healthy friendships even if they are totally open to your having your own opinions as long as you respect their right to have and keep theirs.

So in the Flying Higher program, which is for divorced women, I wanted to do this course on emotional adulthood because I believe there is a better way to live our lives. Living out of control doesn't feel good, and it doesn't go anywhere. And taking our life and doing something with it feels so much better, and it moves us forward.

We can learn that emotional adulthood is like a well-differentiated cell, with a cell membrane and a nucleus that has a purpose within itself. Every cell has a purpose. A healthy cell does not rely on anything outside of itself to function. But emotional childhood, on the other hand, is kind of like a virus cell that has no nucleus and no cell membrane. A virus cell requires the use of a healthy cell, so it will invade and use it for its purposes. It demands to enter into the boundaries of the healthy cell, and it will succeed to the extent that the healthy cell feels bad for it and allows it to enter.

Or emotional childhood, you could think of it like a cancer cell that has a membrane and a nucleus, but it wants to duplicate itself within a healthy cell. It wants the healthy cell to agree with it and buy into its perspective and its life so it can rule and control over the healthy cell and turn it into a cancer cell. We could even say that emotional childhood is like that healthy cell that feels bad for the virus cell or the cancer cell and lets them in when they come knocking. The healthy cell feels that it's her duty to allow the rogue cell to invade and use her. That's the Christian thing to do, right?

Well, I want to teach you how to be that healthy cell with a strong, protective outer membrane and a meaningful nucleus. A healthy cell that can join with other healthy cells to make up entire body organs that actually keep a body alive and functional. Emotional adulthood is like that. It is well-differentiated and also well-connected to other healthy cells. I believe that self-leadership will take you from flying to flying higher.

And there is so much more we could talk about with this, but if we go all the way back to the beginning with those questions about detaching, "I can't seem to be able to stop feeling responsible for him," "I've always felt a deep responsibility to fix or rescue everything broken in the world" — do you see how this is not the way to actually help ourselves or to help the world? We need to be able to do that detaching — and again, detaching is not saying, "I'm not going to think about you. I have no feelings for you. I'm just going to shut you out." It doesn't necessarily mean that, although it can mean that in extreme cases. We don't want to detach from our kids, for example, right? But we also don't want to get caught up in their emotional vortex.

I know you've probably experienced these moments as a parent where you do it right, and you walk away from a conversation and you're like, "Yes! Score! I did it right! I

stayed in my emotional adulthood, I did not let them draw me into their drama, and I was able to just maintain my own emotional stability in the face of their emotional instability. And at the same time, offering them support and love and all the things and just holding space for them to have their little hissy fit if they need to, but also holding space for myself to not get drawn into that.” That’s what I’m talking about. We can do that with other people.

If you want to learn more about how to do that, that’s basically what we do — we do coaching every week in Flying Free and Flying Higher, and that’s what we do in coaching. We learn different ways of looking at specific situations in our lives in order to learn how to respond to those situations from a place of emotional maturity and adulthood rather than the reactionary responses that we tend to have when we’re trying to control everything outside of ourselves and we’re not taking control of our own lives. So just another plug for the groups.

If you’re interested in joining, we’d love to have you. There’s an application process to get into both groups. If you’d like to learn more and apply for Flying Free, just go to joinflyingfree.com, and if you wanna learn more and apply to Flying Higher, just go to joinflyinghigher.com. I’d love to see you on the inside of those. And that is all I have for you today. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.