

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FIND YOURSELF AFTER GETTING OUT OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](https://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 173 of the Flying Free Podcast. Thank you for joining me for this episode today, and thank you for leaving a rating and review on Apple Podcasts when you're done. Those ratings and reviews are important for growing a podcast, and it's the listener's way of contributing to and supporting the podcast community. So I deeply appreciate those.

Today we're going to be answering a question about how to find ourselves after getting out of an abusive relationship. So let's listen to the question, and then we'll dive in.

LISTENER: Hi Natalie. Thank you so much for having this program. I'm currently in Flying Higher, and I'm struggling with finding myself and trusting myself. I've been married for twenty-nine years. I met my ex when I was fifteen, and I've poured myself into him. I am fifty now, and I completely have lost myself. I don't feel comfortable in my own skin anymore, and I don't trust anyone that comes into my area, I guess. Could you please help me?

NATALIE: So first of all, I want to say thank you for leaving this question. And by the way, if anyone else wants to leave a question, I have a little place where you can record in the show notes of any of our podcast episodes now. So you could go directly to this episode, for example, which is [flyingfreenow.com/173](https://flyingfreenow.com/173), and there's a little place where you can leave a question as well if you want to get a question answered. I don't answer all of them, but I try to pick questions that I think a lot of people are struggling with. And I think this is one of those questions.

So let's talk today about "What does it mean to find ourselves?" I think some people mean different things, right? It could mean we want to discover our purpose in life, it could mean that we want to find out why we were created. What's the point of being here on this earth? It could mean we want to find out what our gifts and talents are. Who are we? What were we created to do? What do we have to offer to this world? So let's talk about this a little bit more, because I think the idea or the phrase, "I just want to find myself," is somewhat of a cliché, and it's also very, very vague. And so because of that, because it's so vague, I don't think it's a helpful way to frame the problem that we're actually trying to solve. Whenever our brains ask us a very vague

question or present us with a vague problem, we're not really going to be able to find a solution. It's too vague; it's too general. And that's really exactly what the physical brain hopes for. It doesn't really want to change. Change is kind of scary and feels uncomfortable, so it's going to try to come up with excuses or make the problems very vague and general or very exaggerated or big or whatever so that we just either keep spinning in circles going nowhere or just completely shut down and just go, "Oh, it's too big of a problem. I just can't figure it out." Right?

Alright, so we need to be on to our brains and this little tactic that they have if we want to find real, solid answers. In order to find real, solid answers, we have to get very, very specific with ourselves about "What exactly is the problem?" We need to get specific with the problem in order to find a specific answer. So what are some different things that people might mean when they say, "I need to find myself"? Some people might be referring to finding a meaningful career. They might want to be able to say, "I am a doctor," "I am an IT specialist," "I am a third grade teacher." And that's how they find their identity. Some people, that's what they're talking about when they think that. Now, they may not even know that, but some people, that's what their brain is trying to do.

Other people might be referring to finding some things that they can love about themselves like, "I love my ability to connect with horses," for example. Or "I love my sense of humor and my ability to bring joy to the lives of others." And they think that if they could just find these things, these abilities and gifts and who they are and how they operate in the world, then they will have found themselves.

Other people might be referring to maybe a spiritual connection that they feel like they're missing. Other people might be referring to finding a purpose or meaning in life like, "I help teenagers who struggle with their grades" or "I help pet owners take a break and go on vacation and still know that their pet is going to be well-cared for" or "I help women start businesses."

And then another person, when they talk about finding themselves, they might be talking about finding out what they like or what they enjoy or maybe a hobby that will define how they see themselves like, "I am an artist," "I am a gardener," "I am a quilter," "I am an interior decorator."

So what this means, to find ourselves, is going to be different for everyone. If I was coaching this particular person, which, by the way, she said she's in Flying Higher. If you're in Flying Higher or Flying Free, you can get coaching every week. It's free — it's part of your tuition. If you don't know anything about that, if you want to find out more about how to join those programs, Flying Free is for Christian women who are married

or maybe separated from their partner or maybe they're going through a divorce but they're still legally married, and you can find out more about that program by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com). And then Flying Higher is for divorced Christian women. These are Christian women who are already divorced — they are no longer with their partner. And that is [joinflyinghigher.com](http://joinflyinghigher.com).

Okay, so here's what I'd have you do, though. I'm going to give this to all of you. If we were coaching, I'd dig into and find out what this particular person is actually meaning. I'd ask her questions and draw her out. But since this is for all of you, and you're all coming from different places, here's what I want you to do, or what you could do if you wanted to. You'd get your journal or a piece of paper out, and I want you to answer some specific questions. Ask your brain some very specific questions and then write down the answers:

"What about myself have I lost?" And just write. Write down anything that comes to your mind and answer that question. And get as very specific as you can.

Another question is, "How did I lose that part of myself?" And again, whatever you put in question one, "What about myself have I lost?" — let's say that you brainstormed maybe ten things that you feel like you've lost about yourself. Answer this second question for every single one of those ten things. "How did I lose this part of myself?" This is going to force your brain to start problem-solving instead of just making it this big, "I just lost myself." I say that out loud and immediately I'm just, like, overwhelmed. The thought just totally overwhelms me. So we want to get specific so we don't get quite so overwhelmed by this nebulous, sort of general thing.

The third question to ask yourself is, "What if being unsure about where I'm at right now in my life is actually a normal part of middle-age?" Now, this woman said she was fifty. I'm going to be fifty-six this year. Many of you guys are between forty and sixty years old. That's my general demographic. I do have several younger women and I do have several older women in my groups, but most of you guys are between the ages of forty and sixty, which we would consider to be middle-age. Did you know that this is actually a normal part of middle age as well? You could have a great marriage and still be struggling with this feeling of, "I can't figure out who I am." It's actually very, very normal. You're right on track for your human development.

But how does knowing this — write this down; really think about this — that you're normal and that you're right on track and there is absolutely nothing that's gone wrong here, how does knowing that change how you feel about this problem? Because here's the thing: When we think the thought, "I can't find myself; I don't know who I am," how

does that thought make us feel in our body? Do we feel panicked? Do we feel scared? Do we feel lost? Like, we can actually make ourselves feel lost just by thinking that. Do we feel desolate? Do we feel alone?

And then when you check in with your body... Close your eyes and think about where you're feeling that feeling in your body, and think about what you're exactly feeling. What do you do when your body is feeling those feelings? How do you show up in your life when you are in an emotional state of panic and fear? Are we able to think clearly and creatively and make good decisions from that place? Are we able to solve problems? Are we able to explore and create a new path forward? Not usually. Panic and fear cause the flight, fight, freeze, or fawn response. And those responses shut down our prefrontal cortex in our brain where we do all of our problem-solving and rational thinking and reasoning and creativity, and when this prefrontal cortex of our brain shuts down, we get stuck. And if we already believe that we are lost, we will continue to be lost, thereby proving to our brain that what it believes on a subconscious level is true, and round and round and round we go.

So we need to interrupt that thought. And we can't just jump from the thought, "I can't find myself," to "I've totally found myself." That doesn't work. The brain doesn't work that way. I mean, positive affirmations are great, but if our brain doesn't buy into them, then it's a waste of time. So what I like to do and what I teach my clients to do is to tweak their thoughts just a little bit. Because when we tweak a thought that we already believe, our brain will often come with us, follow us to just the little, tiny tweak. It'll go, "Yeah, that's true, I guess," and that's all we need to do to create a shift in ourselves.

We want to tweak this particular thought... There are a lot of thoughts that we might have that we're like, "You know, I like that thought. I'm going to keep that thought. I think it gives me some good results in my life." Probably most of our thoughts we want to keep. But this thought, "I'm lost and I can't find myself," I don't think that thought is really serving us. I mean, the result that we're getting when we think, "I can't find myself," is that we can't find ourselves. We can't move into our life. We can't find the life that we were destined for. We can't create the life that we want.

By the way, we don't find our lives — we create our lives. That's just another way of thinking about it too. That way it's much more empowering. If we think that we've lost something and we have to find it, then it's really kind of out of our control. Now we're just scrambling around playing hide-n-go-seek, and it feels very panicky and out of control. But if we think, "Well, I get to create my life. I'm in charge of creating my life," now that puts the power back on my shoulders and puts me in the driver's seat, and now I get to decide, "Where do I want to go?" Alright?

So, anyway, first of all, let's think about this. Really, I don't believe any of us are lost, actually. We're all exactly where we are supposed to be for this moment in our lives. Do you know how we know that? Because here we are. This is our reality. We are here, and none of us are lost. We are fully ourselves at all times. Now the only thing that might be lost is our ability to see ourselves. But that's not because we're not there or that we are lost — it's just because our brain, our physical brain, believes this thought: "I'm lost." We don't believe we're there, and we can't see what we don't believe.

So what if, when we notice our brain thinking... We just notice the thought: "Oh, there's that thought again, 'I can't find myself.'" What if we just interrupt that thought? Because we have the ability to actually observe our thoughts. It's crazy when you think about it. So what if we interrupt that thought and offer our brain this thought instead: "Well, maybe I don't need to find myself. Maybe I'm not lost. However, I do get the amazing opportunity to find, if I'm looking for something, I'm going to find out what I like and what I don't like, and maybe what I want to do in this year in 2022." Which, now that's going to date this whole podcast, right? So if it's 2023 or 2024, just insert the year that it is. But, "I just get to find out what I want to do this year, and I like that."

Here's another thought. Really, we could come up with hundreds of different tweak-thoughts, but I'm just going to offer you a couple. And this is what I do when I coach people in the program, by the way. People bring up problems that are very typical to survivors who are living with husbands who are problematic, who have issues, and they're imposing those issues on these women, and we come up with new ways of looking at the problems, and that's how we solve our problems. That's how we change our lives. It has to start in our brains with our thinking.

So here's another way to tweak this thought, "I can't find myself": "I can't wait to experiment with some different activities and see what I enjoy and what I don't enjoy. This is going to be an adventure." Now I'm going to give you an example from my own life of how I go about doing this. I'm actually looking into taking dance lessons this fall. I've always hated exercising. Raise your hand if you can relate. Since I got out of my abusive relationship nine years ago, I've experimented with all kinds of different exercise things. I've been a part of the YMCA... Or, not the YMCA; it was one other club, but it's like the YMCA. I've tried Jazzercise, I've tried pilates, I've tried walking, I've tried weight lifting, I've tried the elliptical and yoga. And I hated all of it. Except yoga — I actually still do fifteen minutes of yoga every night before I go to bed. But this year, I wanted to try dancing. Tap dancing specifically, because I always wanted to tap dance as a child, and my mom told me I was too naughty to take dance lessons, so I sort of like to shift that inner, shaming belief inside of me by re-parenting and healing that part of myself that grew up believing that I was this horrid child that deserved nothing good.

Here's another thing I've played around with, and I don't think I'm... I'm definitely not doing that this year, but maybe in my sixties I'll do this. But I loved the theater growing up. I loved going to plays and musicals. I was in some in high school and college. And I've played around with the idea of auditioning for a community play. I would love to do this with my daughters. But I'm not going to do that this year, but I keep that in my mind. I've kind of activated my reticular activating system in my mind — it's called your RAS, and it's there in the back. And someday I think I might do it. Who am I? Am I a person who does theater? Not right now, but maybe. Maybe I will be. I don't know.

I had a friend in college whose mother — she's passed away since then — but she was an older woman. If we were in college, she probably would have been my age, right? And she was very active in the community theater. I remember just admiring her and thinking, "Gosh, that'd be so much fun to do that when I'm older."

Anyway, here are some other things I've tried and totally failed at. I've tried playing the guitar. I've written some music. I'm not that great at either of those things, so I don't do it anymore. But it was fun to try. So I can't say, "I'm a guitar player" or "I'm a musician." I've learned how to quilt, I've made homemade cards for awhile — you know those Stampin' Up things? I learned how to make cold-processed soap and started a soap business that grew and grew and became lucrative, and then I sold it ten years later because I just didn't want to do it anymore.

So who am I? I'm so many things, and so are you. What if we're just a woman who loves to be alive? Who loves to learn? Who likes to try new things and is okay with failing, and hopes that sometimes a new thing might stick and become a new part of our lifestyle? I'm evolving, I hope, every single day, and this means that who I was last year is going to be very different from who I am today. And who I am today is going to be very different from who I will be next year. But I'm not lost, and neither are you. We are whole and complete and very much rooted in our being. And all that is left is for us to explore who we are, discover who we are, and enjoy the gifts that God gives to us, whether they are as simple as enjoying a cup of tea on the porch at sunset or as exciting as visiting a new country. But no matter where we are or what we're doing, there we are. We are not lost.

That's all I have for you today. Don't forget to leave a rating and review if you haven't already. It is so appreciated. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.