

IS SELF-CARE SELFISH, OR IS IT A SACRED DUTY?

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 19 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have Sarah McDugal of WildernessToWild.com. She's going to be talking with us about self-care. Welcome, Sarah. I'm going to tell them a bit about you, but first I want to say hello.

SARAH: Hi. I'm so glad to be here.

NATALIE: Thank you for joining us. Sarah McDugal is an author, speaker, and abuse recovery coach who works exclusively with female survivors of abuse in the faith community. She is talking directly to us. She offers online coaching for both groups and individuals, available internationally for women recovering from abuse. McDugal also conducts training events for churches and organizations on how to recognize and respond to abuse as well as inspirational events focused on God's love and healing for women and teen girls. I'm super excited for the topic today, because self-care is something that, typically, we as women of faith think is off limits for us because it's selfish. Self-care (it has the word "self" in it) is selfish because if we are taking care of ourselves, we are spending our precious time not taking care of other people, which is our job as Christian women, right?

SARAH: That's right. Totally. Or not.

NATALIE: Exactly. How do we reconcile that idea of selfishness? There are so many different questions we can ask about that, but why don't we dive in and have you tell us what you think about the idea of self-care being selfish. Or is it something we should be doing as Christians?

SARAH: I take the opposite approach, and I'll tell you that I'm the first to admit that I'm bad at taking my own advice. My approach is that self-care is not selfish, it is sacred. That may sound a little blasphemous if you are coming from a hardcore, faith-based, "avoid all things selfish" kind of mentality. I get that because I used to be a pastor's wife. Now I'm a single mom. I homeschool my kids. I'm an abuse recovery coach, and self-care is something that far too often in my own life gets relegated to wishful thinking. I'm not coming at this from the perspective of "Hey, I've got this all figured out. I'm doing this perfectly in my own life. I'm here to talk to all the peasants about how you

need to take better care of yourself.” This is not at all my perspective because I struggle with it.

When you’ve been through an abusive environment, an abusive marriage, or an abusive home, when you’ve survived that and you’re trying to be all things to all the little people in the house, your children, and when you take care, provide, protect, and all of those things, it can be really, really hard to place a premium on self-care. I’m right there in line with everyone else who struggles for it. I’m sure there are those ladies out there somewhere who are really good at doing all the self-pampering things, but do they really exist outside of TV shows? I don’t know any of them, personally. Then if you add in not just being a woman, but being a wife, a mother, or both, or a single-mom, and being a Christian... like you said in your introduction, Natalie, isn’t self-care selfish?

Because I realized I had to take better care of myself, I started studying more about this. There was a time when I had just recently become a single-parent and my kids and I were homeless. I stripped down everything we owned into a small storage unit because I couldn’t afford rent on the house that the lease was up for any longer. I had my car, a suitcase apiece for my children and myself, and a Tupperware container of Legos, dolls, and books for the kids. For almost four months we just traveled. I put thousands of miles on my vehicle and we went from friend to cousin to grandparent to sibling to friend, trying not to wear out our welcome in any one place for too long. Honestly, I thought that I was doing a pretty bang-up job of taking care of myself and keeping it together, figuring things out, volunteering, and keeping my cool. I lost about twenty-five pounds and my hair started to fall out, fistfuls and clumps of hair. I don’t spend a lot of time on myself. I’ll put a little makeup on if I’m doing a video podcast like when we were taping one earlier. The rest of the time I am totally happy in yoga pants and a tank top. I gussy up for pictures and video stuff, but the rest of the time I do not put a ton of effort or maintenance into things. But I really love my hair, so that was a wake-up call for me.

There are some things that can happen to your body or your brain and you don’t really care, but then there’s that something that you are really attached to and you say “Hey, wait a second! Don’t take my hair! You can’t have my hair!” At that point I realized I had to take better care of myself. “This is a thing I have to do. I’m the only sane parent my children have, so I must protect them. In order to protect them, I have to be here. So if I don’t take care of myself better than I am, I could get sick or something could happen. Then what will happen to my kids?” It was still a driving need to protect my children that motivated me to take better care of myself.

I don’t think we have to have that need, that motivation, scripturally. We should be able

to take care of ourselves because we are daughters of God, and God wants us to take good care of ourselves. But for me, I'm just being really honest, it was my kids' needs, needing to be able to take care of them and protect them, that drove me to finally be more aware of self-care. I began studying it. That's when I started realizing, (and we know we aren't just collections of cells and DNA) but our body is actually a holy place. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you and was given to you by God? You don't belong to yourself. God bought you with a high price, so you must honor God with your body."

Interestingly, that comes at the end of a passage that is talking about fleeing sexual sin, so that whole idea of your body being a temple of the Holy Spirit in many cases may very well apply to the abuser in your life who may or may not have been faithful sexually as well, that they should honor God with their body by remaining sexually faithful. But even though it's a part of that passage about sexual faithfulness, it is also something that I believe is a concept that stands alone for us as women. That is, first, that you are a temple. The temple is where God lives. Where God lives is a sacred place. That means that your physical body, your heart, your mind, your thoughts, your feelings, and your actions are a home for God's Holy Spirit. It also means that you don't own yourself. Yes, you are the boss of your body. Sometimes it takes us a long time to figure that out. You have a responsibility to make wise decisions because you have control over you in a human sense, but as a follower of Jesus, your body is His house because He died for us, because He paid the price for our existence, because He's the reason we're sucking air on this planet.

NATALIE: One of the ways we show Him honor is by honoring others, but also honoring ourselves.

SARAH: Yes! And because He has made us priceless as His daughters and we are worth that honor in His eyes, it also means we have a choice. Jesus doesn't force us to do anything. Only Satan forces us to do stuff, tricks us, deceives us, or pressures us. That means that because Jesus isn't going to force us to honor Him with our bodies, we have two reasons for it to be the best choice for us. One is because it's the natural response of a thankful, connected heart, and two is because God knows that making healthy choices is the best path towards happiness and wholeness for ourselves. Our physical, mental, and emotional health is super important to Jesus, and you can't serve others very well when you are burnt out and broken down.

Natalie, I don't know what ratio of our listeners today are single mommas versus mommas who are still living in abusive environments and haven't been able to get out yet. As a single momma, though, for me, one of the challenges I have is that it's really

hard to get away to do things to avoid getting burnt out. That is super hard. In order to be happy and healthy during the day, you need to sleep well at night. But when the kids go to bed, you just want to stay up for three hours of silent time. I had a friend who sent me a meme yesterday. It said, "You know who doesn't care about personal space? Kids. Kids don't care about personal space. They'd crawl right inside your eyeball if they could." I died laughing because of who sent it to me at 6:35 this morning.

Last night I was at my wits end. I sat both of my children down in my room because they wanted to sleep on my floor again, but I really love having my own private space in my room. There is always this juggling act. I sat them both down, and they are eight and nine, not two and three. They are plenty old enough to sleep in their own rooms. I said, "I've been grumpy tonight, and I need to explain something to you." I explained to them that Mommy needs private space just like they do also at times. Sometimes they want to go to their room and play without a sibling messing around with them. I get that. I help make sure they get that time. I need their help, because it's just the three of us in our house, to make sure that I get that time too. They are old enough to understand that. My oldest turned to me and said, "But Mommy, you don't understand. When you're a mother and a child has come out of your body, there is a magnetic tie back to you, and we just want to be wherever you are."

NATALIE: That is one precocious child. My goodness!

SARAH: Oh my word! That's my life, girl! He woke up this morning from his pallet on the floor of my room and he said, "Mommy, I just want to crawl up and read in my natural habitat." I asked, "Where is your natural habitat?" He said, "Right here on the floor with this big pile of blankets and all four hundred of my stuffed animals and the wind from the fan in my face in your room. That's my natural habitat." I said, "You are just too much for me sometimes."

NATALIE: That is awesome. That brings up a good point. I want you to talk about what self-care looks like practically speaking, because sometimes what that looks like will change depending on the circumstances of your life. Those circumstances are ever changing. You go through different seasons. For right now, even just for one night, self-care didn't look like you got the night off by yourself. Sometimes it will be different.

SARAH: Sometimes self-care means not being on your phone after the kids go to bed, scrolling Facebook mindlessly until 11:00 p.m. If you put them down at 7:30, just go to sleep with them. Sometimes you do whatever it takes to get extra rest even if that means the dishes don't get done. Sometimes self-care means taking a long, hot epsom bath. I'm a really low tech, low media mom, but once in a while a National Geographic

nature video is a lifesaver so that momma can go take a long, hot bath. Self-care can be making sure that I eat well so that I don't have a compromised immune system. My kids, instead of junk food... and I don't mean a four-course meal all the time. I mean extra veggies and skipping the sugar. Self-care can be, when I'm feeling down, not watching a TV show but instead turning on uplifting spiritual music or something encouraging and inspirational rather than vegging out like I want to.

Then the stuff that is going into my mind is transforming how I think instead of letting my brain play out a negative loop. So self-care is far broader than manicures and pedicures and massages, although those are lovely. But sometimes you don't have the money, the time, the babysitters, or the friends to meet up for a cup of coffee and do all the traditional Pinterest-worthy kinds of things. I want to talk about that more later, but I also want to point out a book.

The book "Your Sexually Addicted Spouse" by Dr. Barbara Steffens and Marsha Means is absolutely excellent. It talks about how a woman is more likely to develop long term health complications during the process of divorce or while living under abuse than at any other time in her life. Women who live with husbands who are cheating, addicted to pornography, are buying sexual services, or are having affairs are significantly more likely to develop chronic fatigue, insomnia, auto-immune issues, intestinal or digestive problems, and more. This even happens when the woman doesn't know her husband is cheating. She is living in it and isn't aware of it. So if you have been through any of that, there is a huge capacity in your body for inflammation and for needing to take seriously the post-trauma wellness. Functional wellness. I'm not talking about extraordinary things, I'm talking about functional wellness. A part of that shifts with realizing that taking good care of your body and mind is a sacred act of worship to God.

Like you said, Natalie, it's going to look different at all times. If you have five teenagers in the house, it is going to look different than if you have a couple of toddlers and a newborn. If you are single, juggling childcare, and providing and protecting, it will look way different than if you are living in an abusive environment and you don't have the space to breathe yet. But it is not selfish to take good care of yourself. It is sacred. It is holy. It is worship to God. Can self-care become selfish? Totally. Pick up a Cosmopolitan magazine and it will give you a list of self-care that sounds self serving, shallow, expensive, and impractical. You probably don't have time for that, and you probably don't have the money for that. I don't think that's what Paul was talking about when he said we have an obligation to take care of our bodies. Here are some alternatives to that self centered approach. Sacred acts of self-care are not about guilt, it's about permission. Here's a list of permissions:

- Giving yourself permission to not be everything to everyone.
- Giving yourself permission to slow down sometimes.
- Giving yourself permission to just sit and read.
- Giving yourself to just be mom instead of supermom.
- Giving yourself permission to say, "No, thank you."
- Giving yourself permission to take a nap instead of doing the dishes.
- Giving yourself permission to say yes when someone offers to help instead of letting pride get in the way and thinking that you don't need it.
- Giving yourself permission to set stronger, healthier boundaries.
- Here's my favorite, and it's a huge one: Giving yourself permission to carry only your own suitcase of emotional responsibility instead of carrying someone else's.

NATALIE: Oh yes! That is so important, especially for women who are living in abusive environments. Huge!

SARAH: Yes, because you've been conditioned to believe that their emotions are your responsibility. That suitcase has their name on it. Don't pick it up! Then get to the point where you don't feel guilty for not picking it up because you are at peace. That is their job. You carry your own baggage and nobody else's. Sacred self-care can look like some of these practical things. Prioritizing spiritual interaction so you can immerse yourself in some time with Jesus, and that might be having a podcast playing in the background while you are cooking dinner. You may not be able to sit down and spend an hour with your Bible like some really sanctimonious holy person is telling you that you should. In this season of life, it may mean waking up and playing a Bible reading while you are brushing your hair in the morning.

NATALIE: I did that! I did that for a long time. When I was separated and single-momming it with lots of kids and really suffering, I just played the Bible on my phone while I got ready in the morning and listened to Scripture. What I got out of it was different than when I used to dive in, study it, and meditate on it a little more, but at that point in time (again, we were talking about seasons before), that was really all I could handle.

SARAH: Exactly. There are a couple of things I want to throw out on this topic. If you are a momma, or an empty-nester, or someone without kids (I'm just saying mommas because I am personally thinking about that crazy, hectic time when you have kids and you are just juggling everything), if you are a woman who is struggling to prioritize spiritual interaction and you need things like immersion therapy that is gentle and healing, some things that I love are scripture lullabies. There are three albums called "Hidden in My Heart Scripture Lullabies."

NATALIE: I love those.

SARAH: I love those too!

NATALIE: In fact, I used to sell those. I had a soap business...

SARAH: No way!

NATALIE: I'm serious. I had a soap business, and I would sell those. Those were my "spa music." Get a bar of soap or some bath salts and listen to these lullabies. I love those!

SARAH: Girl, those kept me sane. There was a period for about a year and a half where they were on repeat almost constantly during waking moments. Taking that idea, one of the things I've done, and I have them on my YouTube channel called "Soothing Scripture Meditations" or something like that... most of the time when we hear the Bible or Scripture being read it is always in a male voice, right?

NATALIE: Yes.

SARAH: One of the things I have done as a free resource for women who need that immersion therapy of spiritual interaction is to create a half a dozen Scripture readings that are uplifting and encouraging. I usually adapt them to be in first person as if it is God speaking to His daughters.

NATALIE: I would love that! You've got to send me a link so I can put that in the show notes.

SARAH: Absolutely! I'll be happy to do that. I have a playlist of those on my YouTube channel, and I know women who fall asleep to them every night. It's gentle, original music in the background. One of them is like nineteen minutes long, so it's long enough for you to really fall asleep. The others are seven to twelve minutes long. They are nice devotional links. The whole point is that one of the things that we do that is destructive to ourselves is that negative self talk, that loop, that plays over and over. "I'm so stupid. I can't do it right. This is never going to change." All those things that we tell ourselves. The only way to change that is to tell ourselves what God says.

A huge part, to me, of sacred self-care is replacing that negative mental soundtrack with God's truth about who you are as His daughter. The best way to do that is to put Scripture in your mind. Sometimes osmosis is the only way to get about it. Just have it playing in the background. It will help your kids, too, because they are suffering like you

are. If you have kids, playing Scripture in the background can only be a positive thing for them, too. I'll give you links for the show notes. It's a totally free resource, and every now and again when I get time, I add more to them. What else can sacred self-care look like?

- Getting on the floor and wrestling with your kids just to hear them giggle because there is something so healing about the laughter of children and they will love wrestling with momma.
- Leave the laundry to fold tomorrow, go take a hot bath, and go to bed early.
- Prioritize what matters most instead of what is in front of you.
- Keep your immune system strong when you are going through emotional trauma. Sometimes sacred self-care is simply eating when you are so stressed that you have lost your appetite and you don't feel like eating. Eat a smoothie, something to keep your blood sugar up.
- The last two things are being intentional to tell yourself the truth about who you are in Jesus to silence the lies that your abusers have told you. Choose to purposefully break any internal agreements that you have made with those lies when you start repeating them to yourself so that you are not reliving them anymore.

But the core principle of sacred self-care, holy self-care, is not about guilt. It's not about, "I have to do this for myself." It's about permission. "I give myself permission to do this." Permission to leave the dishes, permission to leave the laundry, or permission to take a nap instead of forcing yourself on things. It's important to start small. Don't think you are going to do all these things. Just do little bits at a time, permission for one thing a day, being aware of your thoughts and making emotional and spiritual wellness a top priority. That means going to a good counselor, joining a free coaching group, surrounding yourself with supportive peers who get it. Honestly, if you are surrounded by a bunch of people in your faith community that are blaming you and shifting blame from your abuser to you for what you've been through, that is going to be negatively impacting your self-care. Find a good, faith-driven support group that gets it. When I started learning this, it blew my mind. I have absolutely no pretense of being great and amazing at it yet. It might take me a lifetime. But the idea that taking care of myself as a woman and a mother was part of being faithful in my worship to God was so important to me. It was so foreign to me that I felt it was important to share with others, so that's why I started studying it out because I wanted others to find that freedom, too.

NATALIE: These have been excellent. It's funny because self-care is something I talk about, too. For those of you listening, we just came off of a workshop recording for members in the private Flying Free Membership Group. Sarah talked about forgiveness, and there were so many powerful, eye-opening moments for me, personally, while she

was talking. I passed that along to the members of Flying Free. You can apply for that group any time for those of you who are listening who are wondering what I'm talking about. I'll put a link in the notes. But now I feel like you've shared things in a new way even for me in thinking about self-care as sacred. I had never really thought about that before, but it's true. That resonates with me. I hope that is a takeaway for most of you, that you can walk away knowing that self-care is a sacred responsibility for ourselves. Also, I think you were going to talk about a self-care challenge that you have. Can you tell us about that?

SARAH: Yes! When I did my self-care webinar for my audience of survivors, thrivers, and victims who've become warriors, one of the things we did was develop a twenty-one day self-care challenge where you get an email every day for something saying, "Here's your self-care challenge for today. Just do this one thing." It takes twenty-one days to make a habit, right? So the whole idea is to shift your train of thought and for the habit to develop for twenty-one days to become more comfortable with the idea of doing little things to take better care of yourself in glory to God. I will give you that link for the show notes. I'd love for any of your women who are interested to join us for that twenty-one days sacred self-care challenge. I'm going to open that up to your women special for this podcast. [Currently, this course is no longer running. However, Sarah has similar courses available on her website.]

NATALIE: That sounds wonderful. Some of you may already know Sarah McDugal, but for those of you who don't, you can check out more about her on her website at WildernessToWild.com. She is a powerhouse, and she has tons of great resources. She's definitely someone you are going to want to follow. She's super smart. She has experience. She was a pastor's wife, now divorced. She has experienced spiritual abuse, sexual abuse...

SARAH: All the stuff.

NATALIE: She's experienced in everything. She knows what she's talking about and she's done a lot of healing. She's incredible. We were talking in the workshop. She is like a preacher, man. Not man! She's a preacher woman! She's amazing. I hope that you will check out her stuff. I think we're done.

SARAH: Thanks for joining us on that challenge. I want to know how it helps you. Like you were saying, if you want to connect on Facebook or the website and you have something that sparked thoughts from this podcast or the other workshop, message me. It may take me a couple of days, but I will always try to get back to my messages. I'd love to hear from you if it has helped you somehow.

NATALIE: Fabulous. Thank you so much for joining us, Sarah. For the rest of you, fly free!