

HOW FAR SHOULD I GO TO GIVE MY EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE HUSBAND A CHANCE TO CHANGE?

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 196 of the Flying Free Podcast. We're gonna dive right into our first listener question, so here we go.

LISTENER: I have been in an abusive marriage for twelve years and have gone as far as to hire a lawyer, was beginning to start proceedings, when he finally came to me on his own, said he would do counseling, because of course he always would say, "No, no, no" — there was nothing wrong with him.

So my question is this: I was feeling kind of free knowing I was gonna be divorced, I mean, almost like I saw light at the end of the tunnel — it was coming. Now that I have made the choice to give him the opportunity to go to counseling, I'm feeling confused, scared, anxious, all of that all over again. And knowing it's gonna be a very long road ahead, I'm doubting and questioning whether or not I have made the right choice. But at the same time, I know that if I don't try the counseling, I'll feel like I didn't do everything I could. I'm very, very much struggling with this. And do you have any advice? Thank you.

NATALIE: First of all, notice right off the bat who is taking responsibility in this relationship. Do you guys see this? I mean, you might be tempted to think that it's the husband. After all, he just said he was gonna go to counseling now. At long last he's taking responsibility, right? Wrong. In this story, the wife is still taking the responsibility. She believes that it's her responsibility to do everything she can — these are her words — to make sure the marriage had every chance that it could have.

She's already given this marriage twelve years, and for twelve years this guy wasn't interested in taking responsibility or going to counseling or getting help. But now that she's filed for divorce, he's suddenly interested. Of course he is. The vast majority of abusers are very interested in counseling once their wife of sometimes decades has finally decided to pull the plug on the marriage and be done. It's this amazing, miraculous thing that comes over them in that moment. Why do you think that is? Is it really an amazing, magical thing?

I'm gonna give you an analogy. Let's say that you're a mom and your ten-year-old child

doesn't wanna do his homework. It's this big power struggle every night after school (guess where I got this story from), and you don't know what to do. You notice that this child enjoys playing on his iPad when he gets home from school. So you decide to let him know that you will be taking his iPad away if he doesn't do his homework. So the next day he comes home from school and he gets on his iPad without doing his homework, and you quietly go over and take the iPad away and say, "You can't have the iPad until your homework is finished, dear."

And he maybe throws a snit fit at first, but after he's had some time to weigh out the situation, he decides to do his homework. Why? Because he is suddenly internally motivated to take responsibility? Because he has suddenly transformed into a responsible human? Nope. He's doing his homework so we can get his iPad back.

What if this same child came home from school every single day and got on his iPad, and you said, "Hey, I'm gonna have to take your iPad away if you don't do your homework first," and the child said, "Oh, no worries mom. I'll do my homework, I promise. You don't need to take my iPad away," but then he didn't do his homework? How many days of this would need to go by before we decided that this wasn't working and that his promises to do his homework didn't really mean anything? Or maybe what if every three or four days or so he actually would do his homework, you know, just to kind of string you along and give you hope and make you think that he was getting the point, but then most of the time he just said he would so that he could keep playing on the iPad?

Yeah — this is similar to what we're dealing with when it comes to our abusive husband. He is losing his iPad (that's you) and he wants it back, so he's just negotiating. "I'll go to counseling if you come back and be a good wife who gives me sex and does my laundry again." I mean, he'd rather have the maid and sex service for free, but if he can't get it that way, why, he'll invest in a little therapy session or two if it'll get you to give up all this talk about taking his iPad away.

Now, we know that our child has matured when we no longer have to threaten to take away the iPad to get him to do his homework. Once he has grown and developed emotionally, he will be intrinsically motivated to take personal responsibility for his homework and his grades, and you will no longer have to use an external incentive — that is, if the child matures in that way.

But abusers are grown-ups who, for whatever reason, never developed emotional intelligence. They are not intrinsically motivated to take responsibility. They rely heavily on other people around them or external circumstances doing that for them. They rely

on others to cooperate and do what they want them to do to make them feel good. And of course, nobody can actually do that successfully 100% of the time for anybody else, including a spouse. So then what abusers do is they just abuse their partner in order to force them to be the person that the abuser wants them to be.

Now, if the victim is also relying on others to make her feel good, then she will believe that the best way to do that is not to abuse people, but to do whatever everyone else tells her to. Do you see this? Abusers tend to be entitled, selfish little pricks (sorry for the French, but they are), and victims tend to be people pleasers.

There's not much hope for abusers, because to change, you have to be willing to look yourself in the mirror and be wrong about things. And abusers are never wrong. They can't be wrong. There is a ton of hope for victims, though, because they tend to look at themselves in the mirror all the time and think that there is already something wrong with themselves, and this actually ends up working in their favor by giving them the insight that they eventually need to change. They are gonna be more willing than the abuser to say, "I could be wrong about this." And that is why they, the survivor, are most likely to change.

But look out: If you are an abuser of a victim who decides that she is wrong, guess what? She may realize one day that she has been wrong about you. She thought you could change, but now she's starting to see that you won't. And that means she will change in a way that enables her to one day leave a stubborn, unchangeable, abusive man behind.

So back to this particular listener's question. She's second-guessing her decision to give him another chance after already giving him twelve years of chances. I wonder how many opportunities this man had every day of every week of every month of every single one of those twelve years to simply take personal, adult responsibility for his behavior and be a committed, loving, kind, respectful partner. I'm guessing at least a few thousand, and this, my friends, is why she is second-guessing herself.

Her body knows what she has already invested in this relationship, and she had already decided to be done, so now her body is being yanked back into this abuse cycle, and her body's protesting. That's why she has all of this second-guessing and all these doubts. Her body is not feeling good about this. That's why.

Yeah, it's gonna be a long road ahead going through this now. Just as long of a road ahead as the road that she has already traveled, and possibly longer. But I just wanna offer this woman and all of you that you are driving the car of your life, and guess what

you can do with a car? You can actually do a U-turn or you can actually take a right or a left. You don't have to stay on the same road when you are the driver of a car.

You can say, "Whoops, made a mistake. I guess I am done with this relationship. I love that you're getting therapy, because that's gonna serve you and your life, and I care about you and your future, but I also care about me and my future, and you're not in it. I'm not going to spend any more years waiting and hoping for you to change. I'm gonna focus on my own change, and I'm going to do that in a safe, abuse-free space. Who knows? Maybe if you do your work and I do mine, we might end up getting back together again someday. I don't know. But if that happens, it will happen because we did our own work apart from one another."

Now that's something that you could say to him if you wanted to. I'm not telling you that you have to. I don't wanna tell you what to do. I'll tell you this, though. I gave my ex twenty-three years of chances, and the last four years of those twenty-three years, I made it clear that I was gonna leave him if he didn't do his work. And I allowed myself to get yanked around by him, by elders at our church, and by my family. And then I decided I was going to take back the wheel of the car of my life and drive that car myself. After all, God gave this life to me. He didn't give it to anyone else, and nobody was threatening me except people. God was not threatening me, but of course people were because they wanted to control my story. You guys, that's just inappropriate. I decided that they could want and want and want to control the story of my life until the cows came home, but I wasn't gonna let them do it anymore. Ooh, that makes religious folks mad.

It doesn't make God mad though. God was cheering me on, and I could feel that in my bones. So I want you to know that if you decide to give your husband a few more years of your life, I get it. I did too. I wanted to know for sure before I pulled that plug. And I did. I knew for sure when the time came. There is no shame in waiting for yourself to be ready for that, but just know that there's also no shame in pulling the plug or changing your mind after saying that you'd give him another chance.

Now, this question came in several weeks ago, so I'm guessing that if you are the one who sent in the question, you've probably had a few more weeks under your belt to see just how well your man is doing jumping through that hoop. It usually just takes a few weeks for the mask to come off again. Now, some guys can wear the mask longer and better than others, but it always eventually comes off, and then you can decide where you wanna go from there.

Before we go into our next question, I wanna read a review that came in from a woman

who has been in the Flying Free program for two years. She says this — and I took out all of the things that might indicate who she is, so you'll never guess who she is. I don't even remember who she is because I wrote this down a long time ago. But anyway, she wrote this:

“I joined Flying Free two years ago. I was looking for support for women who are caregivers, and the internet sent me this link. I tentatively joined with little hope. I worked a lot. I didn't have time to attend coaching. I tried printing the sessions once and didn't realize that the printer was out of paper. Later, when my unemployed husband printed something on my printer, I found the last two pages of the workbook on my computer. I felt vulnerable, scared and hopeless.”

(So far, are you really excited about the Flying Free group? I know, right?) “Along the way, I learned that I could listen to the coaching calls even while I wasn't present at the coaching calls.” (That's because all the replays are on a private podcast.) “This really started to open my thinking. I attended a monthly Sister Gathering and was asked what my five-year plans were. All I could do was cry. I couldn't plan for five years. I was just hoping a truck would run over me to end my grief and hopelessness.

You see, the marriage had been dysfunctional from day one — while we were dating, even. I had tried to end it multiple times before we married, but he always convinced me that I was wrong. I had misinterpreted what he said. He hadn't meant to hurt me. The conversations took hours. He repeated himself ad nauseum. Later when we were married, if I repeated myself even once, he would tell me I was nagging. He was emotionally abusive to our children. He was controlling. He raged. What he didn't do was look at porn or have an affair. I thought those were my only tickets out, so I despaired.

Then, he stopped working. He asked for two years, which I willingly gave. We had the money. Two turned into twenty. All our savings were gone. All our retirement was gone. He was always having some medical crisis, which meant he could never get a job. So I worked and worked and worked. I grew more and more hopeless until I found Flying Free.

The coaching, as I mentioned, started changing my thinking. I started running models. I took notes on the lessons in my journal, which I kept with me at work. I would go in earlier than I was allowed to sit in a dark parking lot and listen to lessons, coaching, or podcasts, and my thinking changed. I realized that I was not responsible for his feelings, outcomes, or happiness. He was. His thoughts create his results. My thoughts create my results. If I wanted a different result than bitching about my unhappy marriage to

my friends, I needed a different thought. So I found one.

After sixteen months, I had a plan. I had spoken to a counselor a couple of times. I met with three divorce attorneys, and I chose one. I got an apartment, a credit card in my own name, and a second job that I had been working for a year created a small nest egg to launch my new life.”

Notice how she... First of all, it started with her changing her thoughts. Actually, first of all, it started with her giving this program a chance. There's a small percentage of people who join the program and don't do anything with it, and then after a month they just drop out, probably because they feel like she felt like, like, “I can't do this. This is overwhelming, and I just wish I was dead.” But she didn't give up. She kept going and she started doing that personal work herself. She started carving out time for herself and doing this work, and it changed her brain. And when her brain changed, that's when she started thinking more creatively and got curious about what she could do to get herself out. That's when she started taking action and doing the things that created a completely different result for her life.

This is not an isolated testimony, by the way. This is the norm for people who go through Flying Free. This is what the vast majority of people, the results that they're getting who are actually coming in and doing this work, okay? And not everyone is doing it quickly. Well, this person took two years, okay? So I'm not saying that everyone has to come in and do this right away, but there are some people who come in and three months later, they're like, “I'm ready. I can't even believe this. I can't believe how I've grown and changed just in three months.”

But it doesn't really matter. The time that it takes doesn't really matter. The point is that you're actually moving forward in some way, all right? Even a snail moving still moves. That's all it takes — just putting one foot in front of the other. Anyways, she ends by saying, “In January I told him I was done. I left that night for my own apartment, which I had furnished with a coffee pot, cream, and an air mattress. And I moved out that weekend. My divorce was final this past spring. I got a new job that is remote so I can leave the expensive area I used to live in, and I've put in an offer on a small house.”

So I was really excited when I read that. And I thought, “That's a testimony that I would like to read for the podcast.” I hear stories like this all the time. I actually have a file with literally hundreds of testimonies and I just have a handful of them up on the website, and then once in a while I'll share one here. But that's the norm.

And I'd love to have any of you, if you are ready for this, I'd love to have you join us. All

you have to do is go to joinflyingfree.com and you'll get the whole skinny on the program. We make it very affordable. It's only \$29 a month for something that... I don't know about you, but I used to pay \$150 a pop for counseling. And if I went to counseling every week in a month, that's \$600 for a month for four hours of sitting and talking to somebody. Now, I love therapy, and there are actually amazing counselors and therapists who recommend my book and my program, and they do it in conjunction with their clients so their client actually has someone personal that they can talk through and process the things that they're learning with, and I think that makes a really ideal situation. So don't get me wrong — we love our counselors and our therapists, all right?

And incidentally, there are a lot of counselors and therapists in the program too. My theory is that people helpers, we tend to get caught up in helping these kinds of men. We feel bad for them. We wanna help them. We end up marrying one of them, thinking that we can help this person and be like the wind beneath their wings. And so that's why a lot of people, helper types — teachers, counselors, doctors — we tend to end up in abusive relationships often times where people take advantage of us.

So anyways, I wanted to share that with you. Let's go on to the next question, okay? And this next question is very similar to the first one, so there's kind of a theme to this episode, so let's listen.

LISTENER: Hi there. I just listened to this podcast. Thank you so much for it. There's a lot that I'm trying to navigate and understand, and I can relate so much to this message of trying to fix my husband, trying to provide resources for him, basically giving him an ultimatum: "If we don't go to counseling, then we're done." This stuff in our marriage has been going on for years and years. So I'm confused a little bit. So we can't force them to change, which I get, but how far do we go? I don't feel right just sitting back and saying, "This makes me unhappy." If I don't suggest counseling, if I don't suggest resources, I just feel like... I don't know — I don't know what I feel like. But I don't really know what to do. How do I get the message across that if this continues, I'm done, because there's partnership, right? And if we support each other, we should be providing ideas and suggestions in my mind. But maybe that's just me people pleasing? Anyway, I'd love some feedback.

NATALIE: So the question on the surface is, "How do I get this message across that if this continues, I can't do this marriage anymore?" But I think the question under that is this part of her inside that's asking, "How do I get my husband to change so this no longer continues, and then I can stay in the marriage and we don't have to end this whole thing?" Because I remember feeling like that. I was like, "I don't wanna get

divorced. I've never wanted that." So that's really what it is. And she understands that we can't get our partners to change — she made that clear at the beginning — but there are other parts inside of her that actually don't understand that. Do we see this?

I mean, have you ever felt like you were conflicted inside like this, like part of you was rational and could see things pretty clearly, but then there were other parts of you that were still very confused and upset and uncertain and scared? Yeah. That's all totally normal. That's because we actually are made up of many different parts. We're gonna actually talk about that in some upcoming episodes, but for now, just understand that all of this is very normal.

She wants to know how to get across her message, but my question for her would be, haven't you already tried communicating this message in dozens of different ways and times already? I mean, I remember thinking that if I could just hit on the right inflection in my voice maybe or the correct tone or the perfect combination of words or the right attitude — you know, one of subservience and humility so as not to trigger his fragile ego and bring down his wrath. But nothing I tried worked, and trust me, I tried it all. If my words had anything to do with even remotely implying in the slightest that he might have made a mistake or done something wrong in any way, I would be sure to pay for it with accusations of being a horrible human being for making things up in my head, a horrible human being for nagging, for being mean, a horrible human being for being ungrateful, and on and on, and. So it would get turned back on me.

Have you ever heard of the DARVO reaction? If you try to give feedback to an abuser, they will DARVO you? So the "D" stands for "deny" — they'll deny it. The "A" stands for "attack" — they'll attack you. And then the "RVO" stands for "reverse 'victim' and 'offender.'" That just means that we're gonna put the victim in the offender role and we're gonna put the offender in the victim role. So in other words, you will become the abuser and they will play the role of the victim. This is crazy-making at its best, and this was the story of my life. I mean, I should have just called myself Natalie Darvo. If I had known what DARVO was, I would have, but I didn't find that out until after I was divorced, so now you all have a leg up on me.

So back to getting our message across. You've already done that, I'm gonna just assume — pretty sure. But it takes two people to communicate effectively. You can send a message, but if there's a broken receptor on the other end, the message will not be received. It will not get across, and there isn't anything you can do about that. So my suggestion is that you take responsibility for your part of the communication effort, send your message, provide your ideas and suggestions, and then be done with it. If he responds and changes, amazing. Marriage saved and crisis averted. If he doesn't, then

at least you know you did your part.

But I know what you're terrified will happen, okay? That's that he will be who he is and he won't change. You are afraid that you married a duck, because your man can only quack. You thought you married a cat, but he only quacks, and you don't want to admit that he's quacking because he's a duck. We're sort of holding out hope that he might be able to learn how to meow if we teach him in just the right way. Maybe it's our fault he quacks, but I promise you it's not. That's just who he is. And the sooner we accept that, the sooner we can then make a decision based on that reality instead of based on magical thinking.

Probably not the answer you were looking for. And it's true that there are rare exceptions to what I'm saying, so rare that I'm confident in saying these things over and over and over again, and I do. And I also know that everyone listening who is still hoping for a miracle is also thinking, "Mine could be the exception." How do I know that? Because I did that. I believed that. I read dozens of books and I still believed that until something inside me broke one day, and then I knew. That break turned a light bulb on in my brain, and all my parts inside, even the very most skeptical ones, they were finally on board. They finally got it, and that changed everything.

See? No change on his part. Just a big whopper on mine. It's funny, because my daughter recently told me that her dad told her that I was just a woman who was stuck. I couldn't move forward in my life. Isn't that fascinating? I mean, I've gotten divorced, remarried, I've written a book, I started a business — I've changed in a million ways over the course of the last ten years, but he is, to this day, projecting his own universe onto mine. Quack quack.

So how far do we go to give them a chance? That's up to you. How far do you wanna go? Or you could ask a different question: How far do we want to go to give ourselves a chance at a normal life? Your answer to that question is far more important as far as what will ultimately move the dial in your life and get you unstuck.

And again, if you wanna deep dive into this personal growth, work with me. Check out joinflyingfree.com for more information. You guys, that's all I have for you this week. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.