

CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS WHEN LIFE IS BLOWING UP - PART ONE

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 201 of the Flying Free Podcast. It's the most wonderful time of the year — not. Not for everyone. This is the time of the year where there are so many mixed emotions. Memories brought on by familiar music and smells that date back to our childhoods, and many of those memories are bittersweet. I remember one December when I was eleven years old, and a little girl in our elementary school was run over by her bus. She had dropped a school paper and it blew under the bus as she got off, so she crawled under the bus to get it. And the kids all watched her get crushed under the wheels when it drove away, and I will never forget that Christmas. I wasn't there. I just heard about it, but one of my best friends was on the bus when it happened.

I remember staring at the Christmas tree at night. I would just sit on this chair and just stare at the Christmas tree, and I knew Christmas was never going to be the same for me, and it never was. A Christmas does not go by that I don't remember that. The magic and the beauty was gone. And it was replaced with this horrible reality at eleven years old that terrifying things can happen in this world. And since that time, I've learned that there are other ways, a million other ways, for the holidays to be a mix of magic and pain.

So I want to talk about Christmas related questions that you might have. For the next two weeks we're going to do this. I asked the women in my private Flying Free community — I got over there in the forum and I just said, "Hey, tell me what you want me to talk about during the season." So I got a bunch of questions from them and I'm going to answer their questions, all right? So here we go.

The first question is this: "Since life didn't turn out the way I envisioned, the holiday season is a time of grieving. What are some ways to honor the clean pain associated with loss but leave room for joy and happiness at the same time?" So first of all, when she's referring to clean pain, she's talking about something we talk about in my program. This is the normal pain that we can expect to feel when we've lost something that we love, whether we've lost a loved one, a home, security, a church family, our health, or, if we're talking about Christmas, it might be our ability to get everyone together at one time, or maybe afford to do a tradition that we've done in the past

that's more expensive than what we can afford this year. Or maybe if you're separated, you might be spending either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day alone because your kids are at their dad's house. There is pain associated with all of these things. This is the normal, deep pain that comes from loss, but we call this clean pain. It's clean because it's normative. It's to be expected when something like this happens. We can't do anything about it other than sit with it and process through it.

Now dirty pain, on the other hand, is the pain that comes when we are fighting or resisting that reality. So let's give an example here. Let's say that you invite all of your kids over, and one of them, or maybe several of them, can't come. Clean pain will hit you. But if you fight that reality by thinking some version of, "It should not be this way. This is not fair," or "I must have done something wrong," or "They're doing something wrong," those kinds of thoughts are going to create dirty pain, and then we layer that dirty pain on top of the clean pain that we already have. Now, I'm all in on clean pain, but dirty pain is unnecessary and it only makes it worse. We can't stop clean pain, but we do have control over dirty pain through our thoughts. Plus, when we accept clean pain, we discover that joy and happiness can actually coexist with clean pain, but they cannot coexist with dirty pain.

So I think the key to experiencing joy and happiness during the holidays when we are also in a lot of clean pain over loss is to, first of all, drop all expectations of how the holidays are supposed to be in our mind. Do you know that we just make that up anyway, those holiday rules about how it's supposed to be? It's really just what we decided based on our upbringing and maybe long held traditions that we've always done. But it's not a fact that the holidays are supposed to be that way. That's maybe the way we want them to be, but I would drop the idea that the holidays are supposed to be a certain way, because when you do that, when you drop those expectations, then you can embrace and enjoy the holidays as they actually are.

Again, this is about accepting reality and leaning into it and sitting with it instead of fighting it. I mean, you can keep fighting it if you want to, but just know that you will have a ton of dirty pain, and the holidays will go by in a flash and they will leave you wretched inside. And I just think there's another way. So dropping all expectations is going to be your first step to being able to potentially experience joy and happiness alongside of the clean pain of loss.

Step two, though, is to stay present. This is hard during the holidays, because our brain is so taken back into the past due to all of the sensory experiences that have created these superhighway connections in our brains to literally millions of big and small memories. I mean, I can hear "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" on the radio and

immediately be taken back to the back seat of my dad's station wagon where I'm staring out the window at the falling snow on the way up to my grandma's house. And that memory will branch off into a thousand more that splinter my heart into a million pieces.

And I'm suddenly lost in pain while my ten and twelve-year-old boys right here in the present are decorating the Christmas tree with me. And I could be enjoying their banter and their precious presence in my life right now, but instead I'm lost in a wave of nostalgia and memory and feeling that sweeps me away from the present and what is important to me in this moment here, now. And the tragic thing is that the past is gone. I can't ever get that back anyways, but I do have this moment here. So what do I want to intentionally do with this moment I have here? Do I want to waste it in a lost memory, or do I want to use it to make a new memory?

So what I recommend is using your alone time when you're not with your kids or you're not with your loved ones to sit and be with the sadness. Use that time to be sad. I'm all for putting on the Christmas albums and crying and processing and being present with your pain. In fact, when you take time to do that on your own, then I think you'll be more available to be present with your kids or other loved ones and coworkers or other people that you enjoy being around when you are doing things with them during the holiday season.

All right, another question that came in was, "How do I not let my husband's bad humor affect me?" So my suggestion is actually the same. Just let go of trying to control what he does or how he shows up. There is a clean pain when our husband is being cranky or nasty, right? We're all going to have some clean pain about that when he doesn't want to listen to Christmas music or he whines about the plan, but we layer dirty pain on top of that when we make his behavior mean, "Oh no, he's ruining Christmas," or "Oh no, am I supposed to make him happy? Should I feel guilty when I play Christmas music and he doesn't like it?"

What if instead we could just let him have the Christmas he wants to have? He wants to pout and be cranky and wants to control all the things, so let him. What if we decided to get our focus off of him and his cranky attitude and and focus on the Christmas that we want to have so that when he's giving us the silent treatment because we're playing Christmas music and he doesn't like Christmas music, we can maybe have the thought (or some version of this), "Okay. He wants to have that kind of experience. I will give him permission to be who he is, but I will also give myself permission to enjoy my kids and this music." And then just focus on that.

The problem comes when we persevere on him and his bad attitude, and we think, "It's not fair. He shouldn't be this way. He should be happy. He should be nice. And if he's not, maybe it's my fault and maybe it's my problem and maybe I'm the one who's bad. And he's ruining Christmas — or maybe it's me that's ruining Christmas." Don't let him have that kind of power over you. You get to have the Christmas that you choose to have no matter what anyone else says or does. The resentfulness comes only when we insist that he should be different than who he actually is.

You know what you could pretend? You could pretend that you're having Christmas with the cartoon Grinch character, okay? When you look at him in your mind, picture the Grinch. Would you let the Grinch ruin your Christmas? How did the little folks in Whoville have a good Christmas in spite of their grinch? Do that.

All right, another question that came in was this one: "This is our first holiday season without my soon-to-be-ex living here. He'll visit a lot to partake in things with the kids. How do people prepare the kids and set the days up for success so that we can keep going even if he does his usual, unpredictable, angry, hurtful things? The kids don't want me to change things, but I want to create activities to do instead of just sitting around. I think it'll help keep things moving and give less space for his moods. We could go to a movie, have some games and crafts to do so we're busy. But the kids don't like this idea of change. They expect my soon-to-be-ex to be happier and more normal this year because that's how he acts the little times he visits us."

Okay, so do we have to manage our soon-to-be-ex and his moods with extra activities for the kids? Do you see how we're kind of taking it upon ourselves to, "Oh, well, he's going to be this way, so now I'm just going to throw myself into making extra activities for the kids that they don't even want"? I mean, maybe we could do that if we want to, but if the kids hate it, then I'm not really sure that it's going to help create that peace that I think you're looking for in the long run. What if instead we created boundaries on the times that we spend with our soon-to-be-ex and the kids? I mean, it's just an idea — you don't have to do this. But when I was separated and divorcing, I went through three Christmas seasons alone without my husband being there. And I just decided, "I'm not going to do anything with him and the kids together." So I let him have his time with the kids, and then I did my things with them and I focused on my time with them, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Yeah, we definitely had to shift some of our traditions around for sure. But you know what? We started new traditions that now many years later, have become some of our favorites.

This actually happens, you guys, even if there isn't a separation or divorce in the family. This happens in families that are healthy, too. Kids get older, and traditions that the

little kids liked, such as having the neighborhood kids come over to do Christmas caroling and have cookies and hot chocolate afterward, maybe now we're not doing those things. Instead, we're transitioning to everyone going to the local college Christmas concert together.

In our family, we had this tradition where we would get together with my extended family and we would have a Christmas cookie bake every year. Well, when my dad died and my mom and my sisters no longer wanted me around, we had to create a new tradition ourselves where we decorate gingerbread houses from Costco and we bake and decorate sugar cookies. That's what we do one of our days. We eat half of the sugar cookies that we bake and decorate, and then we freeze the other half and we pull those out on Christmas. I get them on Christmas Day every other year and then on Christmas Eve on the opposite year. So whatever time I get them, that's when we pull out the Christmas cookies and eat those.

It's been years now since we've gotten together with my extended family, and yeah, at first it was really sad and I hurt pretty bad. But we created a new tradition, and I now choose to remember the past with a wistful thankfulness that I did get to have those moments and those memories at one time in my life, but now I get to have different ones. These aren't better or worse — they're just different, and I want to enjoy what I get this year.

I don't know about you guys, but every year I tend to think, "Is this going to be the last Christmas that we're all together?" Because things happen. People die or get ill or they get married and go move to other states or whatever. Things happen, and I always wonder, "Is this going to be the last Christmas that we have together?" If it is, I want to be able to look back and say, "I really poured my whole heart and soul into it and enjoyed every minute of it." And I suggest that for you as well. I think it's a good rule of thumb.

Now, sometimes we have to change the timing of things. For as long as I can remember, our tradition was that we would decorate our house for Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. Well, after the divorce was final, there were times when the kids were at their dad's the weekend after Thanksgiving. So we had to change that tradition. So on the years that they're at their dad's, we have to do it the day before Thanksgiving. Now, I could make this mean something horrible, like, "This isn't fair and life sucks, and why can't we do it the way it's always been done?" Or I could make it mean that we can have a great time any day of the week or month. And the important thing is that we have time to make memories together. That we HAVE the time.

Now this year, because I now have four older kids who have partners and some of those partners have divorced parents too, we are working with a lot of other families to see when we can get everyone together over at my place. And for this year, we've landed on the day after Christmas. So it's not going to be Christmas Eve, and it's not going to be Christmas Day this year. It's going to be the day after Christmas. I honestly don't care, because I've chosen not to care about the day that we're getting together. I'm just thankful we can get everyone together. And there have been holidays when we just can't, and that's also okay if we decide that we're going to make it okay. I remember last Thanksgiving we couldn't get everyone together, but Aimee and I... My daughter was able to come over, and she and I put together an amazing Thanksgiving meal and we had a blast with those of us that were able to get together.

I think it's up to us to either make it a good experience, or depending on what we're believing or thinking, we can actually make it a pretty sad, horrible, and tragic thing. It just really depends on how we choose to frame it in our minds. I would not count on your soon-to-be-ex being nicer, just saying. I think you should plan on him being the way he's already shown you that he has been for the last many years of knowing him. And then, based on that reality, you can maybe think about splitting up the time with the kids with him and then really relishing the time that you have alone with your kids. Personally, I think less drama always means more peace.

The kids will eventually get used to splitting time between you. My kids don't think anything of it now. It's just a normal part of life. And honestly, that's the way it is for probably over 50% of the population as well. And we can believe this is a horrible tragedy that will mar our lives forever, and everyone's going to go to hell and burn forever and ever and ever because of all of this and feel horrible, or we can choose to believe that this is actually a part of life, a normal part of life, for many, many people, and we're all going to be okay.

All right, next question: "I'd love to hear about holidays during the in-between times after we've woken up to the abuse, but we don't really feel like we're flying free yet. Maybe we're separated and not yet divorced, or maybe we're divorced but not yet healed or still in the thick of it, but trying to find our way out. How do we continue the process of healing in the midst of holiday stress? What do we do when our Christmas doesn't look like the one we had imagined back when we got married? For me, this will be my first Christmas in a new house away from my ex. I still have lots of memories of our Christmases together, many of them painful, but I don't have new memories yet, and I worry about what this will look and feel like emotionally for me."

First of all, I want to address the idea of healing, like, how do we continue the process

of healing in the midst of holiday stress? Healing never ends, you guys. I hear this a lot. Women are like, "Oh, when is it going to be over? I've been in this forever. I'm just so sick of it. When is it going to be over?" Never. We never arrive. It is a journey we are on, and I think it's an incredible journey. I think it's amazing. Hopefully every year we can look back on the year before and go, "Wow, look at that. I have evolved into the next healthier version of myself." Hopefully we're doing that every year. It doesn't matter what day of the year it is or what season of the year it is: We're still on that journey — here we are — and we always will be.

Now, if you think about it too, even in the past, have any two Christmases in your life ever been exactly alike, even under the best of circumstances? I love to think about it this way: Each year we are given a gift of experiencing the Christmas holiday, and then we get to decide what to do with that gift. So let's actually use that idea to make an analogy. Let's say that every year on Christmas, you are given a gift. It's a box. It's got several different items inside. Each year some of the items are the same, and some of the items are different. And your job is to take your Christmas box of items and create a lovely Christmas only using the items in the box for that year.

Let's say that you had the choice to either accept your gift box for that year and make a Christmas experience with the items in that year's box, or you could opt out. You could decide to say, "You know what, no thank you to the gift box. I don't want a gift box for the holidays this year. I'm going to choose not to have Christmas." Which would you choose? Either choice is a valid choice, by the way. There are some people who just decide, "You know what? I'm just not doing Christmas this year," alright? This is actually a reality for all of us. Again, regardless of whether or not we are happily married, divorced, separated, or living with a covert abuser, we are each given a set of circumstances every year and they're always going to be different, even under the best of circumstances.

So we have a challenge: We can accept our box of circumstances and then sift through it and make some intentional choices about how we want to use those circumstances and resources to create as lovely of a holiday for ourselves and our kids as we can, or we can choose not to take our box and not to celebrate that year. We can set the box aside and not use it. That is also a valid option.

Now, we could also choose to open our box. "Here's your box: Christmas 2022," and we could open it up and look inside and go, "Ugh. Oh my word. Look at what is not in my box this year." Maybe last year's Christmas box had, "All the kids can come on Christmas Day," and this year's box has, "Only two kids can come." Maybe last year's box had, "Everyone is healthy," and this year's box has, "Someone has Covid." Maybe

last year's box had, "The kids all want to do a cookie bake," and this year's box has, "Everyone has grown out of our annual cookie bake and it is being discontinued." And maybe we don't like this year's box. Maybe we want last year's box or nothing at all. That's okay. We don't have to. But I just want you to see that it is an option.

Now, you could also opt to accept the box that you get, open your box, sift through what is available, and use or arrange all of the resources and circumstances in the best way possible to make a very unique and special Christmas for this year. This is going to require us to let go of last year and all the other past years and stay present for what is here with us now.

When things were upside down in my own world, I actually googled "Christmas traditions" to see if there were traditions that I had never tried before that might be fun to try and see if the kids liked them or not. And one tradition we started was going to a movie the day after Christmas, which also was very helpful with the letdown of the day before. You know, Christmas comes and everyone's so excited and we have such a great day, and then the next day it's like, "Ugh." So we just decided to do this tradition of going to a movie afterwards. Another tradition I started but honestly, it fizzled out after Covid when everything shut down, but it was to go to a Christmas play or a musical of some sort during the month of December. So we have a local college here that we would go to their Christmas concert, or we went to the Nutcracker one year at a town near to us.

This year, I want to try a new one. I noticed that there's a ceramics store near us, and I've never done ceramics before. My grandma used to do ceramics all the time. I still have a ceramic cat. In fact, just a little anecdote here, my husband, Tom, and I, when we met each other, the first time I went over to his house, I saw a ceramic cat, and it was the exact same ceramic... It's big — a big ceramic cat, and I had the exact same one. My grandma made it for me, and guess what? His grandma made his for him. So we ended up getting married. Now we have two ceramic cats in our house. Now, the grandmas painted them differently, so they're slightly different in their coloring, but they're the exact same ceramic cats. So I think that's so funny. It used to be really popular back then, but apparently it's making a comeback.

So what I want to do this year is take the younger kids and go to one of these ceramics places and do Christmas tree decor... Or, not Christmas tree... They don't have any Christmas tree ornaments. That's what I wanted to do. But they have Christmas decorations that you can make. So everyone will pick a different Christmas decoration and we'll all make one.

I think traditions are wonderful, but you know what? They can be changed at any time. And in fact, they will change throughout the years as our families change and grow. So our ability to respect and honor the memories of the traditions of the past while cherishing and enjoying the new traditions of the present will go far in helping us to create amazing holiday memories today. For me, even when I have been all alone at Christmas, I have created special memories for myself of curling up in a blanket with a mug of hot chocolate and marshmallows and watching a Christmas special that I used to love when I was a kid on TV. This was working on and building my relationship with Natalie, and loving Natalie during this season and every season honestly is my number one responsibility.

I think we're going to do one more. The question is this: "I'd like to explore how do we deal with the feelings of loneliness during the holidays when culture, society, other friends and family, and even ourselves expect the holidays to be about connection to others and be about family and friends? After getting out of the toxic relationship, including ex-husband and immediate family members, and even some friendships, I find that my social circle in connection with others is very limited. The holidays put a glaring spotlight on how small this world really is for me, and it makes me feel quite alone."

So whenever we ask, "How do I deal with such and such a feeling," what our brain really wants to know is how to get rid of that feeling. Have you noticed that? It hurts, it's uncomfortable, it's painful, and we don't want that feeling, so give me the cure so I don't have to feel it. But you know what? I don't have the cure for a hard feeling. I do know how to deal with it. Instead of running away from it, you run straight into it. You lean into the storm of the feeling when it washes over you. Remember that feelings are simply vibrations in our bodies caused by our thoughts, and feelings are survivable. It doesn't feel like it sometimes, but they are. Feelings don't kill us. They just hurt really bad, and they sometimes feel unbearable and overwhelming.

But what makes a feeling worse, which I mentioned at the beginning of this episode, is that when we fight it or believe that we should not be feeling it, when we think that we should be feeling better somehow. When we resist our emotions, we not only experience the clean pain of the emotion, but that on top of that, we are now layering the dirty pain of resisting that emotion, of fighting that reality. So I suggest allowing the season to be lonely if you feel lonely. Allow yourself to cry and enter into that grief and lament.

But I also want to invite you to enter into fellowship with yourself. This is something that we learn how to do inside the Flying Free program. Core shame creates a sense of

aleness and loneliness inside of us that can be quite profound. And the key to healing that core shame is by learning how to love the woman who has your name. I'm talking about falling madly in love with her. This is the work that I did when I was alone for three years. I determined to get to know this woman — her name was Natalie — and enjoy her company. I started talking to her, and I still do this. I started viewing her in the third person as a human being who deserved love and honor just like any other human being that I gave that to. I began to see it as my job to give that to her.

Now, last week in the Flying Free program, I presented five sessions that I created for Butterfly Bootcamp. We have this thing called Butterfly Bootcamp. We had it at the end of September where we had over a hundred women come to where I live, and we did this little conference. So I presented these five sessions and we did some small group work and stuff. But the whole theme of that Butterfly Bootcamp was learning how to know and love the woman who has your name. That was the theme. And then all the members who are inside of the Flying Free program, they got that five-day series as part of their membership.

Now, if this series sounds like something that you need, I encourage you to join Flying Free. It's \$29 a month. If you wanted to just join for one month and get that series, you certainly could, and then you could leave if you need to. But I think you might find if you join that it's hard to leave because it's pretty amazing, and you're going to start changing and you're going to start doing this critical work with us. And what better time to start doing this work than during the holidays when things can really feel overwhelming? So you can learn more about Flying Free by going to joinflyingfree.com.

So my suggestion is just to learn how to be okay with being lonely, to accept that, and then also alongside of that, learn how to be a good friend to yourself during the season. See if you can write down twenty ways that you will commit to being this good friend to her over the next three weeks and into the new year.

All right, there were still so many more questions, but we're going to stop here for now, and if you come back next week, we're going to talk about some more. And if you like this kind of thing and you wish that you could get your own questions answered, this is something else that we do constantly in the Flying Free program. You can ask questions in our forum 24/7, you can ask questions in our monthly live Q&A, and you can even go into a deep dive into an issue that you're having by volunteering for coaching, which is something we do every week. Or if you're super shy, you can just read and listen to the questions and answers that other women are offering in the program, and you'll learn a ton. Believe me, they're answering the same questions that you've got, I promise you. And this, of course, is just one of the many ways that you can get help inside Flying

Free. So again, if this sounds like something you need, learn more about this program by going to joinflyingfree.com.

And if you benefited from today's episode, be sure to subscribe so that you don't miss future episodes. And also, of course, we'd love it if you left a rating and review. That's it for this week, ladies. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.