

AN ADULT CHILD OF DIVORCE ANSWERS SURVIVOR QUESTIONS

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 211 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me my adult daughter, Aimee. She actually works within the Flying Free Sisterhood program as the community support director, and she also has been on the Flying Free Podcast in the past. She did Episode 150 with me, where we talked about surviving the holidays as a teenager, and she shared her perspective about what it was like to go through the holidays with parents who were separated and then eventually divorced.

And she's with me again today because in the forum, we decided to ask all of our members what they would ask Aimee about what it's like to be a teenage child who is watching her parents go through separation and divorce, not just during the holidays, but just in general. And they asked a bunch of questions — like, a ton of questions. So I don't know if we'll get to them all, or maybe we'll make this in the two episodes — I'm not sure. But welcome to the Flying Free Podcast, Aimee.

AIMEE: Thank you for having me.

NATALIE: All right, so this is gonna be a little bit serendipitous. We did go through the questions and kind of picked the ones that we wanted to answer, but we didn't do any thinking or talking about any of these, so we're just going to be riffing off the cuff. I'm going to read the question and then Aimee's going to give her perspective, and then I might throw in a few words, maybe defend myself a little bit. No, I'm just kidding. And we'll just see where this takes us, okay? Okay. Are you ready, Aimee?

AIMEE: I am so ready. Let's go.

NATALIE: Okay, so the first question is, "My adult daughter says she feels shame over her parents' divorce. Would you agree? Did you feel shame over your parents' divorce? And if so, how did you get past this?"

AIMEE: So no, I did not really feel shame over my parents' divorce. When I think about shame, maybe I felt ashamed that my parents were divorced. I had all these good little Christian friends who, their parents weren't divorced, and so they looked at me a little funny after that. But in general, no, I didn't feel any shame over my parents' divorce. I

never thought that it was my fault. My dad did tell me it was my fault at one point, but I never believed that truly. And so no, I didn't really need to get past that. That wasn't really a blockade that I had personally.

NATALIE: Okay. So what would you say if you were talking to a teenage girl who did say, "I'm so ashamed that my parents are getting a divorce." Do you have any thoughts about that?

AIMEE: Divorce is very normal. There's a lot of people out there who are divorced. It's not really something to feel ashamed about, especially in a situation like this, where in my case my dad was an emotional abuser, right? I don't think that there's any shame in saying, "Okay, we've got to be done now. The marriage is over. Let's be safe and healthy and sane without the abuser in our lives," right? And also, it's never the kid's fault. It's never a kid's fault that parents get divorced. They're both adults and you're a kid. That would never be your fault under any circumstances. The kids aren't that powerful. I think maybe I would tell them that. You're not as powerful enough to make your parents get divorced.

NATALIE: That's so good. I mean, that's a pretty healthy perspective. I'm not sure that all of the kids — I had nine kids — I'm not sure that all of them maybe had that same perspective. Why do you think that you had that perspective? Because that's kind of amazing. And you never really had any therapy or anything like that?

AIMEE: I don't know. It just came to me as common sense. And I know not everyone's going to feel that way. I just personally never felt those feelings. Looking back it's like, what would I have done that would cause the divorce? There's nothing. I was a pretty good kid though, don't you think, Mom?

NATALIE: She really was. Okay, the next question is this: "When adult children know deep down that their father was emotionally abusive to their mother, why do they tend to blame the mother for dissolving the marriage? Does this have something to do with adult children wanting to bury the truth? Did you target your mother for upsetting the apple cart? Did you ever feel that you brought the reality of your parent's situation into the light?"

AIMEE: So I think people blame the mother because generally the mother is the one who is initiating the divorce, and the divorce feels like the big finalized, like, "Okay, it's over," you know? But really in reality, the father started this by being an abuser, right? But an abuser is usually not going to initiate a divorce because they want to keep that power and control over their spouse. It's pretty rare that the abuser is going to want to

get the divorce. So of course the mother's going to need to initiate it and probably push for it, because again, the father isn't going to want to have the divorce. And in my mom and dad's case, my dad dragged the divorce out for forever because he didn't want that. He wanted power and control over my mom, and that's what he wanted.

So yes, I think kids when they see that on the surface, "Oh, Mom wants the divorce — Mom's starting the divorce," it can be easy to blame the mom for that. But that's really just an external "problem" of really a deep internal problem and pain and abuse.

NATALIE: Yeah. I would just add to that, that typically kids don't see... I mean, yeah, they might hear the mom and dad arguing and fighting. I think you guys heard that from your dad and I at times so that you knew that not everything was well in paradise, right? But at the same time, I think most kids don't know... They for sure don't know everything that's going on under the radar. A lot of conversations that your dad and I had, especially even before you kids were even born, we were having problems. These were ongoing, perpetual problems, and kids don't see all of that. Even if they did, their brains have not matured to the point where they can even understand that. They don't have the life experience to wrap their brains around what's going on or understand all the nuances of that kind of relationship.

So all they're going to see is, "Oh my gosh, Mom filed for divorce." That's the big thing that they're going to see. And of course that's why they're going to blame the mom. So we can kind of understand that.

So here is another kind of piggyback question, Aimee. Someone else said, "My son, while very upset, asked me, 'Why couldn't you just keep the family together?' I completely understand this, because some days I feel so sad that I don't have that to fall back on any longer. I can't imagine what he's going through." So what are your thoughts about that, Aimee, when someone says, "Why can't you just keep the family together?"

AIMEE: I mean, again, if you're the mom and you are getting a divorce, if you didn't do that, you're right: The family would stay together. So technically the kid is seeing that as "all your fault." If you decided, "Yeah, I'll stay in abuse," then the family's gonna stay together. Whopty-do, right? No, not right. We don't want that. But yes, that would be a normal kid response, because again, they don't have the life experience to know all the intricacies of what's going on. They just see that big external, "You're splitting up our family. How could you do this?"

They have this movie in their head of, "Our family's together," and all of a sudden you're

getting a divorce and their whole life is different from what they are used to or what they thought it would be in the future. So it is hard. It's awful, but in the end it's going to be so much better that you're healthy and safe and not living in abuse anymore, and your kids are going to have a healthier parent at the end of the day for that.

NATALIE: Aimee, I just want to ask you this. I know that there were some of my kids who had that thought, like, "Why can't she just keep the family together?" But now we're over five years out from the actual divorce, and really nine years out from getting separated and all of that. Would you say that our family is splintered and un-together?

AIMEE: No, I wouldn't say that. I mean, you guys live fifteen minutes apart from each other. The kids are going in between houses every week and I think it's great. I don't think the kids really have an issue with any of that. They have both of their parents — they also have a stepdad now, which is amazing. Our family kind of just grew, and while it was hard at first and different, it's just different. It's just a different family dynamic, and it's not bad.

NATALIE: Yeah, and it's also a family dynamic, like you said earlier, that actually a lot of people have. This is not abnormal. Yes, it feels abnormal at first because it's not what you are used to and what your family's used to, but it becomes the new normal and everyone settles in. And if you make it this big, huge, scary thing, if it's a big, huge scary thing for you, then your kids are going to pick up on that and it's going to feel big and scary for them too.

The more you normalize everything... And one way I did that for my little kids was by just checking out books from the library about divorce and families that get divorced and normalized it for them so that by the time it happened, they'd already been exposed to the idea, already knew that this is what some families look like, and even though it was maybe not what they wanted, they were okay with it. It didn't feel scary and terrible.

Okay, here's another question: "My children, nineteen, eighteen, sixteen, and fourteen, say they don't care if we divorce. A few are ready for me to find someone new. Did you ever feel like this?" Meaning, I think, Aimee, did you ever want your parents to find someone new. "What things made it awkward for you when both parents were around each other?" Like at your wedding, maybe did that feel awkward? "And do you think you were treated like you were too fragile to handle the truth of divorce, or do you think you weren't shielded enough?" That's a lot of questions.

AIMEE: Yeah, a lot of questions. Let's get through it. Okay, so, "My children say they

don't care if we divorce. A few are ready for me to find someone new." I cared if they divorced. Obviously it's a big deal. But I knew it was the right move, right? I was like, "This is going to be good for all of us at the end of the day. After we get through this big trauma, we're going to be healthier. It's going to be a good move."

I wouldn't necessarily say I really was thinking about either of my parents finding someone new. As you all know, after this episode is released, we'll have dropped an episode where my mom introduces my stepdad to you, Tom. So you'll know that whole story, but they re-met spontaneously. I mean, you weren't even looking for anyone, Mom, and it just kind of happened really naturally. So I guess I wasn't really in the mindset of, "Oh, I wonder if my parents will find someone new." I have thought about that with my dad a lot recently. I mean, it's been a long time since they were divorced. I think that would be hard for me because I would feel so bad for whoever he found. But that's a whole different topic for another day.

Okay. Next question from the same person: "What things made it awkward for you when both parents were around each other?" They're not really around each other that much. Obviously they were around each other quite a bit around my wedding in July of 2021, but I was so busy that day, Mom. I wasn't really looking around and seeing what was happening with you two. I don't think you really made a lot of contact. You don't really talk to each other.

NATALIE: We were just both there.

AIMEE: Yeah, you just do your own thing. It's not hostile or anything, so no, I wouldn't say it's awkward. And then the last question this person submitted was, "Do you think you were treated like you were too fragile, or do you think you weren't shielded enough?" Mom, you told me basically everything. I was kind of your point person, which, we've talked about how maybe you did overshare. I didn't really feel like that. I wanted to be there for you, and I kind of wanted to know things. I didn't really want to be in the dark. That's kind of who I am, though. I'm a drama queen, always looking for the drama. I want to know what's happening. Just tell me what's happening.

So no, I was not treated like I was too fragile. Agreed that maybe I was told a little too much, but we've made amends about that, Mom, right? I was never upset about it, but she has apologized. I think it's a delicate balance of telling your kids... Maybe you don't tell them everything, but they do deserve to know the truth, especially if they ask.

NATALIE: Yeah. I just want to say it's going to be messy, okay? So nobody walking through divorce is going to do it perfectly. People will ask in the forum, "How do I do

this the right way? What's the right way? What's the right timing? What's the right thing to say to my kids?" I think as Christians we've been so programmed with, "There's always a right way to do everything and then there's a wrong way to do everything, and everything is just black and white." That's not true. Depending on the situation and the dynamics and the particular child and their personality and what just happened fifteen minutes ago and what's going to happen fifteen minutes from now, all of those things come into play. Is life really a minefield that we have to walk in, and any minute we can just step on a mine and the whole thing blows up? I don't think that's the way God wants us to live. That is a heavy burden, and that's living in total fear.

What if it's okay to actually just have a messy life and to have a messy divorce? And then yes, you can go back and you can look at things that you made mistakes on and go, "You know what? I probably would've done that differently. Hey, I'm really sorry. I think I overshared. There are things I said to you I wish I hadn't said. Will you please forgive me? How did that affect you? Tell me how that impacted you." You can have those conversations, but you're never, ever going to be able to get it all perfectly right. We need to drop that expectation. All right, here's another one: "Have you been in any kind of therapy, and if so, what kind and did it help?"

AIMEE: Yeah, so I never was in therapy for this issue. I started therapy after I broke up with my boyfriend, who is now my husband. So it all worked out, guys — it's all good. But I needed therapy for that. That was more traumatic for me for some reason at the time, or at least it felt like it was. But no, I never did therapy and talk about this situation in general. I think that everyone needs to go to therapy, but maybe I do need therapy on this, Mom. I don't know. What do you think?

NATALIE: I don't know. You'll have to make that decision for yourself. I will say that I did put some of the other kids in therapy. Aimee was older at the time, so my older kids, I felt like they were... Did I tell you that you could do therapy? I don't even remember.

AIMEE: I do not recall any conversation about therapy. I know that if I had decided that I wanted it, though, you would have supported me 100%.

NATALIE: Yeah. So I did put everyone under you, starting with Tim and under, I did put them in therapy. Tim didn't want therapy, so he fought it. So after a few sessions, the therapist and I just decided it's okay — he doesn't have to have therapy. He's doing great to this day without it. And then the one that really needed therapy was a little girl at the time, and her problem was that she was feeling bad for her dad and how sad he was because... Well, he was sad, but I mean, he was letting the kids see that, almost like, "Look at what Mom did to me. This is a terrible thing." And so she was feeling bad for

him and feeling like it was her responsibility to make him happy. And of course you can't do that, and that's a burden that a little child is not supposed to bear. So the therapist really helped her with that and she was released from that. And she really hasn't needed any therapy since then.

And then I do have one child who is still in therapy, and he will probably need ongoing therapy for a while just because of how he's internalized the way his dad has treated them. There's been some physical abuse there as well as emotional abuse. And so I think he'll be probably working through that for quite a while. And that's okay. Okay, let's do another question: "Did you side with one parent over another, and if so, what influenced that decision?"

AIMEE: Yeah, I mean, I don't like the term "sides," but sometimes you just have to say it because it's easiest and people know what you're talking about. If I "sided" with one parent, it was always my mom, always 100% with my mom.

What influenced that decision? I watched a lot of the emotional abuse happen. Obviously not all of it, because a lot of it was just between my parents, and like my mom was saying earlier, a lot of it was behind closed doors and not right in front of the kids. But my mom would sometimes tell me, filled in some gaps for me, what had happened. So yeah, I was always on my mom's "side." It wasn't really ever a point of conflict inside of me, honestly. I was always like, "Okay, yep. Dad's being a..." I want to say a bad word, but I'm not going to. "Dad's not being a good guy."

NATALIE: He's being a naughty boy. But I just want to say too that Aimee, you're the perfect person to say this. I feel like you have a really good grip on... You have a really good relationship with your dad. And I mean, to be fair, you are his favorite, right? She's always been his favorite. I mean, this is what abusive people do, right? They pick favorites. So Aimee was his favorite so they always got along. I don't think I ever saw him do anything passive aggressive to you, abusive to you at all, except that one comment that he made to you when we separated where he said it was your fault that we got a divorce. That was like your taste of that. Didn't feel very good, did it?

AIMEE: No, it felt a little crappy. But again, I didn't really believe that. I was like, 'Okay, you said that and I choose not to believe that.' But yeah, my dad and I have always had a great relationship. He doesn't really bring up any of this stuff to me anymore because he knows I'll yell at him if he says something about my mom. If you say something about my mommy, I'm going to yell at you. And I have before. So he doesn't really talk to me about stuff like this anymore. I would say we have a good relationship, but it's a little more shallow because of that. We don't really talk about super deep stuff with

each other because we just don't. We try to keep it light for the most part, but yes, good relationship. I'm the favorite. Don't know how that happened. Well, I mean, I'm pretty... No, I'm kidding.

NATALIE: Yes, you do. No, I'm just kidding. Okay, "Were there any mantras or repeated statements that either parent said that was helpful or harmful?" Do you have any thoughts about that?

AIMEE: Mantras... Honestly, I have no thoughts. I don't think that there were any.

NATALIE: Okay. So, "How did your parents' separation impact your relationship with your brothers and sisters at the time that they first separated, and then how has that changed over time?"

AIMEE: Okay, so back to the "sides" thing, I think a few of us took the "side" of our mom and a couple of us took the "side" of our dad. And that was kind of hard at first, especially with my oldest brother. We would butt heads a lot when we were younger, and then when this all happened, we butted heads a lot as well. I think it was because we tried to argue our point with each other all the time because we felt like we needed to defend either parent, and that is just not helpful.

And so now we have a great relationship and we don't really... We accept each other's opinions and our feelings, and sometimes we'll talk about stuff like this, but we never try to argue our point with each other because we know, first of all, it's not going to work, necessarily. It's not going to change each other's minds about what we believe. And it's not in our control and it's not our responsibility to talk about that all the time. It's just not. So yes, at the initial time of my parents' separation, relationships with a couple siblings were a little rocky, and now it's gotten so much better because I think we're just more boundaried in what we talk about with each other in terms of that. It's just not as necessary anymore.

NATALIE: Okay, here's another question: "When should a parent start putting teens into counseling?" And here's the background. What does that mean, "All fourteen, BBG." Do you know?

AIMEE: Are they triplets and it's two boys and one girl? Boy, boy, girl, fourteen-years-old?

NATALIE: Oh, okay. Yeah. Okay, there you go. So three teens. They're all fourteen-years-old. "Boys want to talk to a counselor. The daughter says she does not want to talk to

the counselor, and she says her mom is ruining the family. Just go back to dad." And then she says, "All three are reacting so differently. What would make the transition to living in two different homes, mom's and dad's, flow a bit smoother?"

AIMEE: Yeah. So let's start with the counseling thing. You can't force your kids to go to counseling, especially if they're fourteen-years-old. It's a little too old, I feel. Don't you think, Mom?

NATALIE: I agree.

AIMEE: Yeah. When they're younger, obviously they don't have the brains to be like, "Yeah, Mom, I think I need counseling. I'm eight-years-old," you know? No.

NATALIE: Right.

AIMEE: You've got to put them in counseling if you feel like that's right for them. So that's just an ongoing conversation you might need to have with them until they decide "yes" or "no." And you can bring it up with them. I definitely wouldn't be pushy about that though, because when you push your kids in areas like this, they're going to run in the opposite direction. So definitely have those conversations with them, but they get to make their own choice at the end of the day.

And then what would make the transition to living in two different homes flow a bit smoother? Honestly, I don't have any tips and tricks for you. I never had to do that because I was old enough to not have to do that. Like we kind of said at the beginning of this episode too, it just takes time. It becomes normal later. At first it's going to be awkward and not fun and not smooth, and it's messy. But then once it becomes normal, it's normal and it's fine.

NATALIE: So my only thought to add to that is the first question was, "When should a parent start putting teens into counseling?" And I remember when we read this question earlier, what was your answer?

AIMEE: I don't remember.

NATALIE: You said "today." And I thought that was a really good answer. Yes, put them in counseling today, especially if they want to. And then as far as... So the teen years are kind of tricky. So by the time I was divorced and we had the divorce agreement in place, I think you were... So Tim was fifteen and you were seventeen, okay? So obviously a seventeen-year-old is close to being eighteen. So what we did is I gave Tim and Aimee

the choice. "If you don't have to go back and forth, you're fifteen and seventeen, you can decide where you want to live." And Tim chose to live with dad because I was getting remarried, too. That was the other thing, and I could totally understand why Tim would be like, "I'm not going to move into a house with my mom and her new husband," right? Very awkward.

So he chose to stay with dad in the marital home that he grew up in. Tim grew up in that home. And then Aimee chose to come with me. Aimee had already developed a really good relationship with Tom, they knew each other quite well by that time and everything, so she was comfortable with that. Now, Tim decided after about nine months of living with dad, he decided to come and live with us as well. So then he moved back about nine months later, which was fine too.

Now, the other kids, they did not have a choice. They had to go back and forth. But as they've gotten older, we've opened that up for them to decide. One of my daughters, I actually had to make her go live with her dad because... That's a whole other story. I've got an article on my website about that, but that's a whole other story. But she was diagnosed with emerging borderline personality disorder. There was a lot of violence in our home, and I had to do that for the protection of my other kids. So she actually has been living with her dad ever since. She's doing much better. She's nineteen. She's getting on her feet, but she hasn't lived with me for about four years now.

And then after that, the next one that came up, who is now seventeen, she goes back and forth every other weekend, and my fourteen-year-old daughter has put her foot down and said, "I'm not ever going back there again," And she stays with me all the time. And her dad, fortunately, has not fought that or tried to take me back to court about that. And then the two other little boys who are twelve and ten, they still go back and forth. They're too young to make that decision yet.

So that's kind of the scoop. I guess the older that the kids are, the more I would give them a chance to make their own decision. But again, if your husband, when you divorce him, if he doesn't agree, and if the court also says that they have to go back and forth, then your children will not have a choice. You can go back and petition the court to have it changed as they get older, maybe when they're fifteen or sixteen. Some states will let kids decide earlier and some states won't let your child decide until they're eighteen. So it depends on what state you live in, and I would definitely talk to an attorney about all of the legal ramifications about that.

Okay, next question. "How to deal with the contradictions, meaning, I say one thing and their dad says another about what happened in the marriage? My ex pins it on me as if

he's the helpless victim. My two teenage sons didn't really see much that they interpret as harmful and don't understand why I would divorce their dad. I say he cheated on me and was abusive. Their dad says he didn't cheat and acts all innocent, telling them he's just trusting God until the time I believe the truth. We are divorced now and there's so much peace in the home without him living with us. How do I point out that what they do copies their dad's bad behavior in a way that doesn't make me look like a bad guy in their eyes?" Okay, well, do you want to say anything before I finish reading all that?

AIMEE: Okay, yes. So the contradictions — you say one thing, the dad says another thing. Oh no, what do we do? Gosh, that's really hard, because what are you supposed to do? You can't make someone believe you. So that's a little bit out of your control at this point. Gosh, I don't even know. I'm thinking maybe you need to find some proof that you can show your sons, but I don't know if that's... Yeah, that's probably not the right move either. You can't make someone believe what you say. You also said something about how your home is more peaceful without him living with you. I think eventually they're going to really see that, and that's going to help them realize some things. I definitely think that that helped... Tim was living with my dad for a while, and he moved back after nine months. I wonder why. Just as you live your life and as you continue to be the healthy mom that you are, I think they're really going to see that proof in your actions.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree. I think if we read the question further, it also says, "I'm still anxious that they will somehow turn on me, even though I have a great relationship with them both for the most part." I guess trying to defend yourself and continuously bringing that up and trying to get them to see your perspective is going to drive them away. So I wouldn't keep trying to do that. You've stated your facts and that's it. I would just move on. The more confident you are in your truth, the less you will care if other people see it. Do you see that? I'm going to say that again. The more confident that you are in your truth and what happened, the less it's going to matter that everyone else is able to see it.

And when you loosen your grip on this, "They have to see it," you are going to actually be an easier and safer person for your boys to be around, and they're going to want to be around you. They're going to be attracted to just being around you because you are not making all of this thing be about, "Our relationship is based on whether or not you believe me or not." I mean, I know that's not true, but that can kind of be an underlying thing. Like, "My kids don't love me unless they believe what I'm saying is true." That's not true.

Your kids don't know and they may never know until they're older and have some more

life experience under their belt and have experienced what it's like to be around a covert abuser, which they could be. I know my husband currently, he has been in three different jobs now where higher-ups are covert abusers. They're so manipulative and they're absolutely insane. And so he knows now. I'll be able to say to him, "Hey, that is exactly what I'm talking about. What you're experiencing, that's what I experienced in my marriage." And he's like, "Wow. Mind blown. Didn't know, couldn't understand what you were saying, but now I do." So your kids are going to need to have that experience too.

And then also you said, "I don't want them deceived by their dad's fake version of Christianity." Well, then show them what the real version of Christianity is. That's your best answer to that. Again, you can't control what they're going to believe or not, but you can control how you show up in your own life. Show them what's real and then hopefully they'll be able to spot a fake from far away.

Okay, next question: "Though I have a good relationship with my adult daughter and though she sees that I have undergone a lot of change, I feel sad that there is still a small part of her that views me as weak and someone who failed to protect her from the harm her dad and others in the church caused her. Did you ever feel this way about your own mom? Do you wish that she had left her marriage earlier, and would you have been better off if she had? Why or why not?"

AIMEE: Yeah, so I never felt like my mom was weak. I think it takes a great deal of strength to stay well and alive in an abusive marriage, and then it takes a great deal of strength to leave as well, right? But no, I never viewed her as weak. Even if your daughter does view you as weak, what if you were weak and that is okay, and now you're getting stronger? What if that's okay that you were in your marriage for "too long" and now you're out? I think that that's okay. We're going to make mistakes, and that's all right. We move past them.

Do I wish she had left her marriage earlier? I suppose maybe, but then if she had left her marriage earlier, I wouldn't maybe have some of my younger brothers. They might not be around. Would I have been better off if she had? Maybe. It's hard to look back and say, "Would I have been better off?" Maybe I would've been too young if she had left her marriage earlier and I wouldn't have gotten it, you know? Those are hard questions to ask, but I think that looking back and asking those questions and being anxious and worrying about them is just not helpful for you right now as you're trying to move forward. You did the best that you could in the moments that you were given, and you're continuing to do that.

NATALIE: Okay: "Did you ever feel sorry for your dad, and did that make you mad at your mom?"

AIMEE: Yeah, I mean, I feel sorry for him still, sometimes. He was sad, like we were saying, he was sad about the divorce, and he still is sad sometimes about different things pertaining to that. But at the same time, you kind of have to realize, he kind of did that to himself. And you can still feel sad and sorry for someone who's causing themselves pain. No, that doesn't ever make me mad at my mom. I'm like, "Oh, you are sad because you did something wrong." That's not my mom's fault, though.

NATALIE: Well, and he wouldn't stop. Again, he had so many bazillions of chances over so many years to stop, and he just refused. And to this day he still doesn't understand why. He still doesn't get it, because he just never listened. Just can't listen. All right: "So did you ever fall for a bad boy because of growing up with that kind of a person?"

AIMEE: Oh, this is so funny to me. I married an amazing guy just for reference. But yeah, when I was in college, I wouldn't say I fell for a bad boy, but I pursued some guys who definitely had some similar qualities, or they were... It was fun to chase after them, but they were really aloof, and I guess I can't say "abusive" because I didn't know them well enough to see that or date them long enough. But yeah, I think there is a part of you that's kind of attracted to the bad boy type of deal, especially if you've grown up with that. But I married someone great, so that was good.

NATALIE: "Do you still grieve the divorce as an adult, and do you think your siblings do?"

AIMEE: That's a great question. No? I think I have seen so much fruit from it. I think my step-dad's the biggest thing where it's like, wow, we never would've had him without this divorce. That's amazing. Our family grew into something awesome, so that's great. I guess yes, it's always going to be hard and you always wish it didn't happen. I more grieve that I don't have a dad who is emotionally available and emotionally healthy. I think that I grieve that more than the divorce itself.

NATALIE: All right, Let's see: "What kind of questions can I ask to get my seventeen-year-old, who was fourteen when I moved out, son to talk to me? How hard should I push him to go to counseling (I tried, but he wouldn't talk) or to spend time with his dad, which he refuses to do?"

AIMEE: Yeah. Again, you can't really make your kids do anything, especially... Oh, he's seventeen? Yeah. That's really old. You can't really get your kids to do things. You can't really push him to go to counseling, and you already tried it and he wouldn't talk. He's

going to have to come to that realization by himself if he ever wants to go to counseling, and he's also going to have to spend time with his dad himself if he ever wants to. You can't force him to do that. And then in terms of trying to get him to talk to you, I don't have any specific questions to ask, I guess. But again, you can't push him to do things that he doesn't want to do, because it's going to push him away from you.

NATALIE: I think just the idea that our kids have to be a certain way or do a certain thing or whatever is, even if it's just an energy that's inside of our own mind, they can sense that, and they're not going to feel safe in that kind of space, because nobody does. Nobody feels safe when they feel like if they're around someone that they have to be a certain way or show up in a certain way that that person says or believes that they should show up. Even if your intentions are really good, that just doesn't create safety for other people.

So if you want to have a relationship with your son where your son feels super safe around you, where he can just be himself, 100% be himself around you, then the important thing is not just to love him, but also to respect him. And part of respecting him is going to involve respecting his right to decide if he wants to do counseling or if he wants to spend his time with his dad or not. And then just spending time with them, just hanging out is good.

We don't have to have deep conversations with our kids if they don't want to. I've noticed my teenagers are really not interested in having deep conversations. Once in a while, yes. But those deep conversations come out of watching a movie together and it being late — usually it's late at night, okay? Or when they have a problem. If they know that we're a safe person and that we have tons of respect for them, guess who they're going to come to with their big problem? And then guess when we can have a deep conversation? That's the point. So just be that safe person. Kind of change your own mindset about what you expect from your child, and then go from there.

Alright, next question: “My children defend their dad often. This is painful for a mom to hear and see, especially when he's been caught in a lie, when they have witnessed physical and emotional abuse, when he has been a no-show for school or sports events or neglectful.” So in other words, the kids have experienced his abuse. They've seen him lie, they've seen him physically abuse their mom, they've seen him not show up for school events or sports events. “Why would they do that? Why would they not just discuss the elephant in the room?”

AIMEE: So this is really natural for kids, because it sounds like in this case, they probably love their dad and they want a dad who is present and who isn't emotionally

abusive and who isn't physically abusive. So they're going to defend their dad because they don't want a dad that's like that. So in their minds they're trying to say, "Okay, wait, wait, wait, no — let's rewind. He isn't like that. Let's defend dad," you know? And if a mom is saying to her kids, "Hey, your dad did this and this and that," they're going to come back, and it's just a natural response to defend him. It's not because they don't love you. It's just a natural response. And why not just discuss the elephant in the room? They don't want that elephant in the room, so they're not going to want to talk about that.

NATALIE: Yep. It's called denial, and it's a tactic, a strategy to help people not feel the deep pain. All right, the next question: "How do I encourage my fifteen-year-old daughter to not make the same mistake I did? I don't want to talk bad about her dad, but I want her to see and recognize the behavior and know that it isn't okay. She still gets wrapped up in his manipulation. He love bombs her like crazy and she eats it up. Of course she is desperate for love and approval from her dad like most daughters are, which I totally get."

AIMEE: So encouraging your daughter not to make the same mistakes that you did. Obviously you're not really going to be able to cross that bridge until you get there, until she's with someone who perhaps is like her dad. But also at the same time, we have to remember, maybe she'll end up with someone who's not like her dad. We can't know that she's going to end up with someone who is like her dad. Yes, you don't want to talk bad about her dad. That's probably for the best, especially if she doesn't bring it up. But if she brings up something that he's done and it kind of opens a doorway for you to say, "Hey, yeah, that wasn't a great behavior. Let's talk about why that wasn't great," and that would be a good opportunity for you to show her some of those characteristics and maybe talk about, "Yeah, that's something that we don't want for a guy for you in the future," right?

NATALIE: Yeah. Another thing too is there's a lot of TV shows and series on Netflix and Amazon Prime and movies that now address covert abuse. And the overall general awareness of this type of abuse has just increased exponentially in the last few years. So you can find examples of this out there, and I've done that with my kids. We'll point out something in a book that we're reading together, and I'll be like, "Okay, so this behavior. Do you see what's wrong with this" and get them to talk about it and then let them come to their own conclusions about when they see that behavior in someone else in the family, for example, right? Wink, wink, wink.

All right, so Aimee, did you have to forgive either of your parents for anything we did or didn't do during your childhood? And how old were you, do you think, when you did

that? And also, you mentioned before that you stood up to your dad at times. What does that look like?

AIMEE: Yeah, so I was a good kid. I always ask for forgiveness and I always gave forgiveness pretty easily. So I guess I've always just forgiven. I haven't really had to forgive my mom for anything, you know? She's perfect. No, I'm kidding. But with my dad, I definitely forgive him. I don't really think I ever came to a point in growing up where I was like, "Okay, yep, today's the day I forgave him finally, after all this time." I think I always have forgiven him. I mean, just because you forgive someone doesn't mean that you brush everything that they've done under the rug. Absolutely not. Especially if it's so continued as it has been. I forgive him though, for sure, but not at a specific point or place in my life.

And then did I ever stand up for my mother, myself, or siblings? Yeah. So my dad and I drove to college every day together because he would drop me off at college. It was while I was in PSEO — I was in high school. So we would have just at least an hour and a half together every day driving. And so sometimes we would talk about some tough stuff, and I remember one day in the car he'd set me off, and I was just screaming at him as he was driving. That was a great point. And then we had a forty minute drive home where we just sat in silence, you know? That was fun.

Yeah, I did. I always stood up for my mom in conversations like that. And like I said, he doesn't even bring up that stuff with me anymore because he knows... He would try to get me to see his point of view and see what he was going through and how sad he was. And I'd be like, "Well, do you see how you did this all to yourself, Dad? Do you get it?" He'd be like, "No, I don't get it." I'd be like, "Okay. Conversation's over."

NATALIE: So this next question is kind of like that one. She's saying that her teenager would ask it this way: "What do you do when you know your father's behavior is wrong, but you still love him?" That perfectly describes you, right, Aimee? "How do I continue a relationship with him and his family without feeling disloyal to my mom?" How have you managed that in your own brain? I mean, as the mother, I have wondered that. I'm like, "How does she..." Yeah, just go.

AIMEE: Yeah, totally. I wonder this about myself, too. I'm like, "How am I making this work?" At the end of the day, none of this is my responsibility, which has been kind of a big thing for me to learn. I don't have to be responsible for either one of their behaviors or how they're treating each other.

NATALIE: Or how we feel.

AIMEE: Or how you feel. I'm only responsible for our relationship separately. So yes, I still love my dad, and even though I know his behavior is wrong, I think... What do I think? That has been a tough one. That's a question that I get asked a lot, and I just never know how to answer because I just have decided, "You know what? I still want to have a relationship with you. As long as you and me are good, we're going to be good." Yeah.

NATALIE: I think you hit on it when you said, "I don't feel like I have to manage either one of their... Their feelings, their thoughts about everything belong to them. They're not mine. I don't need to manage that." I think that's the key. If you're a teenager who's thinking, "Oh, I'm being disloyal to my mom," what are you actually doing right there? You think that you are responsible for managing your mom's emotions and thoughts, and you are not. That's what we have the Flying Free Sisterhood for. The mom can join the Flying Free Sisterhood and learn how to manage her own thoughts and feelings so that her children don't have to do that, and that's going to actually bond her to her children in a much better way, I think.

AIMEE: Oh, yeah, totally agree. And that did take me a little bit to learn. My parents separated when I was fourteen. I was probably in college when I finally realized, "Oh yeah, I don't need to make peace between them anymore or try to convince either one that the other one is kind of right about this or whatnot. I can just let it go and just let them have their own thoughts, and let's just focus on the relationship between me and the parent," especially with my dad. Obviously with my mom, too, but with my mom it isn't hard. With my dad, it's a little harder.

NATALIE: You guys, that's it. Thank you so much, Aimee, for coming in here. I am so proud of this girl, and I'm so glad that she agreed to come in and do this interview. I don't want anyone to think that this is a split second thing or that this is an overnight thing, that our kids just become these amazing, mature human beings. Aimee would tell you that she still struggles in other areas we all do. And where she's at today has come through a lot of hard pain, okay? So people grow through pain.

And if you're trying to protect your children and shield them from pain, what you're really doing is stunting their growth. And I just don't recommend it. It's just not going to be helpful for them as they grow up into adults that can actually manage their own brains and their own lives the way that I feel like Aimee is a good example of. So I think really that's the main takeaway here, is embrace the pain. Do you have any last words?

AIMEE: Totally embrace the pain. And yeah, like she said, I evolved into the person that I am. This took a long time. I was a good kid, but I also had a lot of tough stuff happening

with me when this was all happening, too. So give your kids some time and they'll be awesome like me one day. No, I'm kidding. Just joking.

NATALIE: She really was just joking. She's not that kind of person. Okay, you guys, that's all I have for you today. If you enjoy this podcast, I encourage you to leave a rating and review on Apple Podcasts, because when you do that, the Apple Podcasts gods and goddesses say, "Ooh, we should show this podcast to other people who might be interested." And they actually have an algorithm. They figure out who you are and what you are like, and then they show it to other people who are just like you.

So for example, they can tell if this podcast is appealing to Christian women who are married, and then they'll show it to other Christian women who are married. And believe it or not, we do have a lot of people that come to me and say, "Hey, I found this. For some reason, your podcast popped up in my feed as a recommended podcast, and it has changed my life." So that's how you can help spread the word, and I really appreciate that if you do. And that's it. Until next time, fly free.