

## DO MARRIAGE INTENSIVES WORK?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://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 215 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I want to talk about marriage intensives. What are they? Do they work? Are they worth the money? I started thinking about this when someone made a comment, and I don't remember if they made this comment on my blog, or maybe it was my Facebook page, but basically they asked, "Are you saying that there is no hope for an abusive marriage, that there is no hope that these men can change?"

Now, interestingly enough, at the time that I was reading this comment, I was also watching my daughter's basketball game, and the score was twenty-one to thirty-nine with two minutes left in the game. Now, if I was a betting person, I would not place money on the losing team at this point. Would it be possible for the losing team to win? I mean, maybe. Technically, I guess, it's possible, but based on the past history of how the game had been going so far, it was not likely, and I am not going to make a bet on those odds. Are we not trusting God if we choose not to fling our body into the Grand Canyon? I mean, is it possible that something could break our fall and we could survive? Possibly, but are we going to bet on those odds? Most people would say "no."

So let's apply this to abusive marriages. Most of the women I work with have been in an abusive marriage for ten years or more, and I would say that well over 50% of them have been in their abusive marriages for over two decades. These are the ones that are saying, "Wait a minute. Are you saying there's no hope for an abusive marriage? There's no hope these men can change?" These women have been saying this in their brains for decades. I know. I was one of them. We are now programmed to be willing to bet our entire lives on these odds that men who have never changed in the past will one day change in the future. And this belief is what keeps us stuck.

Now, where do we get this programming embedded in our psyches that abusers can change? We Christians get it from church. God can change anyone, right? God can do miracles. God can turn the heart of a king. God is in control of everything. Here's the thing: Those things are true. There's an element of truth to those things, but there is another truth running simultaneously alongside those truths. For example, God can change anyone, but does He? No. He gives people free choice because He is not an abusive control freak like humans are. Human beings are projecting their own abusive,

control freak tendencies onto God, and then they're making a God in their own image. Does that make sense?

So what about God can do miracles? Yeah. I mean, God can do miracles, but the miracles He does, I believe, are in the hearts of people. And Jesus was pretty clear about that. I mean, yes, Jesus showed us miracles on the outside, but He came to do a miracle in hearts. We look for those miracles inside of ourselves first, all right? God can turn the heart of a king. The Bible says that. But He doesn't turn the heart of every king, and if He did... Think about it. If He was going to do that and that was what He did, then we would all be living in peace and prosperity on earth right? But again, He gives humans free choice. God is in control of everything, yes. But He chooses to give us control of our own lives.

So at the end of the day, it's not really up to God to change your husband, because God has said that it's up to your husband. God has given that choice over to your husband. He gives that autonomy to your husband. So you have to decide what kind of odds your life is worth betting on. And your choice will be in direct relation, I believe, to the value that you place upon the life that you're betting, which is your own. That's why it's so important to do your own healing work. This is going to involve recognizing your own intrinsic, personal value as a worthy woman made in the image of your Creator, this value God has assigned to you.

So it's not really right for us to say, "Oh no, I'm not worthy. I'm not good. I'm a bad little worm." No. That's just basically a spit in the face of God. So all the Christians that are telling you that you're a worm, they're just blaspheming God when they say that. That's just ridiculous. You are a human like all humans on earth, and God created us and wired us to need love and respect and a life of meaning for us to thrive. Now, when you see this about yourself and you accept this about yourself, that this is what God has assigned to you, this is your inheritance, then you learn how to offer this to yourself, this is when you're going to be able to make a healthy choice about what kind of odds you want to bet on in taking care of that valuable life that you've been given.

Okay, all of that is a preface for what I want to get into right now. And I get a lot of questions about marriage intensives. It comes up once in a while. I shouldn't say once in a while. It comes up a lot. And it seems like they are sort of the Christian's last ditch effort to save a marriage, and they're popping up all over the place now. They're much more popular now than they were back when I was getting out of my marriage. There are lots of organizations all over the place that are capitalizing, really, on the desperation of mostly women who don't want a divorce, but they're married to an abusive man and they're hoping that a marriage intensive will be the magic wand that

will transform her abuser into a Prince Charming. If you fork out \$10,000 or more, you go to a nice resort for three days... They're all different. Some of them are a week, but the average I've seen on most of them is about three days. And then you come out on the other side and you're this brand new, happy little couple.

I bought into this idea myself, and after a particularly horrific, abusive incident that involved one of our kids, I gave my husband, my ex-husband now, but I gave my husband at the time an ultimatum, and I said if he didn't do this marriage intensive that I had heard about with me, that I would tell the church elders what he had done. Now, as it turned out, I told the elders what he had done anyway. And by the way, they didn't care, either. But I just want you to know where I was at in my life back then was where a lot of you are right now, and that is I was in a place of utter, pure terror about what my reality potentially entailed. And I did not want to face my reality and I didn't want to ruin my little dream world of my little Christian, homeschooling family and marriage. And I mean, I knew there were bad things happening, but I wanted to keep thinking that it was going to be okay.

So anyway, I did tell the elders what had happened. They didn't care. They literally swept in under the rug and encouraged me to do the same thing. And I'm not going to go into the details here, but it was something where the police actually should have been involved, but I was so ignorant and so desperate to maintain our marriage and our family and our relationships at this church, and I was terrified that if I involved the police that something horrible would happen.

I think I instinctively knew that that type of action, like getting the police involved, would force me to actually look at the abuse for what it was. And at that point, I really wasn't ready to face my reality yet. I still believed that God was going to do what I wanted Him to do, what I had been praying for Him to do for twenty years, and what I fully expected Him to do, because I'm telling you — I had a big, strong, mighty faith. I still do. It was pretty misplaced back then, but it was a strong faith. He was going to change my husband, and I decided that He was going to use a marriage intensive to do it.

Now, back then, the marriage intensive that I had heard about was close to where we lived, it was \$7,500, it was only two days, and there was no resort. We just went to a therapist's office and then we'd come home at night. And this therapist, he was such a quack. He literally spent one-third of our time together — I know this because I wrote it in my notebook — talking about himself and his family and his practice. One-third. \$2,500 we spent to listen to him tell us about himself, his family, and his practice. And then the other \$5,000 was for us to get help. So the reason why I was tracking it, I started tracking it after I realized, "Man, this guy talks a lot about himself," because I

was paying for this with my own hard-earned money from making and selling homemade soap.

This guy was making that much money while I was working my butt off for hours and hours and hours making homemade soap to sell so that I could pay for this. My husband didn't want to go, and he certainly never would've paid for it. So once again, it was me reaching out for help, paying for help, begging for help, working for help, doing all the things to get help, and it was like pouring money and time and energy down a drain.

I know now that the therapist we were using — just because I've done so much reading on this and so much researching and talking to other people, now, in the years since that time — that he was actually a flaming narcissist himself. But at the time, I did not know anything about narcissism. I was so green behind the ears. I just knew nothing. And I didn't have the language or the knowledge.

But he used his sessions with us to recreate this image of me that my husband had already mind-mapped onto me from the very beginning. And one of the most horrific tactics he used was this: At one point he told me to stand facing my husband and put my hands around his neck and then give him a really angry look. So because I was very submissive, very fawning... I mean, I would stand up for my rights to a certain degree, but I always obeyed what anyone told me, especially someone who I perceived to be "in authority over me," which, I would've been intimidated by a therapist. So knowing that about me, this is why I know that I did this, I obliged him, even though deep down inside I knew instinctively this was a trap, really. The therapist took a picture with his phone and then showed it to me, and my whole body went into uncontrollable, convulsive sobs.

Yeah, because that was exactly the image that my husband had been mind-mapping onto me for years. He was hurting me over and over again with covert abuse, and every time I rose up and asked him to stop or called him out on something or begged for relief, he would accuse me of being this ugly, bitchy, nasty, unsubmissive, loud, arrogant, rebellious, unloving, unforgiving, hateful wife. I didn't want to be any of those things. I really wanted to be a good person. I'd been trying to be a good person my whole life. So this only made me try harder to be good through working harder, through having more babies, homeschooling, working to earn money, cooking three meals a day, not complaining when my back ached and I was nauseous and sick almost all the time, volunteering at church, hosting events in our home, and on and on.

The harder I tried, the more I was painted as a failure. I would later be diagnosed by a

professional, experienced, licensed therapist with C-PTSD. And many years later, I still have symptoms that come up once in a while, even though I've done so much hard and painful work on my own healing.

"So did this marriage intensive work, though?" I bet you're wondering. Well, you know that I'm divorced and remarried, so I guess you can figure out that it didn't really work, but in some ways it did work. And I'll tell you how. First of all, my husband did change. You guys, for three whole months... I mean, I walked on eggshells waiting for the shoe to drop, but it was relatively peaceful. And my husband, during that time, he did not criticize me. He didn't falsely accuse me even once during that time. He didn't lie to me, that I'm aware of, during that time. He didn't withhold information from me. He didn't dismiss me, give me the silent treatment, disrespect me, complain about me, or any of the other things that I was accustomed to putting up with from him. He showed up during those three months and offered me the barest and simplest of human respect, and I ate it up like a starved dog and believed that a miracle had happened and he had changed.

Until he didn't. Three months later, it was back to business as usual, and that was when I knew. I had tried every possible thing over the years now. I could check every single box and nothing had worked. And after that intensive, an itty, bitty flame of truth had been lit, and that tiny flame would grow to be a house fire that would eventually burn our entire marriage to the ground. Because our home was full of gasoline fumes, just waiting for that spark.

So did this marriage intensive work? Yes. Again, I have to say it did. It worked in that it ultimately held up a mirror to reality, to the truth of the matter, which is that a good marriage requires two people who are invested in it, and I was not in a marriage like that. Period. I was in an abusive marriage, and no amount of counseling was going to change that.

Now, there are all kinds of marriage intensives available out there if you just google it, and I'm not saying that there aren't some that are amazing. I'm sure there are. Will they change your marriage? Not if it's abusive. But if you really don't know if your marriage is abusive or not, then investing in this last ditch effort to save your marriage may help you to figure that out.

If you go to [samarriage.org](http://samarriage.org), they have on their website ten ways to save your marriage. This is kind of fascinating. I've heard somewhere, I don't know where I heard this, but someone told me that apparently there's a movement going on to lower the divorce rate in Christian marriages, and so whoever is trying to do this movement thinks that

marriage intensives and this kind of thing are going to actually help lower the divorce rate.

But anyway, here are some things that these kinds of people are saying that will help you save your marriage, okay? I'm going to read these ten things from their website. One of them is, "If you find a Christian counselor and do what he or she tells you to do, this will save your marriage." Now, is that true? I mean, I did that over and over many times, and it didn't save my marriage. What it did do is embolden my abuser to know that he could get away with anything with no consequences. And it caused me to develop C-PTSD because I was suffering covert abuse without an empathic witness. Peter Levine says that "Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness." When a victim is not believed and her experience is not witnessed or validated, she will suffer trauma.

Another way that this website says that you can save your marriage is, "If you find a mentor couple that will spend time with you individually and together." So we did that, and again, we were told what to work on, and so I would put in my 250% while my abuser did nothing. So that didn't work because I was in an abusive marriage. These things don't work when you're married to an abuser, okay? That's my whole point here.

A third idea that they have on their website is to "Pray for God's healing for your marriage and each other every day." Well, guess what? I can check that one off my list, too. And I even have journals to prove it. My journals are full of my desperate prayers for my marriage. To this day, I believe God was willing. Unfortunately, my ex was not.

Another way to save your marriage according to this website is "To call a truce. Don't try to solve things alone now that you have not been able to solve before." Well, we never solved even one issue that came up, not ever, unless you count the only solution that worked, which was for me to apologize for offending him by my existence or by how stupid I was or how I never listened or how I was such a nag or all the bad things that I was. If I apologized and did not hold him accountable for any of his behavior or if I took the blame for all of his behavior or the responsibility for it, why, then we could have a semblance of peace. But otherwise we weren't able to solve anything.

Another idea they had is, "If you forgive your spouse and ask them to forgive you, your marriage will be saved." Well, the Bible gives a number. It's four thousand, nine hundred by the way. Oh, that's seventy times seventy. Seventy times seven. Well, okay. Seventy times seventy, though, is four thousand, nine hundred times. And my guess is that I did it. I forgave my ex four thousand, nine hundred times in just a year — like, every year. And so that's a lot. That really is a lot. And you know what? It didn't help or



save our marriage.

Another idea they had is to “Take divorce off the table. Commit not to talk about or entertain the idea of divorce while you're trying to work things out.” Okay, well, we were married for twenty-five years. The very first time that divorce ever crossed my mind was in year twenty-one. You guys, that's twenty-one years of not only having divorce off the table, but of never having it even cross my mind in the first place, and nope. That didn't help or save our marriage.

Another idea: “Eliminate distractions that take you away from your marriage.” Well, hey, I was a stay-at-home mom. I lived to take care of my husband and our home, and I threw myself into it with passion. I'm the one who planned any date nights. He never did. In fact, the only time he'd go out with me is on our birthdays and our anniversary. He would agree then that if I planned that, he would go. So I planned our anniversary times together, not him. I made his meals, did his laundry, raised his kids, and helped out financially by being frugal and eventually starting my own home business to help pay for the growing needs of our growing family. There were no distractions. I was all in on my marriage, but that didn't help or save it either, because he wasn't in at all.

The next idea that they had on their list of how to save your marriage is, “Identify the source of your conflict. If you just knew why you're having conflict, then you could save your marriage.” Well, my husband insisted that we would not have any conflict if I just let him control me. So he would say that I was the source of our conflict. And I would say that I was the source of our conflict, too. My journals are full of self-deprecation, and, “Why can't I just rest in God's love for me and not expect my husband to love me?” and, “I'm such a loser and there's something so wrong with me.” So now I know that the source of our conflict was my husband's constant covert abuse and the repercussions of that on my life. But identifying that as the source of our conflict didn't save our marriage. It ended it.

Another idea that they had is to “Agree to use time-outs before things get heated.” When you're living with an abuser, you guys, this is utter nonsense. Abusers don't take time-outs. Hello. And if a victim tries to, she's going to get more abuse heaped upon her.

And then the last idea that they had is, “Be intentional about time together and date nights.” Again, this goes along with the earlier suggestion to eliminate distractions that will keep you from the marriage. I used to beg to have regular date nights. He refused. He didn't have time and we didn't have money. Now, we had both, but spending time on our marriage was not something he wanted to do, and unless there are two people

wanting to do this, that's not going to work. So all of these ten suggestions are great suggestions for a marriage that's normal but might be suffering from getting a little stale. But they are ridiculously out to lunch when it comes to an abusive marriage.

Focus on the Family claims that if you invest in just one of their marriage intensives, there is an eight in ten chance that you'll avoid divorce. I just want to point out that after my marriage intensive, we were asked to leave a review, and of course we left a rave review when we were hot off that intensive. It was intense, and plus, I had just invested \$7,500 in a miracle, so I was pretty invested in believing that I got what I'd paid for. Also, we didn't get a divorce until almost five years later, so I'm a little sus about their statistics. Sorry. Also, it would be interesting to know how many of those marriages just needed a tune up and how many of them were actually abusive.

If you want to save your marriage and you want to save some money on an intensive and your marriage is abusive, I'm just going to give you my own list of ten things to do as a wife. And if you do these ten things, I promise you your marriage will be saved, and I'm going to give you these ten steps for free. You're welcome.

1. Do whatever your husband says immediately and without argument.
2. Believe whatever he believes without argument.
3. Never give him feedback unless it's to tell him he's amazeballs.
4. Anticipate his every need in advance.
5. Give him sex the way he likes it, on his timetable, and as often as he wishes.
6. Keep the house immaculate.
7. Keep the kids quiet and polite and happy at all times.
8. Look beautiful at all times. However, he defines beauty, not you.
9. Always assume that he is right, godly, and good in everything he says or does.
10. Take responsibility for his moods and behaviors. Everything negative in his life is your fault from now on.

I'm telling you, you'll be one of those women on Facebook getting to post that you are



celebrating fifty years of marriage one day. You might not be alive at that point, and if you are, you might be a shell of yourself, but at least you'll have that one moment in the sun, and you'll have saved your marriage. Will it be worth it? What kind of value are we assigning to a woman that we willingly lay on the altar of marriage to sacrifice her? Why is there such an emphasis in today's version of Christianity of worshipping marriage, so much so that we are literally killing women and children for the sake of saving marriages? I personally think that needs to change, and I think that when people really value marriage, they'll change that.

So if you are considering a marriage intensive, here's the upside of it, okay? If your marriage just needs a tune-up, or maybe you do have a husband who's actually a man who wants to be self-aware, he wants to learn and grow and invest in you and your relationship, and you want to with him, then all of that is going to come out in a marriage intensive, okay? It's not going to be a miracle, though. A marriage intensive is just going to reveal what is really going on inside of the heart of that man and woman to begin with. A marriage intensive will equip you with some tools, but who you are as humans will determine what you go out and build after the intensive with those tools.

I'm sorry, but three days is not going to change your life. That's why people are in therapy to do healing and growth work over a long period of time, because it takes a long time to rewire your brain and to create new habits and new ways of looking at the world, new ways of feeling, and new ways of behaving. That is something that happens over time. It does not happen in a forty-eight hour time period.

On the other hand, if your marriage is truly abusive, you could attend a marriage intensive every year for the rest of your life, and at the end of the day, your marriage will still be abusive, because that is the nature of an abusive marriage.

That's all I have for you, you guys. If this podcast has been helpful for you, consider subscribing so that you get our new episode, which we put out every week, automatically added to your podcast app, and then consider leaving a rating and review.

Here's one of the recent reviews: "As a trauma therapist helping with abuse, this show is vital in exposing the seismic effect of religious abuse within marriages. The evil of abuse in marriage is handled with accuracy, compassion, and dignity. I was alerted to your podcast by a client who allowed me to help her deliverance out of a thirty-five plus year toxic marriage. She amazes me and is en route to being married to a friend, lover, and believer. Redemption at its finest. Thank you. May all you do return to you and yours tenfold."

So thank you for leaving that review. I really appreciate that. I especially love hearing from therapists, and I do hear from them quite a bit, actually, on the back end. I love working together in conjunction with them, because they can sit down with people one-on-one and dig into the nitty-gritty of your specific situation. If you can find a quality, licensed, experienced, skilled therapist, that's what they can do for you. That's what they offer to you.

And a lot of them will recommend to their clients that they join Flying Free in conjunction with their therapy, because within our program they'll be learning a lot of things during the week that they can then take to their therapist, and their therapists can fine tune it with them in person. And that's how we work together.

Anyway, I'd love for you to leave a rating and review. When you do that, you alert your podcast app that this podcast, Flying Free, is valuable, and then they will recommend it to other people who are similar to you. And that's how this podcast has grown and spread. I don't know if I've mentioned this before, but we did hit over a million downloads at some point last year, and it continues to grow because this information is vital for Christian women who are suffering — they are not being heard, seen, or understood. And I know that many of you have believed that you are alone in this, but just know this is an epidemic that we're part of, and we can all work together to do our part to expose the truth and set one another free. So thank you for listening to me this week, and until next time, fly free.