

DECLUTTERING IN A TOXIC ENVIRONMENT: INTERVIEW WITH DAWN MADSEN

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 222 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Dawn Madsen, also known as The Minimal Mom. Dawn Madsen and her family have been minimalists for over eight years. She's passionate about the message of simple living, and she reaches over one million women on YouTube every month with practical tips to simplify and declutter. Dawn is the friend you turn to when you're overwhelmed with your stuff and you want to free up more space and time for what matters most. So you're probably wondering, "What does this have to do with living in a destructive marriage?" That's exactly what we're going to talk about today, so buckle up. Welcome to the podcast, Dawn.

DAWN: Thank you. Thanks for having me, Natalie.

NATALIE: So most of my listeners are women of faith in emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships, and on this podcast we focus on strategies for dealing with the stressors of life while you're also managing a marriage that is painful and confusing. And we talk a lot about clutter, but it's the kind of clutter that we have in our brain space that keeps us stuck in confusion and overwhelm. We've never really talked about the practical stress of dealing with the clutter in our physical space.

I'd like to even say that maybe our physical space reflects, sometimes, our brain space and where we're at. And when we're feeling stressed and overwhelmed by constant criticism and critical thoughts and emotions of fear and shame and confusion and overwhelm, maybe our physical spaces will reflect that, which really just adds to the stress and overwhelm. So I'd like to talk about that a little bit. Can you tell us, how does the stuff in our house add to our stress?

DAWN: So there's so much research now that links clutter and stress. So we know the stress hormone, cortisol, especially as women, we're more sensitive to it. But when we are in a cluttered environment, our cortisol levels rise. And so if we are already in a stressful environment, in an emotionally-charged home, you can imagine, and I'm sure you felt this, right? Anytime your house gets a little cluttered we're all sensitive to it, but if you're already living with heightened stress levels, you are going to sense it even more. This stuff around you is telling you that you're unsafe and it is making your

house feel even worse so that there's never really anywhere we can go and fully let our guard down if our house is cluttered.

And I say all this not to add to your mental to-do list now, to be like, "Okay, now you have to go declutter your house, right? It's stressing you out," but just so that you're aware of it so that you know that this is probably contributing to the stress levels in your house right now.

NATALIE: Yeah, I can totally relate to this, too. When I think about my former marriage, my ex, he was a pack rat, so he would collect things just to have things. It made him feel secure to have lots of junk around. And I think I actually have some PTSD around stuff. But my strategy was just to clean one room, just have one room that was my room, and kind of have it be stress free.

So a question that obviously is going to come up a lot is, "I have a really hard time keeping up with everything that's going on in my house. So is there something wrong with me?" And I hear some version of this all the time in my community: "There must be something inherently wrong with me that I can't get anything together in my life." So what would you say to that?

DAWN: When I first really made this connection, I was reading a book. It's called "Becoming Mrs. Lewis." Have you read this? It's the story of C.S. Lewis' wife.

NATALIE: No.

DAWN: I highly recommend it. It was really enjoyable to read. They didn't get married until much later in life. So Joy Davidman, the main character, she was first married to a man who was an alcoholic. And she would lament about how she couldn't keep up with her housework, everything, it was just drudgery just trying to do the laundry and the dishes. And her spouse at the time, he made it very clear that she wasn't doing a good job with it, right? So it was very top of mind to her, very evident. But she also had a passion for writing, and so she felt very torn constantly, like, "I should be cleaning, but I want to write," and just never really being able to keep up on her house.

Later in life, then, when she eventually goes to live with C.S. Lewis and is staying at his house in Europe, she describes this day of sitting on the couch and the sun is streaming in and she's folding laundry, and she is the happiest that she has ever been. And so it was interesting to see that contrast, because she's a brilliant writer. She actually inspired many of C.S. Lewis' later works. She contributed to it. I mean, she is an incredible woman, and none of us would look at her and say, "Well, what is wrong with

her?" And I just thought that dichotomy of seeing what it was like to do housework in a somewhat toxic environment compared to a home where there was freedom and you were free to be yourself and appreciated for who you are, how then it didn't feel like such a big deal to keep up on the housework.

So I would say there's absolutely nothing wrong with you if you are living in a stressful environment right now. I know you've visited with Britt Frank before, but she talks about how we're literally often in fight, flight, or freeze mode, right? And so that is all about our own safety and survival. It's not about dishes and spring cleaning and deep cleaning and all of that kind of stuff. However, what I've learned now after living as a minimalist — it sounds kind of extreme, but just living with only the stuff we use on a daily basis — is that minimalism can really start to become a survival tactic when you are in these high stress situations that, as we've reduced the amount of stuff in our home, I can actually stay on top of it very easily now, when in the past that wasn't always the case. And so minimalism can be a really good tool, or simple living — you don't have to go quite that far — to even stand a chance at staying on top of your house when you're also dealing with all of this other turmoil.

NATALIE: Yeah, I love that. Can you talk a little bit just for anyone who might not know what minimalism is, because I'm guessing that means different things to different people, too. So tell us a little bit about that.

DAWN: So about eight years ago we had four kids ages four and under, and I got to be a stay-at-home mom. It's what I always thought I wanted to do, and so I just remember thinking, "I'm getting to do what I want to, but it is not enjoyable." And then I would feel guilty and I would always be watching the clock. I'm like, "Okay, four hours until Tom's going to be home. I should pick up the toys, I should get dinner ready, I should do the dishes." And then it'd be like, "Okay, two hours till he's going to be home. Really, you should get up and do something now." And then it's fifteen minutes, and I'm like, "Okay, if I really scramble, I can make some kind of difference before he gets home."

And so I was just always stressed out by all of the stuff in our home. And so I started looking for cleaning routines, schedules — that kind of stuff. I'm like, "Surely there's a printable I can find that's going to solve my problem." And I listened to a podcast that had Joshua Becker on it, and he's a pretty well-known minimalist now, and he just said, "Did you know that you don't have to have all of this stuff?" And I was like, "No, I did not know that." I thought I just had the stuff that you have when you have little kids in a household, now. And so as I started researching it more, I didn't know if getting rid of a bunch of our stuff would be the solution, but I'm like, "I have to try."

So over the next year, I got rid of anything that we were not using, currently using, or I didn't know for sure would use in the next coming year. It was totally an experiment, and what I found was as I started getting rid of more and more that there was so much more freedom and so much more peace in our home. It didn't solve everything, but it made the storms that came easier to weather. And so minimalism to me is just only keeping the stuff in your house that you use and that adds value. And so if we're not using it, it leaves our house pretty quickly, now. But again, then I started to find that I could actually manage our home.

NATALIE: Okay, interesting. So where would someone begin this whole process, especially if they're feeling just really overwhelmed? I think a lot of these women are depressed, too.

DAWN: Oh, yeah. You have been trying to fix your marriage. You have been trying to make sure that this isn't damaging your children. You are managing so much right now. Anyone who has been listening to this podcast for any amount of time, life has not gone... Managing a home does not look like what you thought it was going to be, right? And so again, I'm so sorry.

And what has been the most helpful for me, if you're feeling very overwhelmed right now, is to shift how we're looking at stuff. So what I realized as I was going through this process of getting rid of stuff from our home was that every single item in our home is inventory that we have to manage. For most of us as women, we are kind of the primary caretaker of all of this stuff in our home. Some of it might be your spouse's — like you said, your husband was a pack rat — but the day-to-day stuff, the kitchen stuff, the clothes, the kids, all the kids stuff, we as women are usually the ones that have to manage it.

And so if we can start looking at it as inventory that we have to manage, same as like a store has to manage inventory, we can start taking a little bit of the emotional pressure off of it. And so I would say there's nothing wrong with you, again, like we talked about before. You're not lazy, you're not unmotivated — you're just trying to manage too much stuff.

So what we need to do is lower the inventory in our home, and I think the best place to start is your kitchen, because we use the kitchen so much and many of us feel a lot of guilt around the kitchen — if we can't stay up on it, we're not getting the dishes done, we're wasting food, especially with grocery prices right now. I would start by simplifying the kitchen, and again, just asking yourself, "What stuff in here am I not using and what stuff do I just have duplicates of where the inventory has crept up?" Plastic cups and

plastic containers and water bottles and all those random things that come in. Any gadgets we thought were going to make our life easier, but they're not actually. What stuff are you just not using? And again, let's move it out, because if we can reduce the inventory in our kitchen, you're actually going to find that it's a lot easier to keep clean, and you might even find that you enjoy cooking a little bit more again, too.

NATALIE: Yes, yes. I did that. That was one of the first rooms that I decluttered. I was kind of proud of myself, because I didn't have anyone like you walking me... I just knew that my house was swallowing me up with stuff. I took over the kitchen. I even remember telling everyone, "Okay, the kitchen is mine and I will not have anyone else's things in here. It's just going to be my tools." And I got rid of so much stuff. And it was amazing to open up a cupboard... You could even start there. Just do one cupboard. Just open up one cupboard a week. Look at it, take inventory, and just pull out what you don't use. I had nine kids, so things would come into our house all the time as little gifts or little freebies when you went to the parades and all kinds of crap — plastic mugs that had people's logos on them. And it was like everyone in my family kind of thought like my husband did: "We've got to keep this; this is a treasure." And then no one would ever use it — it would just kind of stack up.

But I had a husband who really did not like to throw things out. In fact, he would go dumpster diving in other people's dumpsters, and so he would for sure go dumpster diving in our dumpster in our garbage can and pull things back out again and put them back into our house. So what do you do if you've got someone like that who you're living with?

DAWN: And I think, too, for many of us, the first thought that would go through our head if we're thinking like, "Okay, I'm going to declutter, I'm going to work on simplifying my house," is, "Well, what's he going to think? Is he going to think I'm up to something? Is he going to think that surely I have some scheme going on here," right? I think it's important to maybe have the conversation with them and say, "Okay, I am learning that I can't manage this much stuff. I want to have a clean kitchen. I want to cook dinner frequently. That is something that's important to me. I can't manage all of this stuff in here, so I'm going to work on clearing it out. If you have anything that's yours that you don't want me to touch, then it goes here." Give them one cabinet or one spot. "I will not touch anything in there. That is yours. But the rest of this stuff over here, I'm going to start working on that."

And one other tool that you can use — we call it a "Time Will Tell Bin" — you can literally take a Rubbermaid tote, a plastic bin, and anything you're not quite sure about — because even for yourself, you're going to come across stuff where you're like, "I spent

good money on that. Am I really just going to donate it?" — you can just put it aside, put it into the "Time Will Tell Bin" so you can test out having this simplified kitchen and put it in the basement, attic, garage, whatever. And then after three or four months if you haven't pulled anything back out of it, if he hasn't missed any of the stuff that went into it, your kids haven't missed it, then you'll feel more confident about decluttering that stuff after a few months have passed.

NATALIE: I think I would need longer than a few months for the "Time Will Tell Bin," but I will say this. This is just a strategy, a tactic that I did, and I don't know — maybe it's kind of sneaky — but I actually would take stuff that I knew that didn't even belong to him, okay? So I didn't do this with his stuff, but stuff that belonged to the kids or toys or whatever. I would take it and I would set it aside — I love the name of your bin — I would set it aside for about a year, and then if nobody missed it, then I would put it in bags and I would take it to Goodwill, and I wouldn't tell anybody. I wouldn't tell my kids, I wouldn't tell anyone. I could get away with that. Or I would take it to a garbage, like someone else's garbage, and put it in there.

DAWN: I think it's important, too, to mention that if you are in survival mode right now, which I know many of your listeners are, that this isn't the time to be a hero with decluttering. You don't need to make sure every item gets disposed of properly and goes to just the right donation place. And, "Well, my church in the summer does a drive for a mission, so I need to save it until then." This is not the time for that, because your mental health depends on this right now. If you could live in a highly simplified house right now, I think you can just even imagine that it would feel a lot better for you and your kids right now. So we have to be less worried about where it's getting donated to. And you might just be throwing stuff in the trash for right now, trusting that in other seasons of life you're going to be able to make better decisions about things. But right now this is survival decluttering, and so don't stress out too much about where this stuff is going to.

NATALIE: I am so glad you said that, because giving permission to yourself to do that is so powerful. So I'm really glad that you said that. I don't like to waste things either, and I would think, "There are people who could use this stuff, and so I need to..." And then it becomes one more thing that you have to do, drive to the Goodwill, have a special place where you're hiding it from everyone. It takes up mental space and emotional space in your life. Sometimes if you're really overwhelmed, it's like, I don't even want to go there to set that whole other thing up, too. But just throwing it in the garbage, if you can get away with that, do it.

DAWN: It's done. Absolutely.

NATALIE: Plus, sometimes I would even say to God, "God, I just pray that someone else out there is dumpster diving and could find this thing."

DAWN: Absolutely.

NATALIE: A lot of women will come into my program because they actually want support in getting out of their marriage, and some of them are preparing or even just thinking about the idea of leaving, and they're worried about the things that they actually really do care about that they don't want to lose or to have taken away from them. What would you recommend for those people?

DAWN: So it's really important that you have a memory bin for every person in your house. So it can be a small Rubbermaid container. You can pick the size based on how many memories you want to fit into it, but to find one container for each person in your house. And then that's where you're going to put the super special items. And what we're doing is we're curating a special collection of things that's very mobile and you know where it is. And then as you are working on cleaning or decluttering and you come across these things, now they have a home where they live.

For many of us, this stuff is kind of spread out amongst many boxes and bins and kind of floats around the house. And you'll be amazed by giving one spot where this very special stuff lives that it gives you a lot of peace of mind, because you're like, "Okay, I know all of my most special things are in here." And sometimes, especially when we're in these difficult situations, we can, even as women — I know you talked about your husband kind of hoarding a little bit — but as women, too, we can sometimes feel a sense of security by having lots of stuff. We might really cherish memories of when our kids are little. So, "I want to keep all of their baby clothes and their very special toys." And so we don't have any parameters around it, so we end up keeping way more than we actually need to remember that season and it gets very stressful and overwhelming.

So I really encourage you to try this. If you're thinking, "I couldn't possibly pair it all down to one bin or anything like that," you might be surprised that when you have something to compare it to, like, "Is it special enough to put into my memory bin, my child's memory bin?" that it helps to make those difficult decision for you. But again, by knowing everything is in one safe spot, it really does give a lot of peace of mind.

NATALIE: That's excellent. Okay, where can people find you? I'm imagining that there are some listeners that are going, "I can't even go there. I just can't even go there — I'm just so overwhelmed," but I also am pretty sure there are people out there listening that are going, "This is my next holy grail goal. This is where I can have control over my

life.”

DAWN: Yes, that's what I was just going to say. There's so much of our life right now — you can't control it, but you can actually control your kitchen and your physical environment. And it feels quite overwhelming on the onset, but as you just get into it... And you know, too, Natalie, right? When we are just ruminating on thoughts and our mind is spinning, there is something about standing up and doing something physical that actually helps to bring some order to our brain. And you'll be surprised that even as you're just picking up the kitchen that it's like, “Okay, I can do this.” And as you continue to work to simplify and declutter... I couldn't believe the confidence I began to gain in myself.

And I didn't mention this earlier, but there's this idea, it's called the “Silent to-Do List.” It's a book by Fumio Sasaki, and he says that every single item in our home is sending out a message, and most of those messages are negative because it's like, “Wash me, pick me up, clean me, do this, do that.” And so again, it kind of ties into that idea of inventory. But as we start to get rid of some of that stuff, because you probably have enough other negative messages coming at you, I could not believe the confidence I built in myself through that decluttering process, because I was like, “I can finish what I start. No — I can keep a home tidy.” I am a messy person. I don't have a cleaning routine. My house is not deep cleaned on a regular basis, but it's tidy. You could stop over and it's not a big deal.

And I started to gain this confidence, like, “No, I'm not lazy. I was just trying to manage too much inventory. I'm actually not unmotivated, either.” It was just simply too much, and that was jacking up my stress hormones and all of that kind of stuff. So if you just feel inadequate, incapable, seriously, what would I do? I would challenge you to set the timer for five minutes and stand up and just start tidying up and picking up stuff and just low-level decluttering, and I think you're going to find you start to feel better about yourself as well.

But to answer your question, I spend most of my time on YouTube. We have over seven-hundred videos to help you declutter. I don't want to drag this on any longer, Natalie, but there is something called body-doubling and it's very effective, especially for those who have ADHD, you get distracted or discouraged easily, and it's actually where you work with someone else. And what's fascinating to me is you can actually do that through YouTube videos, and that's why “Clean with Me” videos have become very popular, because you're actually body-doubling. So if you are the type that needs some kind of external motivation, which many of us do, you could really try putting on some of these YouTube videos in the background while you work, and many say that that's

very motivating to them.

NATALIE: That is so cool. I have never heard of that before. That is so cool. Wow.

DAWN: Actually, Natalie, could I ask you one other thing too?

NATALIE: Yeah.

DAWN: If any friends are coming over from my channel and maybe they haven't gotten a chance to get to know you or hear any of your podcasts, but we know this problem of emotional abuse and marriages is so prevalent now, so could you just list off just a few signs that women might look for in their own marriage if they're wondering like, "Well, maybe I might fall into this category, but I actually have no idea"?

NATALIE: Yeah. One of the signs is just how you feel in your body on a regular basis. In your relationship, if you are feeling a lot of confusion, a lot of low-level anxiety, or like you're walking on eggshells or like you have to manage the other person's emotions, you often wonder, "Am I going crazy," if you kind of have that thought going through your head a lot — those are all signs that you're probably in an emotionally abusive relationship, because we don't feel like that in healthy relationships. And oftentimes our body is going to tell us the truth about our relationship long before our brain is going to connect the dots.

Now, it's easy to connect those dots once you have the information. If you can get the information to match what your body's feeling, that's the key to unlocking, then, the next steps. "Now what do I do about this?" And so I actually have a quiz that you can go to. Just go to emotionalabusequiz.com, and you can take a quiz. On that quiz it will ask you a bunch of questions — I think there's maybe twenty questions — and you can just answer them, and then at the end, it will give you your score to kind of give you an idea of whether or not your relationship is healthy or destructive.

And then I wrote a book called, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage." And if you want a copy of the first chapter of that book and the first chapter of the companion workbook that goes with it, which is kind of like a little mini therapy session, I will send that to you if you take that quiz and you tell me where to send it, what email address you want me to send that to. And then beyond that, I have a podcast. It's this. This is the podcast. And there are over two-hundred episodes. We just dive right into this, everything that has to do with living with someone who is creating these feelings of confusion and pain in your life.

DAWN: I like what you say, Natalie, that I think often we're looking for someone to be all good or all bad, and I think that's what can be really confusing about it, is often these people, they have these wonderful sides to them too, right? And it's like, "Oh, but everybody else loves them," you know? And so it can be very confusing, and so it doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing type of situation for you to find yourself resonating with this by any means.

NATALIE: Exactly, exactly. I work mostly with Christian women, women of faith, and they are always looking at themselves and trying to figure out, "What can I do to make things better? How can I be a better Christian? How can I be a better wife? How can I be a better mother?" And it is confusing when their partner is often putting on a really good front to everyone else, but on the back end there's all this turmoil in your own relationship. And also confusing when sometimes he actually is well-behaved with you and is showing you love and sometimes you do get the things that you need from him. That was my relationship, and there were so many perks and good things that I got from my husband that he was really good at offering, and then there were all of these other things.

I just would say one thing, the big, overarching problem in a destructive relationship — and that is when the other person isn't able to take responsibility for their behavior. If you feel like in your relationship nothing ever gets resolved and there's never any resolution to any of your conversations, the only way to peace is to just shove it under the rug and pretend it didn't happen, that is probably the number one sign that there is.... It's really extreme dysfunction. You might not be getting hit or anything, but that is extreme dysfunction. And that is actually very destructive to your body and your brain and your emotional wellbeing. Thank you for asking that.

DAWN: It's confusing for a lot of people. because like you say, if it's not physical abuse, then it's kind of like, "Oh, well, just go to marriage counseling. What's the big deal?"

NATALIE: Exactly, exactly. And you can go for years trying to figure out what is going on. So people can find you on your YouTube channel, and I'll put the links, but just verbally, what is that?

DAWN: Yeah, so if you go to YouTube and search "The Minimal Mom," or I also have a website called theminimalmom.com, and we have some different courses. Natalie, you have a wonderful membership community. We have a membership community too if you need extra support in decluttering — we have that there. You can find that at theminimalmom.com as well.

NATALIE: Fabulous. Thank you so much for being on the Flying Free Podcast. It was so much fun to talk to you. It was fun to do something a little bit different and go down a little bit of a different rabbit trail this time. And then for those of you who are listening, thank you so much for joining us today. Until next time, fly free.