

HOW TO HELP KIDS HEAL FROM THE EFFECTS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN THE HOME

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 24 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today it's just me, and we're gonna be doing Part Two of a little mini parenting series where we talk about co-parenting with an emotionally abusive spouse or ex. And I'm going to be pulling from a lesson in the eleventh course in the private Flying Free educational and support group.

And before we actually dig into the lesson, I want to quickly talk about that just a little bit, because at the time of this recording, which is June 10, 2019, we are going to be opening that group up again at the end of this month. So if you are interested in more information, you can go apply to join the program at joinflyingfree.com. [Flying Free is now accepting applications at all times and opens very regularly! We would love to see you on the inside.] So if you're ready to jump on board, we'd love to have you join us.

In that group, there's several benefits to being part of that. One is that you get support from peers, so women just like you who are dealing with emotionally abusive spouses. Some of the women are learning how to get stronger so that they can handle their emotionally abusive spouse in a more productive way. Some women are in the process of getting out of their relationship, and some are going through divorce and some are actually already divorced. So all kinds of people.

So these women are able to connect inside of the private forum, but we also have courses, expert workshops, and more. In the past we've had people like Bob Hamp and Jimmy Hinton and Cindy Burrell and Megan Owen and others join us for expert workshops. You also have access to what we call Butterfly Stories, and those are where we hear from another woman who's actually done the whole journey of being married to an emotionally abusive spouse for several years — it's often two or three decades — and then she makes the journey out, and then what does her life look like now that she's out? So we have several of those.

We also have live Q&As every month, and we also have live Sisterhood Gatherings every month where we actually get online and we get to see each other face to face and discuss. I try to pick a different topic each month that we can discuss. So for example, this last month we talked about counseling. So we talked about what therapy modalities have been most helpful to different people and what has not been helpful,

different tips as far as finding a good counselor, that kind of thing. And everyone shares their own expertise and their own experience. So it's a really great group. It's a very close community of women. Fifty-three of us are going to be gathering this coming weekend in North Carolina for a little mini retreat, and I'm really excited about that. And we have a great time and we learn and grow together. So this lesson is going to be drawn from within that Flying Free group, and let's begin.

This lesson is going to pull ideas and quotes from Heather Forbes' book called "Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: Volume Two." You can apply these principles to your own healing as well. Some of us needed to parent ourselves properly before we could actually parent our children from a place of wholeness. So you can work on both simultaneously. There are actually two books in her series. In her first book, Heather Forbes lays down two foundational principles. Number one: All behavior arises from an unconscious, fear-based state of stress, and number two: There are only two primary emotions: fear and love. So basically her theory is that all negative behavior is a sign of a stressed-out child working from a framework of fear.

She drives home the fact that we absolutely need to have a healthy self-regard before we can most effectively parent traumatized children. In other words — you've heard this before — you get the oxygen mask on yourself first, and then you're going to have the life and the strength to put it on your kids. This is just one more motivator, okay, to keep working towards your own healing.

Here is a quote from her book. Here's how Heather Forbes puts it: "The past is the past and only exists as a memory in your mind. The future is only a thought in your mind. It is never a reality. Nothing can ever happen in the past, and nothing can ever happen in the future. Life only happens in the present moment, and your children need you in the now. To live in this moment, it takes loving yourself and accepting yourself at a deeper level than you have ever been able to do in the past. It takes going beyond just being comfortable in your own skin, but actually becoming your own best friend. Developing this loving and healthy relationship with yourself is the key to developing a healthy relationship with your child. You will be opening up the space within you to be present with your child, which will simultaneously be creating the exact environment he needs to change his brain, his mind, his heart, and ultimately his behavior."

That's the end of that quote. When children are traumatized, they have a lot of experience with extreme emotions, so one of our goals is going to be to provide a peaceful, safe environment for them to emotionally rest in. We want to reduce the opportunities they have to experience conflict and extreme swings from deep fear to rage to euphoria. We want to regulate their environments and then teach them how to

regulate their inner world as well.

One of the most important ways that we do this is through empathy, and here's another quote from her book: "Empathy is the ability to put yourself in the perspective of someone else, essentially walking in another's shoes. There is an emerging field within brain science called 'social neuroscience.' Social neuroscience focuses on how the brain functions in social interactions and studies the circuitry in two people's brains that become activated while they interact.

Scientists have determined it is our mirror neurons that are responsible for our ability to feel what others are feeling. Mirror neurons reflect back an action we observe in someone else, making us mimic that action or have the impulse to do so. This gives us the ability to be empathetic with someone else and literally feel them at a neurological level. Studies are showing that is indeed our default wiring to be empathetic and to attend to the needs of others.

What throws us off track from this natural state is stress. When we are stressed out, we are self-absorbed and we can only focus on ourselves, which keeps us from being able to make use of these mirror neurons in human relationships. We lose the ability to empathize with others and with our children."

So there are so many implications in this to recovering from emotional abuse. I know for sure as a stressed-out parent dealing with emotional abuse on a daily basis, it was very, very difficult for me to get into the worlds of my children when they most needed me. We were all under extreme amounts of just crazy-feeling stress and I needed to be on my A-game, and I wasn't able to because I was also under that stress. So when a person is stressed, their amygdala — that's the part of the brain that reacts by fighting, running, or freezing, and it's way in the base of your brain, okay? It's your reptilian brain — that part of your brain goes into overdrive, shouting so loud that the prefrontal cortex, which is your logical, thinking, reasoning part of your brain, shuts down temporarily.

And then you're going to get these stress hormones that are released like cortisol, and they are going to go into your bloodstream, and these hormones are going to affect all of your other body systems. So when people say that emotional abuse is not physical abuse, they're absolutely and completely and totally wrong. They're just ignorant as to how all of this happens in your body.

When a child is experiencing this kind of stress on a regular basis, they lose their ability to regulate themselves. They don't even know what it feels like to be regulated. Their

stress tolerance goes way down, which means they constantly live just a few seconds away from falling apart. Your challenge as the parent is going to be to help your child learn how to regulate his body. They need to learn how to keep their amygdala calm. When you understand that this is actually a physiological issue and not a moral issue, you will be encouraged to keep working on this with them. We tend to think that when our kids are good that means that we're being a good parent, and likewise, when our kids are bad then we're being a bad parent. Instead of using the words "good" and "bad," we need to try to get into the habit of using the words "regulated" and "dysregulated."

Here's another quote from Heather Forbes' book: "We must remember that a child caught in this place of survival cannot partake of or value a parent's point of view more than his own. The road to healing comes in the parent first valuing and partaking in the child's viewpoint, no matter how illogical or irrational it may seem to the parent. For the child it is his reality — thus, it is his truth. Validating him, understanding him, and respecting him" (notice that agreeing with him is not listed here) "is going to create the path to moving the child from fear to love. As the child experiences these qualities, he is learning how to do the same for others. He is experiencing a shift from survival to relationship. This type of experiential knowledge far out-powers a parent lecture on how and why he should be caring about others or why he should be doing what he was told," okay? That's the end of that quote.

So in order to help rewire your child's brain, you have to rewire your own brain first. If you can keep your amygdala calm or regulated when your child's amygdala is freaking out, you will have a much better chance of helping him rewire. But when we react in our own fear by yelling, shaming, giving vengeful-type consequences, or emotionally abandoning the child, he is not going to be able to safely rewire his own brain. The rewiring of his negative programming will only happen through his relationship with you, otherwise the cycle is going to continue.

Here's another great quote from the book: "You no longer have to accept the negative thoughts and programming you absorbed as a child. These do not work for you anymore, and they certainly are not working for you in your relationship with your child. Beliefs are nothing more than feelings of certainty based on your experiences or what somebody told you. You always have the opportunity to create new, positive beliefs within yourself and programs that work for your life.

Ask yourself these questions: 'Whose life am I living — my thoughts and beliefs, or somebody else's?' 'Am I going to accept the limitations and the false interpretations put on me, or am I going to take a different path to happiness, harmony, peace, and love?'

'Am I going to choose the path of the victim who suffers and struggles, or am I going to choose the path of transformation to be the best parent I can be?' It takes training yourself just as you would train to run a marathon. It takes self-discipline and self-awareness to tap into the power within yourself. It starts with your thoughts, because your thoughts do matter. Your thoughts create your reality." So that's the end of that quote.

Always remember that the behaviors that you see, they look like anger, disrespect, and rebellion, okay? And you know, the Christian world will say, "Spank them. Spank the living tar out of them." But you know what? Underneath all of those behaviors, what you've got is a person who is afraid, a human being who is crying out for unconditional love, validation, and acceptance. Again, that does not mean that you agree with them on something — it just means that you validate their experience, okay? You listen, you care, you're empathic. This is what we need and this is what our kids need too.

So what do we do to help our children learn to regulate themselves? First of all, we adjust our expectations. Here's a quote from the book: "In an effort to avoid losing this love, children become so overwhelmed they simply cannot function under this amount of stress. Parents become frustrated and disappointed due to the child's unmet expectations. The child feels this increase in stress and regresses further from his developmental capabilities, and the negative neurological feedback loop is in full swing between parent and child.

The parent's fear of the child not being a capable adult becomes knotted up with the child's fear of not being loved and accepted. The parent's fear of not being a good parent due to the performance of his child adds into this fear cycle. All these fears ping pong back and forth, breeding more and more fear into this already insecure relationship between the parent and the child. Avoiding this cycle or putting an end to its viciousness becomes the parent's responsibility. Realigning parental expectations is an absolute necessity in finding peace in your home."

I'll just interrupt the lesson here just really quick to say that a lot of times we think — and you hear this — that if you don't maintain a two-parent home that your children, their lives will be destroyed. But do you see the connection between living in a two-parent home in which one parent is emotionally abusing his spouse and his children and there's this constant stress and constant cognitive dissonance and constant fight, flight, or freeze mode going on, and a home where the parents maybe are separated or divorced but where the child is living in a place where everyone is healing, where everyone is getting better, where everyone's getting help and counseling and learning and growing? There's no comparison. There's just absolutely no comparison.

All right, the second thing that we can do to help our children learn to regulate themselves, besides adjusting our expectations of them, is to understand what the reenactment cycle is. Our children have core beliefs based on things that they have experienced in their lives. For example, maybe your child has a core belief that she is unlovable and that her world is unsafe. Now, the symptoms of her core belief may be that she argues, pushes you away, and thinks that if she gives other people things that they will love her. The problem is that these behaviors actually reinforce her core beliefs. The only way to break the cycle is by introducing a strong support system response to those behaviors.

So her support system — this would be like her parents — are either going to be validating or they're going to be invalidating. She is testing to see if her core beliefs are true or not. You will either affirm her core beliefs are true or you will show her by your strength and your calm response that her core beliefs are not true — that she is loved no matter what. You are a strong ally in her life. You will help her learn boundaries. You will help her learn that she has power to make good choices for herself, and that when she messes up, you will still be in her life, loving her through it and giving her help with consequences and training. So keep in mind that your response is less about your words and more about your body language, your tone of voice, and your facial expressions.

And this is where the challenge lies, right? Because when we're in the mode, it's hard for us to make sure that our body language and our tone of voice are affirming and loving and kind. You want to demonstrate by your body language that you are calm, that you are listening, that you're understanding, that you empathize with her feelings. If she's sitting, go ahead and sit. If she's standing, stand. Again, you don't have to agree or give in. You just need to listen and stay calm. Hold your ground with an empathic and honoring attitude. Use neutral interaction to stay out of power struggles. When we buckle under our children's pressure, they go back to those false core beliefs and the cycle begins all over again.

All right, the third thing we want to do to help them regulate themselves is practice something called “linking.” Linking is basically when you take an incident or a past experience and you rewrite the script so that you are choosing a healthier response or behavior in the story. So you imagine yourself doing something different from what you actually did. Maybe you did this after an abusive incident where you went back and you were like, “Okay, I did this. When he said this, I said this. I'm going to rethink that and do it differently this time in my head.” You might have been trying to figure out a way to make it have a different ending. Well, that's kind of what I'm talking about.

But here's a little more detailed explanation. This exercise is going to rewire your brain in really helpful ways, all right? And by the way, you do this when you're in a state of calm regulation, okay? Once you begin to imagine yourself doing these things differently in a stressful situation, your prefrontal cortex, which is the gray matter in the front of your brain, is going to begin to talk louder — and by the way, that's the part of your brain that is like the thinking/reasoning part of your brain — that part of your brain's going to talk louder than your amygdala the next time you find yourself in a similar situation. And then you're going to end up discovering that you actually have options. You don't have to go in the same cycle every time.

So here's an example from my life. I have a special needs teenage daughter who can get very violent. She has physically hurt me on numerous occasions over the course of many years. Now, at the time that I wrote this, she had not hurt me in almost a year because of the day treatment that she was getting. As of the time of this recording, she actually not only physically assaulted me, but she got arrested for it. So we are regressing just a bit in her life.

But anyway, at the time that I wrote this, this is what I wrote: “When she begins to ramp up, I start to hear shark music. You know, like “Jaws.” And that shark music scares me. My heart starts racing and my amygdala starts getting louder and louder while my prefrontal cortex begins to fade away. So what I've had to practice doing is telling myself, ‘It's just shark music. There's no danger here. I don't have to run away. I will stay calm and respond calmly.’

Now, I've had to imagine doing that, and then when I'm in the real situation, I've had to actually practice doing that. Now, I'm not always successful, but when I am, the difference it makes in my interactions with her is huge. On the other hand, when I succumb to the fear and allow myself to panic, I create an atmosphere of very loud fear and dysregulation that envelopes both of us, and we both fall apart.” We both have PTSD, by the way.

So my point is this: Practice linking calm responses to your past experiences so that you can start creating new options in your brain that are going to present themselves to your brain the next time that you are in adverse circumstances with your child or with someone else who's causing you pain and fear. This is an adulting skill that is going to serve you well in your future, and it's definitely something that you want your kids to be able to do as well. So walk them through this — don't you just do it. Help them to figure out how to do this as well. And then you can each challenge one another to get better and better at it.

Another thing that you can do to help them regulate is verbal praise. And this is absolutely essential to making connections with traumatized children of all ages. It involves seeing them and letting them know that you see them. It's super simple. It's basically a formula, and it goes like this.

You say their first name. I'm just going to pick a name out of the hat. We'll just say Jill. "Jill, I see that you are..." fill in the blank. "I see that you are brushing your teeth." "I see that you are sitting on your bed." "I see that you are reading a book." "I see that you are eating your food." The behavior has to be either positive behavior or neutral behavior. Neutral behavior would be sitting on the bed or staring at the wall — whatever. Positive behavior would be doing something positive like playing with your sibling or reading a book or something like that — helping out a little brother.

So you say that. So, "Jill, I see you doing such and such. Now you will be able to..." and then you fill in the blank with a benefit to them, okay? So it has to be something that's going to benefit them. So, "Jill, I see that you're brushing your teeth. Now you will have shiny teeth," or "Now you will have good breath, and when you go to school, the kids will like your minty fresh breath," okay? That's a benefit to her. "Jill, I see you are reading a book. Now it's like you went on a trip somewhere and you didn't even have to go anywhere, and now you have that experience in your mind and you'll always carry that with you for the rest of your life." Or, "Jill, I see that you are cleaning your room. Now you could dance in your room if you wanted to, and you wouldn't accidentally step on anything." "Jill, I see that you're making your bed. Now every time you walk in your room today, it's going to feel so good because your room is going to look amazing," okay?

Now, what you don't say is you don't say, "Jill, I see that you are helping your little brother. Thank you!" Now, you can say that, but that's not a benefit to them. And you don't want to say a benefit to you, like, "Jill, I see that you're vacuuming our kitchen floor. I really appreciate that, because I love a clean kitchen floor." No, no, no, no, no, no, no. That's a benefit to you. You want to say, "I see you, I see you," you want to say their name, and then you want to say the benefit to them.

So here are some wrong ways to do it. I'll just give you some examples of wrong ways. "Jennie, thank you for taking out the garbage. Now I don't have to do that." So you see what's wrong with that? You didn't draw attention to the benefit it was to Jennie. You focused on yourself and the benefit to you. So you want to shift the focus to their benefits so they can begin to see the cause and effect of their choices.

"Peter, I see you brushed your teeth earlier tonight. Good job!" So what's wrong with

that? Well, you need to notice what they are doing in the present, not in the past, not an hour ago. And you also forgot to tell them how it benefited them. So telling them “Good job” does not help them see the benefit to them. And don't just look for the good things they do, because this might be really hard if you have a child who doesn't really very often do good things. Notice everything they do, even if it's just sitting on the couch. “Jennie, I see you sitting on the couch contemplating your belly button.” You don't have to put that in there. I'm just trying to be funny. “Now you are practicing just being in the present and you are calm and at peace.”

Now, I learned this skill when I took a parenting class through Options Family Services, which is a local place where my daughter was going to day treatment, and the instructor made us give twelve verbal praises a day to our kids. I think you should try it. I think you're going to be amazed at what it does in their lives.

Another thing you can do to help them regulate is to practice affirmations. Heather Forbes writes, “Affirmations are an amazingly effective way to reprogram yourself. They are software for your mind. If you have never used affirmations or if you've had a negative opinion of them, here's an example to try. It's an affirmation especially designed to help you in your relationship with yourself and your children. Use this affirmation or one you create as a way to update and revise your current software.”

I'll just give you a couple of the affirmation examples for those of you who are listening. For example, “I know full well that I have the ability to remain in a state of love under all conditions, all circumstances, and at all times. I accept that now.” “The negative reactions of my children will bounce off me because I am confident in who I am, and I am committed to loving myself fully and completely. I accept that now.” “I refuse to believe that my child's negativity is an indication of my ineffectiveness. I accept that now.”

And then here's another thing that you can do to help teach them regulation: Just simply learn and teach emotional regulation skills. So one of these is progressive muscle relaxation. That's where you lay down and you just tighten up and relax the various muscles all the way through your body. You can do that once in the morning, you can do that once at night before you go to bed, you can teach them how to do it when they're feeling dysregulated.

There's something called STOPP. It's a strategy that will help you in the heat of the moment when you are dealing with intense emotions. The S stands for “Stop.” Just pause for a moment. The T stands for “Take a breath.” Notice your breathing as you breathe in and out. The O stands for “Observe,” so observe your thoughts. Where's

your focus of attention? What are you reacting to? What sensations are you noticing in your body? And then the P is "Pull back and put in some perspective." What's the bigger picture? They want you to pull out and take a bird's eye view of the situation. What's another way of looking at the situation? What would a trusted friend say to me right now? Is this thought a fact or an opinion? What is a more reasonable explanation? How important is this? How important is this going to be six months from now? And then there's another P, so this word STOPP actually has two P's to it, but the last P is "Practice what works."

If you enjoyed this lesson, this is just a sampling of one lesson that is found in the Flying Free courses. There are ten lessons in each course and there are twelve courses to take you through a year. And we also do so many other things, too. So please do check out this group. I hope to see you on the inside of that. Until next time, fly free.