

WHAT AN EMOTIONAL ABUSE SURVIVOR NEEDS

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 243 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to answer one question from a listener, and here it is.

LISTENER: Hi. I was curious what advice you would give to close friends and supporters of women who are in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages. I've listened to a lot of your podcast episodes and really appreciate them, and they have really helped me to grasp the situation that my best friend is in in her marriage. And I've really taken to heart your repeated message about the importance of restoring power and decision-making to women who are in these difficult situations and not taking that power away from them, and how you won't advise women that they ought to leave or ought to stay, but instead just reinforce again and again that it's their job to take ownership of their lives and make decisions, and you want to provide them with resources to do that. And I love that message.

So I was curious, kind of stepping beyond that, if you had any other suggestions for people like myself who are just really close confidants to women who are in the midst of marital turmoil who are deciding if they want to stay or leave. To me, it's really obvious that she should leave and soon, and that she's put too much into this relationship — way too much — and the prospects for change happening at the level it would need to for them to have a healthy relationship just seems incredibly unrealistic. So I guess I'm asking if you have any advice for how to be a supportive and loving friend and a safe space and to give wise counsel, but without overstepping if that makes sense. Thank you so much, and again, so grateful for your work.

NATALIE: I think you really answered the question beautifully already. Basically, hold space for them to come to their own conclusions about what to do. I know that you think that she should get out, and there's nothing wrong with expressing that, actually, but just make sure that you're clear that this is your opinion and it may or may not be the right timing for her or the right choice for her right now.

Women who feel controlled are scared to make their own decisions. Other people have made those decisions for them and they don't have a lot of confidence in their own decisions. So they're more apt to ask other people for advice or like, "What would you

do, and/or what should I do?"

And then a lot of us, especially those of us who are in religious environments, we're always very... Well, it's not just those of us in religious environments. It is everyone. Human beings tend to think that we all have the answers. I do, you guys do, we all do. And we're very happy to tell other people what we think. Everyone just needs to have their own podcast, right? Okay, I'm getting totally off-topic.

But my point is that we want to give them the permission to make their own decisions. Plus, here's the other problem: When we tell other people what to do, especially when they're in situations like this, it puts us in this precarious position of taking responsibility for someone that we're not really responsible for. Yes, we're responsible to support and love and hold space for them, but we are not responsible for their choices or for the outcomes of their choices. I tell women, "You're the one with skin in the game of your life, not me. You have to make the decision that's going to be best for you."

And yeah, there's going to be some good things that come from that decision and also some really hard things no matter what you decide. It's never going to be like, "Well, if I make the right decision then it's going to be all roses and rainbows, and if I make the wrong decision all hell's going to break loose."

No, it doesn't matter which way you go, there are going to be some good perks about it... I mean, think about it. There are perks for staying, too. For example, not always, but some women are more financially stable if they stay. And that gets really quite problematic if they end up leaving. Some women who have really small children don't want to leave and then know that their small children are going to be in the care of this man without the woman there to mitigate any abuse that the man might be doing to the children. These are serious things that they have to consider, and not everyone is going to just be like, "Oh yeah, I'm just going to get out." So I just think holding space for the situation and letting people come to their own conclusions and learn on their own.

So it sounds like you're kind of looking for more practical ways to help a survivor, and then I just think the best thing to do is to ask that person what they need because it's going to be very specific to their particular situation. Some might need help getting to a domestic violence shelter for a consultation or to check in. Some might need you to go with them to visit attorneys because that's kind of a scary thing to do. Some might need help finding a good therapist. Some might want to go through a book with you about emotional abuse. There are lots of great books out there. I'll throw mine in the ring, and my book is called, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage. A Christian

Woman's Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse," and it has a workbook that goes with it. So small groups can go through it together or you can go through it with one other person, and that would be really helpful.

Beyond that, I thought it might be kind of fun to read something... Well, fun? I don't know — maybe it's not fun, but interesting, maybe, to read something that I read to the church elders of my church, the church that excommunicated me, Bethlehem Baptist in the Twin Cities. I read this letter to them back in January of 2015. And now, at that time, I was separated from my husband. We separated in September of 2014, so this is just a few months later, but I was still hopeful that the elders could maybe help him change so that we could get back together again.

So Jason Meyer had just come on as the new lead pastor of Bethlehem. He has since left now, but he was the replacement for John Piper. And he was very keen on exposing abuse in the church. And someone had told him about me and one of my friends who was also in an abusive relationship and has since divorced. And so this pastor asked us if we could meet in his home along with his wife, some of the other pastors, the chairman of the elder board and their wives, and then a couple of counselors who were also members of Bethlehem. And I wasn't really sure at that point if they could help me. I won't go into the details, but up to that point, I'd already been trying to get help and had been grossly mistreated by one other elder and one pastor. And at that point in time, I was like, "I'm not going to even try to get help from these people anymore." But now they were taking initiative with me and saying, "Oh, we're so sorry that this happened to you and you can trust us now. And I know that would be really hard for you to trust us now, but you really can, and we will believe you."

And so before we met, they asked if this other lady and I would send the group in advance a synopsis of how we had already tried to get help at that church and failed to get the help that we needed. And then they promised that they would read these summaries to prepare for our in-person meeting. So because I had already sent that summary, I thought, "You know, this is a great opportunity for me to actually share my thoughts about, you know, based on what I had just gone through with this church and a couple of other churches, how they could be better helpers for women who come forward and say, 'I think I'm being emotionally abused.'"

So here's what I wrote. I wrote this, and then I read it out loud to them: "Abuse strikes women of all backgrounds and personalities. I would never have dreamed that I could be taken in by any kind of abuse. I didn't even realize that was what was happening to me. Even now it feels strange to use that terminology, and I am uncomfortable with it. Each time I would step forward to get help with my marriage, the helpers would see me

as being perfectly capable of dealing with our problems. My husband, on the other hand, would appear insecure and quiet and browbeaten. I couldn't get anyone to help me figure out the mysterious dynamic that was at play in our marriage.

So these are my thoughts about how a church could help or hurt a target of abuse and her children. And these thoughts are based on my personal experience of twenty-three years of dealing with covert abuse, as well as listening to the experiences of other women in our church and reading extensively on the subject.

1. Very few, if any, Christian women want to go to an elder or pastor and air their husband's dirty laundry. So, when one of them musters up the guts to do so, that should send a message right from the get-go that there is something serious going on in that marriage. The woman may come across angry. This is because she has likely been dealing with stuff for years and years and is desperate for help. The most hurtful thing for me throughout this process was that with every encounter with a people-helper, I was the one who was vilified for being triggered by his abuse. So then the focus became my reaction to the abuse rather than his abuse of me.

People-helpers need to be okay with anger. Anger is part of grief work. It can be addressed after the original problem has been handled. Most of the time when that happens, the anger dissipates because relief and closure come. I didn't want to be angry. I wanted to be a sweet, gentle soul. I was forced into this adversarial role because nobody would help me, and that only increased the anger and frustration. This type of anger is rooted in deep hurt and loss, and that needs to be grieved.

2. There are many reasons a woman is afraid to step forward. Here are a few that I experienced: 'Well, I'm a sinner too. Would I want my husband to tattle on my sins?' So the husband regularly is using this tactic of sin leveling on the woman, so she's paranoid about this. Or she might think, 'I will betray my husband. I want to be a faithful wife and protect his reputation. He will be humiliated, and I don't want to see that happen.' This is because on the back end, the husband is saying things to make her feel guilty if she should step forward. Or she might think, 'I'm afraid my husband will dislike me even more, and I want him to love me. This will ruin any hopes of that happening now. And what if nobody believes me?' The husband is treating her poorly when she tries to get help. He makes her feel like she's stupid, like she's overreacting, making a mountain out of a molehill. He makes sure that she knows he is disgusted with her weakness and vulnerability.

She might think, 'Is it really that big of a deal? Why can't I just deal with it on my own?' Again, the husband is feeding this mentality, and when others make light of anything

she shares, she feels even more stuck, like the problem is really hers and she should be able to get it together and solve it. But she can't because, in reality, the problem is her husband's beliefs and behaviors. She might think, 'Well, I will be admitting failure that I can't hold this marriage together anymore or that I'm not trusting God enough. I should try harder to respond in more godly ways.' The husband on the back end is shaming her because of her responses to his crazy-making. He's telling her that she isn't godly and that she's out of control. He's telling her that others believe that she is a problem in order to shame her and put fear in her heart about what others think.

She might think, 'I feel sick every time I think about it. Maybe that's the Holy Spirit telling me not to tell anyone.' Or she might think, 'My husband won't trust me anymore if I step forward. The heart of a husband should be able to safely trust his wife.'" (That's a Bible verse.) "Or she might think, 'What will everyone think of us? I can't let anyone know.'

3. When they finally do begin to tell their story — if they can get past all of those roadblocks — the listener should be aware that they are really only hearing the tip of a huge iceberg of garbage, one or two decades of pain and sorrow. Each example that they give might seem minor, but they represent thousands of similar examples that have been stuffed under the rug and not resolved. Because of the ongoing emotional trauma, they can't even remember most of the incidents. After one of my husband's crazy-making sessions, I was unable to recall what was said even just ten minutes later. My brain was total mush and my stress was over the top.

4. I've read dozens of books on this subject over the course of the last three years," (this is now in 2015) "and they all concur that the root problem is power and control. But I would add that the root problem of all abusive relationships is a refusal to recognize sin and repent. They don't believe they have a problem. It is a common theme in every single abusive relationship, even in the men who repent with their lips. They'll say, 'I'm sorry,' but they keep doing it, they're excellent manipulators. That's not true repentance because there's no change in their attitude or their behavior. They're just going through the necessary hoops to get their control back. Crocodile tears.

The vast majority of emotional abusers fly under the radar because the rest of the population can't conceive of the fact that anyone wouldn't act out of good conscience and empathy. We view them the same way we view ourselves, and so we're totally confused. Once we identify what they are doing and the reality of how they view the world, then their behaviors make sense and we can deal with them on their own playing field.

5. It is rare for an abusive man to change. Why? Because they don't believe they have a problem. How can you change something that isn't a problem for you? And if it's only a problem for your wife, then it still isn't a problem for you when you're an abuser.

6. When church elders and pastors agree with the abusive man that his problem is minimal and most likely exacerbated by a sinful wife who's not meeting his sexual needs properly or whatever other needs he might have, the abusive man's conviction of his relative innocence is even more solidified in his mind. I know my husband acts like everything is totally normal when he comes home to visit the kids or do some repair work on the house or the car because he truly believes he is a wonderful Christian man. He believes he is long-suffering, waiting patiently for his angry wife to come around to seeing things properly.

And nobody here is telling him any different. The only consequences he's experiencing are from me. I have had to, by myself with no support, implement consequences in his life so he will have the opportunity to wake up, repent, and change. But as long as he has support and love and encouragement from church, he can continue in his delusion that he is a wonderful husband and father while I am an unbiblical wife.

7. Women who have been systematically torn down emotionally over the course of their adult life are broken on many levels, even if they have maintained a relationship with God. I was a virgin when I married. I waited for the right one. I prayed for my future husband, I read my Bible every single day, and had a prayer life. I did all the right things to ensure that I would glorify God with my life and have a godly marriage.

When things started going wonky within the first six months, I knew I was sliding into a dark hole from which there was no escape. But I hunkered down, believing God would do something miraculous. He would use me to help my husband. After all, isn't that what a wife is for? But my husband didn't want any help. He was already perfect. I was the bad one. I had a very sensitive conscience, and when John told me that," (I use the word "John" in here just because I don't want you guys to know what his real name is) "when John told me I was angry or domineering or wearing the pants because I expressed an opinion that was different from his or I dared to tell him he hurt me, I would be mortified and I would try hard to be more submissive and not give him feedback whenever possible.

I would say I was sorry and ask for forgiveness over and over and over again, but he was never sorry. He never acknowledged that he did anything wrong. I would get angry because he wouldn't take any responsibility for anything he did. He blamed and shamed me for everything, and that grinds a person down after twenty-three years.

As our kids got older, he did the same thing to them. This creates profound confusion, false guilt mixed with real guilt, because where's the line between what I'm responsible for and what he's responsible for? It creates a sense of loneliness and the knowledge that you are not loved or safe. Yet people like this can be very nice too, so you slide easily into this world of fantasy and you pretend that things are normal. You hear things like, 'Well, men are just like that. They have a hard time admitting when they're wrong. It's normal,' and you want so badly to believe that your marriage is normal, so you grab hold of all those things and comfort yourself with them while deep down inside you are slowly dying.

8. The confusion surrounding abuse is a million miles thick. Helpers make it thicker by not taking it seriously. The woman is six feet under and the church takes up their shovels and works with the abusive spouse to pile more dirt on top of her. If she manages to stick her hand up through the dirt somehow, either her spouse or an elder will step on it and then throw more dirt on it.

9. My husband is safe at Bethlehem and I am not. He faithfully attends, but I'm at home now. When I was first starting to realize that Bethlehem wanted nothing to do with me and my problems, I became aware of other women who were in abusive situations. Shannon," (the name has been changed) "and her family sit in front of us at church most Sundays, and her verbally abusive husband raises his hand in worship, totally confirmed in his delusion that he is a wonderful Christian man. There are many such delusional men at Bethlehem.

But they don't fool God. God is a God of truth and justice. I don't see truth or justice at Bethlehem, and that is why I can't go there anymore. My husband doesn't love me — I'm just his scapegoat. My church doesn't love me — they blame me because I can't keep my marriage together. They tell me I'm not glorifying God when I don't stand by my man in humble submission as a good wife should.

10. We need to define and understand forgiveness better. I have never had a problem forgiving. God wired my personality to believe the best about people, and I love extending grace. My husband has told me that the opposite is true about me. He considers all feedback from me to be vindictive and graceless because he refuses all feedback. But he is a liar, and I'm finally realizing that I don't have to believe his lies anymore.

My mom always told me when I was growing up that I was the most forgiving person she knew. I've had several relationships with people who have mistreated me and taken advantage of me. I have forgiven them and looked for ways to do them good. I

have forgiven my husband countless times even though he has never asked. Yet, because I am finally implementing consequences, I have been labeled as an unforgiving, bitter woman. I am in grief right now. I'm facing the facts, admitting the reality of my situation, realizing my husband really doesn't love me and won't fight for me or our marriage, and I'm coming to terms with that loss.

Part of the grief work I'm heavily into right now is allowing myself to be angry for how my husband has destroyed our family. But you know what? I'm not bitter, and here's how I know: Whenever he shows small signs that he might be coming around, I am immediately ready, in all my emotions and with all my heart, to move toward him and be vulnerable. I want so badly to be able to have an intimate relationship with him. I want to love him and support him and lift him up. A bitter woman would not feel those things. I have forgiven him, and I continue to forgive him as he continues to sin against me, but this does not mean I am safe with him or that I can spend my life with him anymore. It doesn't mean I overlook his behavior and pretend it isn't sinful and destructive to me and our children.

11. Abusers lie. They lie first to themselves, and then they lie to everyone else. They firmly believe their lies, so they can almost always convince others to believe them as well. If elders and pastors want to help in a domestic abuse case, they will need to stop saying that, 'Well, it's just a matter of he said/she said.' They need to start believing the victim.

Are there situations where the woman is the liar and the husband is the innocent party telling the truth and being abused? Yes, but they are rare in the Christian community because of what is being taught about men and women. So why isn't the knee-jerk reaction to believe the woman? Most Christian women are trying hard to do what's right. They are covering up and pretending and coping and weeping and trying some more. To minimize what they are living with is the equivalent of kicking them in the gut and spitting on their face. That's how much it hurts.

12. In my experience, when I would share my story, the people-helper would believe me, and then they would hear my husband's version and believe him. His version was more palatable, and he was calm and nice and kind of shy while I was hysterically emotional. My husband would make me out to be the controlling, angry, emotional, nasty woman, and he would do it in a quiet, kind of hesitant way. He would come across humble and sad and sorry — sort of hen-pecked. This stereotypical paradigm would feel familiar and comfortable to the helper. It would make sense, especially if the helper was a man. And from then on, this is the box they would put us in. All advice and counsel would flow from this story.

Since I had no awareness of what was going on at any level, I was not able to articulate it so that anyone could understand, and this is why it is of importance for the counselor or the people-helper to be well-versed in emotional abuse so they can see through the smokescreens and help the woman put words to her problem, define her problem.

Now, I did give one of the elders some books to read so that he could learn, and I gave some things to the other pastor as well, and they never gave me any feedback on any of those things, so I don't know if they read anything or not. If they did, it certainly did not make any difference in how they perceived our situation or how they helped us.

13. The abuser doesn't want the help — the victim wants the help. But the abuser, interestingly enough, gets all the counseling and support. The elder and the other pastor have put in hours and hours of time helping my husband, and I have heard my husband scoff about their help behind their backs because he doesn't want help. He's only going through the appropriate hoops in order to gain allies and ultimately gain control of me and his family again. On the other hand, nobody has reached out to me or my eight children still living at home. Not one person. Two of my older boys tried to tell the elder, but he didn't believe them.

14. I represent thousands of conservative Christian women who gave up careers, died to their own dreams, desires, and needs in order to be under a man, to love, honor, and serve a man, to spend exhausting, sometimes debilitating years bearing and raising children with God's glory in mind. Many of us homeschooled, which is an emotionally exhausting, thankless, and unseen task in and of itself. We were not loved, protected, listened to, appreciated, cherished, or supported by our husbands. Instead, we were blamed, shamed, verbally maligned, ignored, lied to, and burdened with the responsibility to deal with our sin, the sins of our children, and the sins of our husbands, all laid squarely on our shoulders. We had to keep up appearances in order that God's Word would not be blasphemed.

And we did it, willingly, with all our hearts. We did it for future reward, to please God alone, to set a good example for our children, to imitate Christ. Suffering was held in high esteem. Debasing ourselves was a godly quality. We were warned not to tear our houses down, but rather to overlook a multitude of sins, to forgive and forget, to wait patiently for God to convict because we're not the Holy Spirit, to esteem others higher than ourselves, to submit and don't be a Jezebel, that soft answers would turn away our husband's wrath, so if he's angry, it's our fault, and I could go on and on and on.

You want to walk in the truth of your situation, but to do that, you have to give up all these Christian rules. And since you can't do that, you are forced to choose between

truth and obeying rules. If you believe that obeying the rules is paramount, then you split yourself in half. One half is aware of the truth, and one half must obey the rules. It makes for a very conflicted inner life filled with anxiety and confusion. You equate God with rules.

15. I think every leader at Bethlehem needs to revisit some previous beliefs about when divorce is biblically acceptable and when it is not. One of the most horrific feelings for a Christian target of abuse is that she can never escape without disobeying God and bringing dishonor to His name. Nothing could be further from the truth. Staying with an abuser and enabling him to abuse with impunity does not bring glory to God. When the world looks at Christians, they see a bunch of hypocrites who throw women under the bus. Jesus didn't do that. He spoke harshly to abusers and hypocrites. But He showed grace and love to the weak, the repentant, and the unwanted, and He gave dignity and honor to women. That's what the world needs to see. But instead, the church throws the law at the woman who dares to stand up against it, and it showers the abuser with grace and mercy. That only perpetuates the problem and keeps those men in the church service raising their hands in worship with a smile on their face while their families die. It's sickening.

16. The children suffer because they don't understand all that is happening. Even older children are only vaguely aware of the depth of pain in the parent who is targeted. Yet they are also hurting because they're being targeted as well. Often, when the mother finally stands up and creates boundaries and consequences, the abuser plays on the pity of the children. The abuser makes himself look to be the innocent party being targeted by the mean, unforgiving, rebellious mother.

My husband slept in a camper and then in his car for several weeks even though I had offered to pay for an apartment with my own earnings, and I encouraged him to get one. He made the kids think that I was the one making him suffer. He's told the children that I am brainwashing them. He's told them that he will come home 'as soon as mom lets me,' making them think it's all up to me. Mom is really the only one truly parenting because she's the only adult in the family taking responsibility for anything. And this is pressure like you cannot imagine.

Kids are kids. It's hard to parent with two of you, let alone one who is also creating drama and chaos of his own. When children see the mother fighting for her dignity and worth, fighting for the truth, fighting for justice, they don't know why, exactly. All they see is the fight. If a church is the one putting the pressure on the man and getting behind the mother, communicating to her and her children the truth about the situation, then the kids could let the mom off the hook, because they would see that

the church is taking their father to task.

Instead of gaslighting them by saying, 'Everything is fine,' the church could help the kids see that dad's behavior is wrong. And then the kids could learn what is healthy and what is not healthy for their own futures. They could learn that covering up is bad and being honest is good. They could learn that God cares and He hates abuse. They could learn that lying doesn't pay. They could learn that they are loved in a normal, healthy way — if not by dad, then by their mom and other men in the church who care and have their backs. Mom gets to calm down. She doesn't have to fight anymore because it's being taken care of. She can rest and do her job knowing that her husband is being disciplined by God through the church. Mom no longer has to look and feel ugly and unlovable to herself and her kids. Mom can start healing."

So, you guys, that's what I read to them, and a year later they were talking about excommunicating me. So did they learn anything? Did they hear me? No, they did not. All right, so I wanted to just share that with you. That's from a long time ago, but it's obviously still as relevant today as it was back then.

One final thing I would say as far as helping someone who is your friend — or maybe it's your sister, maybe it's your mother — another way you can help them is by introducing them to this podcast because when people start listening to the kinds of things that I'm teaching in this podcast, they're going to get new thoughts. And they're going to get those new thoughts over and over and over again. And those new thoughts could start taking root, and they can start producing fruit in their lives. Because the only way that we can change our lives is if we change our minds. I mean, the Bible calls this "renewing our mind." We need to change our minds. We need to change our belief system if we want to change our lives, if we want to make different decisions for ourselves. As long as we hang on to the same belief system, we're going to keep creating the same results in our lives.

Another thing you could do is if you have the funds, offer to sponsor that woman for a Flying Free membership. We have a way that other people can sponsor a woman that helps them... Sometimes the survivor has the funds to pay for Flying Free. It's only \$290 for an entire year. Otherwise, you can pay monthly and it's \$29 a month. But sometimes they'll have the funds to do that. It's basically the price of two therapy sessions, but they don't want their husband to see the credit card charge. Just so you know, those of you who are not in the program, the credit card charge looks like "NHoffman." So it's nothing weird or whatever — it's just my name. But, however, some women don't want their husbands to see it. Some women have just told their husbands it's like an online support group for Christian women that want help with their

marriages, and, "I just want to get help for our marriage. I just want to be the best wife that I can be," you know? And you do change in ways that definitely change the dynamic in your marriage. But anyway, some women explain it like that to their husbands.

Some women just use their own bank accounts or their own credit cards if they have them. But then again, some women actually have a sponsor. And so the sponsor will purchase a code. So they're actually paying \$290 for a code, and then they give that code to the woman that wants the membership. And the woman goes in and then registers, but instead of paying, she just plugs the code in, and then that's how her membership is "free," right? It's not free because someone else paid for it with the code, but it's free for the person.

So anyway, that's how you can sponsor someone in Flying Free. And if anyone's listening and you want to do that for somebody, you can just send an email to communitysupport@flyingfreenow.com and Aimee, our community support director, will help get you set up for that.

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