

HOW CAN I BE A GOOD MOM IN AN EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE MARRIAGE?

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 252 of the Flying Free Podcast. I have a story for you today. It goes like this: She was going to be the best mom. She had all her parenting books read and underlined on the shelf by the brand-new crib in the corner. She had taken the Baby Wise and Growing Kids God's Way classes at church and picked the brains of every godly mother who had a baker's dozen of well-behaved kids, creating a nice neat row in the first third of the church worship center.

She was ready. She had a vision of lying on her deathbed at the age of 103, surrounded by countless children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, sharing blessed stories of how she had faithfully prayed, baked whole wheat bread from scratch, and homeschooled for 30 years, all while making her husband of 75 years the happiest man on planet Earth.

Then, they would rise up and call her blessed, and she would peacefully slip into eternity, knowing that everyone she left behind was bringing God glory by either being a pastor, a pastor's wife, a missionary, or a missionary's wife. Everything she did for the next twenty years was with that vision in mind.

She worked, she prayed, she loved, she conceived, she prayed, she birthed, she worked, she nursed, she volunteered, she loved, she sacrificed, she prayed, she spanked, she taught, she raised, she loved, she baked, she worked, she scraped, she forgave, she prayed, she cleaned, she tried, she groveled, she worked, and twenty years later, that vision was a faint memory.

She mistakenly married a covert abuser who used the Bible to control and manipulate her mind. Some of her children didn't believe in God anymore. They thought Christians were hypocrites. Some of her children were immoral. Some used alcohol and drugs. Some disowned her. Some had personality disorders. Some were violent. All were traumatized.

This is my story. But it's not just my story—this is the story of hundreds of thousands of conservative Christian women all over the world. I've heard them over and over and over again. Same song, different verse. What in the world happened? I can hear some

people already: "Well, maybe her family fell apart because she swears." Because, you know, then all you have to do is make sure you don't ever say a swear word, and the vision is yours.

I get it. I used to think that way too. I had my list of things to do and not to do to ensure success. I hate to burst anyone's bubble, but I was not a swearing person in my perfect, "best mom" years, and it still fell apart.

Other people have other ideas for why these kinds of families fall apart. One, the mother didn't submit enough to Dad. Two, the mother was selfish and spoke out when she should have just humbly kept her mouth shut. Number three, the mother didn't spank enough. Number four, the mother worked. Number five, the mother didn't set a good enough example. Number six, the mother didn't try hard enough. Number seven, the mother didn't love enough.

But you know what I rarely heard in all of my years of being immersed in this kind of environment? I never once heard that it could possibly be because Dad was emotionally and spiritually abusing everyone in the family.

My theory about why this wasn't an issue—Dad doing this—is because Dad doing this was expected. In these kinds of circles, the man is literally supposed to be entitled to control and power over his wife and children. He is trained to be this kind of human, and the wife and the children are trained to enable him, and that is why these families are imploding left and right.

All of those words that I just shared with you in that story, I wrote it in an article on my website. And since that time, I've been able to see more about what happens when a wife and kids get away from that kind of thinking in their mind. I have been able to raise my younger kids in a very different environment, in a home that does not expect their perfection, but focuses on love and acceptance and empathy. A home that expects every individual within it, including the husband—I've been remarried for almost six years—to take personal responsibility for only their own behavior and nobody else's. A home where all of the members—mom, dad, and kids—are all respected and honored, and nobody has power over anyone else, but instead what we do is we empower each other.

Now, it's messier, I admit. When you give all the members of a family a voice and you validate everybody, everyone's going to use their voice. Now our kids have a voice, and their feelings and perspectives are considered instead of squelched. So instead of all this fear and shame ruling our home, we now have a home that's ruled by the law of

love. It is richer, it's more authentic, it's more honest, it's more raw, and it's more real.

I don't have the answers to how to raise perfect children because nobody's perfect, but I am on a journey in learning how to deeply love and accept and enjoy the imperfect children that I've got. Not just the younger ones that are still in my home, but also those older ones who were raised in a very different environment than the one that my younger ones have been raised in.

Jesus Christ was never about the law. He was all about love. He was the essence of love and He came to establish His kingdom of love on this earth through us. He taught us that love fulfills the law and the prophet. That's what He boiled it all down to.

So what would happen if we applied this to our parenting? So the question that we're asking ourselves is, "How can I be a good mom if I'm living in an emotionally abusive marriage?" We can't do anything about Dad. We can't. We can't control him, but we can control ourselves.

Now, if you're like me, you and some of your children have either been diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, or maybe you haven't actually been diagnosed with it, but you probably have many of the symptoms. This means that you not only have the regular parenting challenges that all parents have, but now you've also got children who need special parenting geared toward helping them with their trauma. And you have to offer that to them even while you yourself are dealing with your own trauma.

So, which comes first—helping your kids or helping yourself? Well, you can't help your kids until you've helped yourself. So you need to get on top of that first. The good news is that as you are getting help and healing for yourself, you're going to be able to simultaneously offer that same help to your children. But if you stay stuck, your children are going to suffer with you.

So I highly recommend getting that education and support and help that you need. I believe it is imperative. You can read books, you can listen to this podcast and other good podcasts like this one, you can get therapy, you can get coaching. I offer my own method through the Flying Free program, which you can learn more about by going to joinflyingfree.com.

But do something and don't wait. Your future and the future of your children depend on your taking this seriously enough to invest the time and money and effort to work hard on your healing and personal development. We absolutely need to have a healthy

self-regard before we can most effectively parent traumatized children. In other words, you've got to get that oxygen mask on yourself first so that you have the life and strength and energy that you need to put it on your kids.

I'm going to read you a quote—actually, several quotes. All of these quotes, by the way, are from Heather Forbes in her book called “Beyond Consequences, Logic and Control: Volume 2.” Highly recommend that book. But here's the first quote I want to read: “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 becoming your own best friend.”

You guys, this is so, so important. I know many of you come out of these religious cultures where you've been taught that that's ridiculous or hogwash or that's self-centered. That's a lie from the adversary. You're getting lies from the adversary sitting in your church pews. I promise you, they're undermining and sabotaging your development and your ability to parent your children well.

Back to the quote: “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 that he needs to change his brain, his mind, his heart, and ultimately, his behavior.”

I'm telling you guys, my parenting is totally different than what it used to be ten years ago, twenty years ago. It's completely different. I'm showing up as a completely different person because of this work that I've done in my own life of getting my own healing. I had to heal myself. I had to have my own back. I had to rewire my brain from all of the lies that I was raised with and that were reinforced in my abusive relationship and marriage.

When children are traumatized, they have a lot of experience with extreme emotions. So one of our goals is going to be to provide that peaceful, safe environment for them to emotionally rest in. We want to reduce the opportunities they have to experience unhealthy types of conflict and extreme swings from deep fear to rage to euphoria, which is what they're getting in an abusive environment, and we want to regulate their environment as much as we can and then teach them how to regulate their inner world as well. And one of the most important ways that we do this is through empathy. This is

something that I talk about a lot in my new book that's coming out soon.

Here's another quote about empathy from Heather Forbes: "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 it 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 focus only 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."

Can you guys relate to this? I can definitely relate to this. This is why oftentimes when we're actually living in an abusive environment, it's very, very difficult to get to that place where we are regularly being able to regulate our own selves because of the extreme amounts of stress in our lives.

When a person is stressed, their amygdala, which is the part of your brain that reacts by fighting, running, freezing, or fawning, goes into overdrive. It shouts so loud that our prefrontal cortex, which is the logical, thinking, reasoning part of our brain, shuts down temporarily. And then all kinds of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, they're released into our bloodstream, and these hormones impact all of our other body symptoms.

When a child is experiencing this kind of stress on a regular basis, or when we are, they lose their ability to regulate themselves. And some of these kids don't even know what it feels like to be regulated. Their stress tolerance has gone way down. So that means that they are constantly living just a few seconds away from having a meltdown.

Your challenge as the parent will 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 it's not something that you just spank out of them, you'll be encouraged to keep working on this with them.

By the way, if we think that we can just spank this out of our children, all we're doing is contributing to their trauma. Of course, if you don't know how to do this for your own self in your own body, you're not going to be able to help your children do this. This is why getting help for yourself should be your number one priority.

Here's another quote from Heather Forbes: "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 might seem to the parent. For the child, his viewpoint is his reality. Thus, it is his truth. Validating him, understanding him, and respecting him..." Notice that agreeing with him is not listed here? "...will 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 other people. He's experiencing a shift from survival to relationship. This type of experiential knowledge far outpowers a parent lecture..." Or spanking, for that matter, "...on how and why he should be caring about others or why he should be doing what he was told."

In order to help rewire your child's brain in these ways, though, you have to rewire your own brain first. If you can keep your amygdala calm or regulated while your child's amygdala is freaking out, you're going to have a much better chance at helping him rewire. But when we react to our child in our own fear and shame by yelling, shaming them, giving vengeful type consequences, or emotionally abandoning them, then that child 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, this cycle is going to continue.

And then the last quote that I want to read from Heather Forbes is this: "You no longer have to accept the negative thoughts and programming that 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.”

Always remember that the behaviors that you see in your children, they look like anger and disrespect and rebellion, but underneath those behaviors, you've got a person who is afraid and feeling shame. Your child is afraid, your child is filled with shame. A human being who is crying out for unconditional love, validation, and acceptance. This is what every human needs. We need it and our children need it.

Do you see the importance of healing yourself? The importance of getting those new thoughts so that we can regulate ourselves? We can only pass on what we ourselves have acquired and practiced. So where can you get more help? On the Flying Free Podcast, there are two other episodes where I talk about parenting traumatized children: Episodes 23 and 24. So if you go to flyingfreenow.com/23 or flyingfreenow.com/24, you can access those podcast episodes. I also have a list of resources that can help your child grow in his or her emotional resiliency skills, and I will put that link in the show notes.

And within the Flying Free Sisterhood program, I have a course that teaches more about what our kids need from us to help them regulate their emotions. And I would love to have you work with me and with hundreds of other women of faith on this same journey. You can learn more about what that program has to offer by going to joinflyingfree.com. I do coaching every week, as well as there are a dozen courses, full courses that have several lessons in each course that go over all kinds of things from boundaries to healing your relationship with yourself, healing your relationship with God, healing from complex post-traumatic stress disorder — all of the things.

So many members of Flying Free have reported the difference that their own growth and transformation is making in the lives of their kids, too. And I'm just going to read you a couple of reviews where they mentioned that. One woman says, “With your help, I am writing, healing, and figuring out who I am. I can honestly say for the first time I am in love with God and who God made me to be. I am seeing my gifts and strengths, which always eluded me. I picked up my Bible again, and it reads so differently. The veil of guilt and shame cover me no more. It spills over to my kids, too.

Thank you for helping me break down so many walls of dirty pain. I can heal and be okay with real pain. I have a lot of hurt still, and I'm learning that it is okay to cry. So much is happening while I'm in my cocoon. I can't wait to see what happens next. I'm learning to be my authentic, human self.”

And another member writes, "I've been in Flying Free since July 2021. Best money I've ever spent." By the way, it's not expensive. It's only \$29 a month or \$290 for an entire year. I always tell people it's about the cost of two or three private therapy sessions. She goes on to say, "This program has been a lifeline. Where I had no one, it showed me that I was someone. Where I had doors closed, I felt validated, accepted, and cared for within this group of women. When I had days I did not have the strength to crawl, this group cheered me on so I could stand. I am feeling blessed by this program in more ways than I could ever imagine. With renewed strength and hope within my person, I am rising to the challenges one day at a time.

I have become a way better parent to my kids, and they are learning to be their badass selves. I wish I could take this stuff to the high school and teach them. I always told my kids they were valued, but until I learned that I was also valued, those were just words. I am living it and I am alive. I am a recovering, self-loathing Christian who is truly breaking free from this slavery that I was entrenched in. Moving forward has never been harder, yet so freeing. So when those hard days come, I have this group to help pick me up knowing I am running a race for my life and my wellbeing."

Doesn't that sound amazing? Are you ready for that to be your testimony as well? Are you ready to turn things around not only for yourself but also for your children? Head over to joinflyingfree.com for more information.

Okay, and then one last thing before we end. We're coming up on the end of 2023 at the time of this recording, and there are about 730 or so reviews on Apple Podcasts right now for this podcast, for Flying Free. And I think that we could make it to a thousand by the end of this year—I really do. But that means that I'm going to need some of you who have never, ever left a rating over on Apple Podcasts to go over and do that.

You could just leave a rating. I'm just looking for a thousand ratings. And doing that just means basically pressing the star button and rating it. Or if you're feeling really ambitious, you could leave a review as well. There are many, many reviews over there as well. And basically, a review is just giving your words or your thoughts about what this podcast has meant to you over the years or how it's helped you.

And the reviews are great because then people who are looking at this podcast and considering listening to it, they can read what different women have to say, and then that will help them to decide if they want to give it any of their time. But you don't have to leave a review.

Also, by the way, I know I'm in a niche where most of the people who are listening are trying to keep things under cover, right? We don't really necessarily want people around us to know that we are in an abusive relationship right away, and we're also trying to do things secretly, and we don't necessarily want our husbands to find out too. So, unfortunately, that's just the way that it is for many of you.

But you can leave a rating and review anonymously. You can use whatever name you want. So we've got all kinds of interesting names over there. You can just make something up, you can call yourself anything. So if you want to do that, go right ahead, but the easiest option just to get to a thousand would be just to go leave a rating, and it just takes a couple of seconds. So go to Apple Podcasts, you can do it online in your browser, or if you already listen to this podcast on the Apple Podcasts app, you can just do it right there in your app. And let's see. I think we can get to a thousand. Let's see if we can. Thanks for your help.

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