

## TEN STEPS OUT OF AN EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE "CHRISTIAN" MARRIAGE

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://Flyingfreenow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 254 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, I'm going to combine a couple of different articles on my website into one episode that will lay out a ten-step pathway if you or someone you love is considering getting out of an emotionally and spiritually abusive relationship. Because getting out is most likely one of the hardest things you'll ever do in your life.

So before we get to our steps, our ten steps, I want to point out that if you're anything like I was, you may be actually waiting for someone else to come and rescue you. You may think of yourself as being powerless and needing the approval of other adults in order to make some hard, adult choices of your own. So you may have done what I did for twenty-two years, and that is to continue to reach out to other people for help — reach out to friends, reach out to family members, maybe your church or your pastor, someone, anyone, to help rescue you from your marriage. And if you believe that divorce is always wrong, then you may believe that the only way to be rescued is by getting your husband to change.

In Episode 22 of the Flying Free Podcast, I have an episode called, "But Maybe God Will Do a Miracle and Change My Husband!" You can check that out. By the way, I'm going to be sharing several other episodes to kind of piggyback off of this one, and you can find them — I'll give you the number of the episode — but you can find those episodes easily by just going to [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com) — that's my public facing website — and then forward slash, and then whatever the number is of the episode. So if this is Episode 22, you would go to [flyingfreenow.com/22](http://flyingfreenow.com/22), and then you would come to this episode called, "But Maybe God Will Do a Miracle and Change My Husband!" So that's something you might be interested in exploring if that's kind of where you're at. So if that's where you're thinking, then you're probably begging God for that miracle and wondering why He doesn't come through for you.

There's another episode, it's Episode 46, called, "Why God Doesn't Rescue You From Your Bad Marriage." So check that one out if you're wondering why He's not getting you out or why He's not changing your husband.

But what I want you to eventually see is something that I finally saw, and that is this:

God has uniquely positioned you to be your own hero, to rescue yourself. It was you all along. This is part of how God grows us up into adult maturity, by allowing us to go through this painful process of constantly looking outside of ourselves for our pathway forward until we finally come to the end of that fruitless effort and we surrender to God's plan of bringing us into our own coming of age story, where we become an adult in our own right and make choices to steward our own life into a space of love and peace and joy. When humans are in that space, that is when they are able to more intimately connect with and love others.

Now, I don't know about you, but I was very limited in my capacity to love when I was just trying to survive. I had limited capacity to see clearly, I had limited capacity to make decisions, limited capacity to just be present in my life because I was trying to recover from one round of verbal and spiritual manipulation and abuse after another, just like starving people don't have time or energy to make art or write books or climb mountains because they're giving everything they've got just to finding their next bite of food. It's the same thing.

You don't need to be rescued by someone else. What you really need is to be empowered to be the adult that God created you to be and to rescue the woman who has your name. She's your responsibility. You're the one. You need to be empowered because as I teach in one of the articles I wrote a few years ago, the way out of this pit of abuse that you're in is by a very hot ladder.

So imagine a pit. You're in the bottom of it and there is a ladder leading up to the top, but every single rung of that ladder is red, hot, and burning. So this means that every step that you take up and out is going to be painful. It's going to hurt. And until you're willing to go through that pain, you will likely remain at the bottom of that abuse pit.

All right, so what's step one? Step one is called "denial." And I also will add the word "fear" because the reason why we're in denial is because we're afraid, right? This is how I spent most of my marriage. Within six months of being married, I knew something was horribly wrong, but I did not want to believe that I had made this colossal, lifelong mistake by actually marrying the wrong person. So what I did is I spiritualized it and I gaslit myself. I would think things like, "Well, God wants me to suffer so I become more like Christ." "Well, God wants me to be a catalyst of change for my husband." "Well, God wants to refine me." "Well, I deserve to be mistreated, abandoned, and disrespected. That's how God is going to keep me humble."

Now, I did not believe divorce was an option. It never even crossed my mind as an option because of how I was raised. So what other choice did I have? If you'd like to

hear more about some of the things that I believed, you can go to Episode 53, "The Beliefs That Keep Christian Women Stuck in Abusive Marriages."

I read a lot of Christian wife books, and I ran on that hamster wheel for over two decades before I came to step number two, which is waking up to emotional abuse and learning about what it is. Now, I'm going to write more about my process of this going on in my upcoming book, but this is the part where you feel like you've jumped into an icy cold lake right after the ice has thawed. It doesn't feel so good. Denial protects us from this shock of waking up to the hard, cold, icy facts of reality. When you're waking up to the truth, it feels like you're dying a million deaths at the same time. And once you wake up, of course, you can't unsee what you see.

So this is also the place where you start reading books, like "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," or watching YouTube videos about emotional abuse or listening to the Flying Free Podcast with Natalie Hoffman. You're like a little caterpillar who has just hatched out of your egg, and now you are consuming, consuming, consuming as much information as you can and your world is expanding as you learn terms you've never heard of before like "gaslighting," and "flying monkeys," and "covert abuse," and "complex post-traumatic stress disorder," and "DARVO."

All this information did two things for me. One, it made me sick as I realized what I'd been experiencing for twenty years was a thing. It was real, and I hadn't been making it up in my head. And the second thing this information did for me is fill me with relief for the exact same reasons.

But once I knew what I was dealing with, I entered into the next step, step three, which is trying to get your abuser to change. So now we've asked the question, "Is it me?" and we've discovered, "No, it's actually the abuser. He's the problem." So what's the solution if you're married to an abusive person? Well, change the abuser, right? Because if he changes, then you won't have to keep climbing the ladder out of hell. I mean, if hell is transformed into heaven, problem solved.

So you keep trying to tell your partner in 4,789,935 different ways how you can't do this anymore, and how you desperately love him and hope that he'll see how destructive his behaviors are, and how you might need to take a drastic measure if he doesn't change something soon.

But you know what the result is? Hell gets a lot hotter. Now, that rung really stings, and you may be stuck on it longer than necessary. But once you realize that hell is hell because it just is, you'll be ready to take the next step out of your abusive relationship.

Now, I recommend the very first Flying Free Podcast episode, Episode 1, How Can You Tell if Your Abusive Partner Has Changed? if you want more help with this step.

Once you see that he isn't changing because you asked him to, then you'll move into step four, which is trying to get help from other people. Now, I would reach out for help periodically throughout the first two decades of my first marriage. I tried getting help from our pastor. I tried getting help from a pastor's wife. I tried getting help from one of my friends. I tried getting help from an elder. I tried getting help from my parents. And nobody could help. Every time I reached out, I was so embarrassed. I would feel like a failure, I would worry that they might not believe me because my husband was so nice to everyone else outside of my family. I felt like this little school girl tattling on my spouse instead of an adult woman who was able to handle her life.

Plus, I didn't want to shame him. I thought it was my Christian duty to protect his fragile male ego. It was my duty to respect and honor him no matter what. So telling someone on the outside about his bully behavior felt disrespectful somehow, and it made me feel guilty.

Toward the end, after I realized that I was thinking about suicide far too much, I ramped up my begging for help. Once I had books and articles to back me up, then I reached out again to some of these people, armed with evidence and a million examples, but none of it mattered. Nobody believed me, and I was lectured, chastised, and shamed for speaking up. Never mind that I had a reputation for telling the truth my entire life. Suddenly I was the liar.

Now, false accusations when you are only trying to get help is one of the hottest ladder rungs that you'll face. At this point, you will be tempted, as I was, to fall back. In fact, this is the place where many women drop. They begin the climb to tell someone new, and then they drop again. It's that painful. And when it happens over and over again, you begin to lose your faith in family, in church, in friendships, in the human race. Now, there's Episode 168. It's called "The Worst Things People Say to Justify, Minimize, and Excuse the Abuse You've Experienced," and check that one out if you're feeling like you're on this particular ladder rung.

All right, step five: separation. For this step, I recommend Episode 130, called "What You Need to Know When You Leave." So in this step, you decide to separate because you think that maybe if he sees how serious you are, so serious that you won't have sex with him anymore, you won't go anywhere with him, you won't make his food or do his laundry or clean up after him or serve him in any way, maybe if he loses you as his sex slave and housekeeper, maybe then he will decide to change. But he doesn't.

Oh, at first he love bombs you and says he's sorry, although he doesn't ever know exactly why. He tries to go through all the hoops in the hope that you will believe that he has changed, and at first, you might believe him. But after a while, the mask slips a little, and then you call him on it, and he explodes and blames you for everything again, and it's back to square one.

You realize at this point that he will always be the way he is because his belief system is completely different from yours. You're the kind of person who values connection, intimacy, honesty, vulnerability, and mutual respect. He doesn't share those values. He believes that you are a toy in his universe, created by God to be used by a man. He believes you should know your place in the hierarchy of men. And he will always believe that. Those are his core values. In fact, he and your pastor or other religious leaders may be putting pressure on you to forgive and reconcile. And if that's the case, I encourage you to listen to Episode 43: "When Your Husband and Pastor Demand Reconciliation and Forgiveness."

So this eventually leads you to step six. This is where you grieve as you see that it can't be fixed and you will not be rescued. This is the step of acceptance, radical acceptance, of your reality, where you move into grief. Instead of fighting and resisting your reality, now you are accepting your reality, and that really hurts, and you start to grieve.

You finally accept the truth: Your husband really doesn't love you. It's not personal. He's incapable of loving a woman for who she is. He loves her for what she gives to him. This is how a lot of men, especially in religious environments, are programmed. And if she isn't giving him anything, then he isn't interested anymore. This is a tremendous loss for a woman who thought or imagined that she had married a man with a heart.

So you are now convinced that your attempts to make a difference in your relationship never really worked, and to think they will work at some point in the future is insane. You were living in a dead marriage where the vows were broken a long time ago, and now, during this step, step six, you're going to feel the full impact of that loss.

So you will inevitably need to move through the grief cycle in order to find hope and healing. And this process can take a long time. It could take two years and longer. Many people are not going to understand that you are grieving because you haven't lost anyone to death. So you need to give yourself the time and compassion that you need to get through this part of healing, and we need to choose to ignore those who are unsupportive and don't get it. Those people are only going to keep you from doing the hard work that lies ahead.

Grieving is one of the worst parts of this ladder of hell. You can be stuck on it for a long time. You'll be tempted to keep climbing and get this one over with, but if you do that, you'll inevitably fall back down because you really can't move forward until you've done this grief work. And that includes going through the stages of denial and anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.

The grieving phase, I compare it to the caterpillar when the caterpillar spins her chrysalis and she begins that hidden process of transformation. This is a dark and quiet stage where there doesn't seem to be any movement forward from the outside. It takes a long time, it feels suffocating, it's cramped, and everything in you is undergoing major changes in how you think and feel and what you believe.

Just because you can't see the transformation taking place doesn't mean it's not happening. This hard phase is where the most painful, most miraculous stuff is actually taking place. I recommend Episode 232. It's called "Dealing with Grief When Waking Up to Emotional Abuse."

And then we come to step seven. This is where you file for divorce. Now, when you take this step, you are jumping off the proverbial cliff. You've made a life-altering decision to escape the emotional abuse, and everyone around you is going to explode all over you while you are grieving and free-falling through space. Divorce is expensive, it's time-consuming, and emotionally draining. Your stress level will skyrocket even higher than it was before. You may have panic attacks, you may go into a depression.

If you have children, it is common, especially for the purpose of avoiding paying child support, for the abuser to fight for 50% custody, and they will likely get it even though they may have never been involved very much in the lives of their children prior to the divorce. This may involve a long, drawn-out court battle that will drag your children and a custody evaluator into the equation. This may add to the trauma that your children are already experiencing.

But this is where the butterfly emerges. The caterpillar is no longer a caterpillar. She is now a completely different creature altogether. She is a beautiful butterfly with the capability of doing things that she could not do before. But first, she needs to shed the remnants of her old life in order to be free to move into all of the potential of her new life. If you've ever seen a butterfly work to get free from the chrysalis, you will know that it's not always easy and it takes a long time, but it is critical. While the butterfly struggles, blood is pumping into her wings, prepping them for their future flight, and this takes time and effort, and others should not interfere with this process though they may try to in order to circumvent things by trying to control you as well as your

process.

But this is the place where you'll learn healthy boundaries, you'll learn how to apply them, and gently let others know that you are capable of making decisions for yourself now. You are a grownup and you are taking responsibility for your own life. This would not be possible unless that caterpillar had already done that hard, transforming work in the chrysalis.

In the life of the emotional abuse survivor, this phase is the last horrible one. It's like the final battle. It's where you take all the things you've learned and integrated into your life and you bring it all to bear on this last effort to break free. Your old life struggles to keep you trapped.

Now, I have done several podcast episodes on the subject of divorce. If you go to my website, [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com), and you put "divorce" in the search bar, you will be able to find all of the articles and podcast episodes I've done on this subject. But I will just recommend here Episode 35, "Shame Busting Your Divorce," Episode 63, "Can a Christian Get a Divorce?" and Episode 187, "Will Divorce Ruin My Kids and Their Opportunities in Life?" That's just to get you started.

The process of divorce is a nightmare, and it is made so much worse by the next rung. Step number eight, you experience rejection and you must stand alone in your resolve. Abusive individuals do not want you to have healthy boundaries. They do not want you to be an adult who's in control of your own life and they will do everything in their power to maintain control, so they may launch a smear campaign against you, making it appear to others that you are actually the crazy, abusive one, while your abusive partner is the innocent victim who just wants to keep the marriage together because he loves you so much.

Sadly, this usually works in the man's favor, but be strong. Just because people believe lies doesn't mean they're true. Healthy, respectful people will come to you to find out about your life, not just to listen to your abusive spouse and his allies and buy their juicy gossip. I have talked literally to hundreds of women who have told me horrific stories about how their abusive husband ended up being coddled and comforted in their religious communities while she was actually kicked out as a liar and a vow breaker. And it happened to me, too. We are all in good company.

I love the music video by Kelly Clarkson called "People Like Us." Just go to YouTube and look up "Kelly Clarkson, People Like Us." It's a great music video. Breaking free means saying goodbye to old friends who weren't really your friends. It means saying goodbye

to your reputation. Yeah. This thing that we've tried to protect our whole lives, right? Say goodbye to it. It means saying goodbye, possibly, to your church. It means saying goodbye to your marriage. It means saying goodbye to your financial stability, possibly, for a while. It means saying goodbye to your previous dreams. It hurts. It will require everything from you.

But remember that in this stage, you are a new creature. God has given you the power and desire to do it, to fulfill your destiny and the purpose for which He created you. The adversary can no longer destroy you through your spouse or your religious community. Now your life belongs to you and your Creator, and God promises to never leave you or forsake you. A couple of podcast episodes that speak to this step of being rejected are Episode 75, "When You Are Rejected by Family, Friends, and Church," and also Episode 186, "Why Being Rejected by Your Church and Family Hurts So Bad."

By the way, the transcripts to these episodes are also on my website. So this is Episode 254, so if you just go to Episode 254, [flyingfreenow.com/254](http://flyingfreenow.com/254), you can go to the transcript and Aimee will have all of the direct links to all of these other episodes over there too. So really, at the end of the day, you really only have to remember one URL, and that's [flyingfreenow.com/254](http://flyingfreenow.com/254), and then if you go there, all of the other links will be there or they'll be in the show notes as well. Actually, they might not be in the show notes on your podcast app, but they'll for sure be on the website.

All right, now we have come to step number nine. I call this the dark night of the soul. Now, I thought it would be better on the other side of divorce, but there's actually more grief. Just because you're now divorced does not mean life is peachy. Now, imagine if a tornado or a hurricane went through your neighborhood and leveled your home. There are no more trees, there are no more homes, everything is just splintered, unrecognizable trash everywhere. Would you expect that you could go to sleep that night and wake up to a brand new neighborhood in the morning? Of course not.

You would know that there was going to be months, perhaps years, of rebuilding. You'd have to plant new trees and then you'd have to wait for many, many years for them to grow. You'd have to spend time grieving all that was lost. Your kids may need therapy. You may need therapy. You've lost everything. Your marriage, your home, possibly your financial stability, your friends, your church, your reputation, maybe even some of your children. Your health might be struggling. You've still got all your PTSD symptoms, your panic attacks, your heart palpitations, your back and neck pain, your digestion issues, your migraines, your frequent illnesses because your immune system is on the fritz from so much stress. You are a shell of yourself by the time you get out.



Many women also struggle with their relationship with God. They don't know what they believe anymore, since it was their beliefs and those they trusted who betrayed and abandoned them when they were needed the most. Maybe God isn't real. Maybe He's just another scary little god. Maybe you no longer want a relationship with God. Maybe you do, but you don't know how to trust Him again.

I went through this dark night of the soul, and it's very common. I had to let all of the beliefs that I had grown up with completely fall apart before I could figure out which ones stood the test of time and experience, and which ones resonated with the love of God that I ultimately chose to hang my hat on. This is a lengthy grieving process, and it brings about another transformation toward deeper meaning and transcendent joy and love for those who are willing to walk through those fires.

I have had some interviews with some incredible authors and teachers on this subject of deconstruction and reconstruction of our faith. Episode 192: "Confronting Religious Trauma and Reconstructing Faith" — that interview was with Dr. Tiffany Yecke Brooks, the author of "Gaslighted by God," who, incidentally, was also my writing coach for my new book that's coming out soon. And I can't say the title at the time of this recording because it hasn't been revealed yet, but it might actually... I don't know if the title will be out by the time this episode is published, but it's coming.

And then Episode 198: "Why Don't I Feel Close to God?" That episode is an interview with author and therapist Krispin Mayfield, also excellent. And then Episode 205, "Where Does My Help Come From?" with author and former pastor Keith Giles. And then, of course, there's my two-part series I did a few years ago, "If There Is a Loving and Powerful God, Why Does He Allow Abuse?" Episodes 105 and 107.

All right, we have come to step number ten, and that's where we rebuild our faith and our friendships, our relationships. So this is the part where the butterfly's wings dry and stretch out. Once you've reached this phase, you have passed through an almost unbearable crucible that has likely caused extreme pain not just for you, but for many people around you for many, many years. Your life has been shattered in a million pieces, and you need a break. You need to rest and consider.

When the butterfly completes her struggle to get free from the chrysalis, she rests, and her wings slowly dry out. She stretches and practices using her wings, strengthening them, and getting them ready for a new life of flight. This time is a crucial one because it's where you process your entire belief system and all the pieces land where they need to for now. You organize your thoughts. You organize your beliefs. If your faith in God was shaken, you find out where that fragility lies and that part of you gets

strengthened. Often, your faith will be more real and powerful than it ever was before, much like a broken bone that has been healed.

Friendships are going to change during this phase as well. There will be some friends who walked through the entire ordeal with you, loving and supporting you every ugly step of the way. Other friends will have left you, never to look back. Cut your losses and be glad for the opportunity to discover the reality of what your friendships really were. But the exciting thing about this time is that you will actually begin to form new relationships that are healthier because as your boundaries and your courage and your confidence return, you will begin to attract other healthy people.

I have been amazed at how God has replaced a hundredfold everything that I lost. The tearing down was just His way of doing some awesome renovation in my life, and this will happen in your life as well if you allow yourself to courageously embrace and walk this entire process. A couple of good episodes for this step are Episode 54, "Rebuilding Your Self-Esteem After Abuse" and Episode 56, "Questions Christians Have About Rebuilding Life After Divorce."

Now, if you are in steps one through nine and you would like further education, coaching, and support with me and others as you make that terrible climb up the ladder of hell, consider joining Flying Free. You can learn more by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com). And if you are in step ten and you're rebuilding your life post-divorce, consider joining Flying Higher. And you can learn more about that program by going to [joinflyinghigher.com](http://joinflyinghigher.com).

*Hey, beautiful butterfly. Thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, be sure to subscribe, and then consider leaving a rating and review so others can find us. To connect with me and get a free chapter of my book, head over to [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com), and until next time, fly free.*