

INTERRUPTING THE ABUSE CYCLE

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 255 of the Flying Free Podcast. Before we dive into our topic today, I want to see if you would be willing to do us a huge favor. It's the end of the year, and we are not that far off from hitting 1,000 ratings on Apple Podcasts. I thought it would be such a fun way to end the year — kind of a milestone marker as we close out our fifth year of producing the Flying Free Podcast. I know, it's been five years. It's crazy! I can hardly believe how fast the time has flown. And you know what? We have not missed a single week in five years, and I think that is something to celebrate.

So if you would like to celebrate with me and my production team, and if you are listening right now on the Apple Podcast app on your phone, it's super easy. All you need to do is go to the Flying Free show page — right now you might be on this episode page — go to the show page, scroll down until you see five stars. Click on the fifth star, and that's it. That will leave a rating.

Then if you want to write a review as well, you can. You can let me know what you love most about this podcast. But to get to the 1,000 ratings goal, all you really need to do is click on the fifth star of those five stars. And thank you in advance for helping us reach this super fun goal.

Okay, today I want to talk about the abuse cycle because one of the most common things I hear on our private forum in Flying Free is some version of, "Well, I'm not really sure it's abuse because sometimes my husband is so good. We have some great memories together, and he's actually a great guy when he's in a good mood."

Or I might hear this: "My therapist worked with me for a long time and I'm finally ready to separate, but now I'm having doubts because ever since I told my husband I want to try a separation, he has suddenly changed. Maybe he wasn't abusive after all, or maybe this is the change I've been praying for for twenty-four years."

So the abuse cycle has three main parts. Now, some images include four, but to keep this super simple, especially for a podcast — I can't really show you anything — so we're just going to stick with the three main parts. According to peaceoverviolence.org, here are the three parts. And if you Google this, you'll find it all over the place, but there

are three parts.

In the first phase, the abuser gets edgy and tension begins to build up in the relationship. And this is where the survivor might feel like she's walking on eggshells. So if you've ever felt like that or been like, "Ugh, I think there's some tension building up. I think I better be careful because I might trigger my husband," all right, that's that first phase.

The second phase is the actual explosion phase, and that's where the abuse occurs. And we're going to talk about what that specifically looks like. But it can last for a few minutes, it can last several hours. Actually, it can last even longer than that. It can last for weeks where he's in an explosion phase. We're going to talk about what that abuse might look like in a second here.

But the third phase is the honeymoon phase. And this is the phase where the perpetrator may be sorry or he may act like nothing happened. He's maybe interested in making up. He may promise never to do it again. But the tension always starts to build up again eventually, and that continues the cycle.

Now, I usually send the survivor a picture of the abuse cycle and I ask her to tell me... This is after she said, "Well, I think he's changing," or "I think he's actually really good." I will ask her to tell me which part of the cycle she is currently in. And then the light bulbs begin to go on for her because she realizes that the good mood that he's in, or the sudden change and all the happy feelings, those are all part of a cycle.

And we all know what cycles do, right? They go around and around forever. A circle is infinity. So when there is a "good" part, we know that eventually it will go bad again. And when there is a bad part, we stay because our bodies and our brains have been conditioned to expect that the good part is going to come back around again.

So before we move on, I want to talk about what the abuse might look like, because abuse is not just physical. Abuse also includes emotional abuse, which is what I focus on in my work and my program and my books. And there are some episodes, actually, if you want to learn more about what emotional abuse is, I have some episodes that I can recommend for you.

One is Episode 26, "This Is What Covert Hidden Abuse Looks Like." And by the way, when I give you an episode number, it's easy to find it. You can go in your browser, just go to flyingfreenow.com/ and then the number of the episode. So in this case, it would be flyingfreenow.com/26. And that's called "This Is What Covert Hidden Abuse Looks

Like.” Another one would be Episode 49, “Emotional Abuse: When You Have All the Responsibility and None of the Freedom,” and Episode 70, “When Giving the Silent Treatment Is Emotional Abuse.”

And you guys, that's just three. There are so many of them. If you go to your podcast app, you can just scroll through the titles. I try to pick titles for the episodes that pinpoint — obviously — pinpoint what the episode is actually about. So of course, this is a podcast specifically about the topic of emotional abuse, so we talk about that a lot on this podcast.

Okay, another type of abuse would be financial abuse, and that's when your partner is controlling the money or doling it out or not allowing you to have the money or keeping you from buying the things that you need. We have an episode, it's Episode 172. It's called “Protect Yourself From Financial Abuse with Attorney Lisa Zeiderman.” You can check that one out.

Another type of abuse is sexual abuse, insisting on having sex when your partner doesn't want to. Episode 104, “How Do I Heal After Abuse and Sexual Betrayal?” Episode 108, “The Great Sex Rescue,” which is an interview with Sheila Wray Gregoire about her book, “The Great Sex Rescue” — highly recommend — and Episode 170, “Does the Bible Say I Have to Give My Abusive Husband Sex on Demand?” Those are some examples of episodes that talk about sexual abuse.

And then another type of abuse is using children as a weapon to manipulate the victim. So threatening to take the children away if she ever leaves him is a common one, or turning the children against the victim by feeding the children lies. A couple of episodes that address the idea of children and helping your children to process all of this are Episode 113, called “Building Resilience in Children Who Have Experienced Coercive Control,” and Episode 233, “Raising Resilient Kids Even if Your Co-parent Is Destructive.”

Another way that they will be abusive is by threatening to hurt you by punching walls or breaking things or throwing things. This is actually considered physical abuse because it often ramps up to actually not just hitting walls or furniture, but actually hitting the victim. So that's something to take very, very seriously if your partner is getting violent towards things in your home or towards your property or towards animals as well.

Another type of abuse is just invading your personal privacy by insisting on watching you dress or bathe or reading your journals or keeping you awake at night or waking you up in the middle of the night. Another type of abuse would be controlling your time by refusing to allow you to do certain things or forcing you to do other things.

Another type of abuse would be isolating you from family and friends or keeping you from going out and doing things, keeping you from making autonomous, adult decisions on your own. Another type would be verbal abuse, calling you names, criticizing you, disrespecting you and your boundaries, not allowing you to have a voice, blaming you for his behavior, accusing you of things that he does, or badgering you about things. All of these things can be ways that an abuser takes his victim's power and autonomy and self-respect away. All of these are ways that he controls her.

So when we think about the abuse cycle, sometimes we think about the part where he is apologizing and being nice and giving you flowers or rubbing your back or tending to you in some way, and we think of this part as "the good part," and we say, "He's being good. I miss the good times. Sometimes he is so good to me." That's not good, beautiful butterflies. That is evil. Genuine goodness is never evil and controlling and cruel. Genuine goodness is not good sometimes and bad at other times, but fake goodness is.

Do you remember the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood"? He looked so good, all dressed up like a little old innocent granny. But was he good? No. The nice-looking costume and mask were a tactic to fool Little Red Riding Hood into believing that the wolf was good, that the wolf was innocent and incapable of harming anyone.

When serial killer Ted Bundy lured his victims, do you think that he came out with a weapon and said, "Come to me, my victim"? No. He would pretend to be a good guy or he would pretend to be disabled so his victims would be fooled into helping him. He would ask them to help him get things out of his car. Sometimes he impersonated who we would think of as good people, like police officers or firefighters. Why? So his victims would trust him, so his victims would be fooled. Does that mean that Ted Bundy was good part of the time and bad other parts of the time? No, we would never say that about Ted Bundy.

So we need to stop saying that abusive, controlling individuals are sometimes good. They sometimes pretend to be good, but they are naughty humans doing naughty things in this world and refusing to take responsibility, make amends, and change.

All right, so let's think about a circle like a merry-go-round or a hamster wheel. Those are my favorite ones. The line goes around and around forever as long as you stay in the wheel or as long as you stay on the merry-go-round. The only way to interrupt that cycle is to get off of it. Get off the merry-go-round. Get off the hamster wheel. The problem is, most victims are programmed to chase after a carrot that is dangling just out of reach, and the carrot is going in the same circle. So that motivates the victim to stay in the circle.

This is what the carrot is: They have this irrational hope that one day, by some miracle, they're going to catch up with the carrot and get it. And the carrot is this belief that, "Well, maybe he'll change. He could change. He might change. Maybe he really is good. Maybe Ted Bundy really is good." I'm not saying your husband is like Ted Bundy, but I'm just saying... I mean, some of you guys probably have husbands like Ted Bundy. But I'm just saying that's an analogy to help you get my point, okay? We think that if we can catch up to the carrot and get it, and they change and they suddenly become amazeballs, the problem will be solved.

And so around and around and around we go, year after year, after year, after year, after decade, after a decade. Toward the end of my crazy relationship, when I found myself in the middle of one of our typical... The conversations go in circles too, don't they? So I'd find myself in the middle of one of these conversations that are going absolutely nowhere. I would feel so dizzy and angry, I started to twirl and sing, "Around and around and around we go, where we stop, nobody knows." And my husband would roll his eyes and tell me I was crazy. And quite honestly, I think he was right. I felt seriously crazy because I was on a never-ending merry-go-round or hamster wheel and I just wanted it to stop, but I wasn't willing to get off of it yet.

By the way, I've been married to my husband, Tom, my second husband, for six years now, and I have never once been in a wacky conversation with him. Amazing. Much like how I never experienced crazy, circular conversations with any of my prior roommates or friends from high school or college, because those people were normal. They weren't abusive. You guys, there are a lot of normal people out there, but you are not married to one.

So what I want to talk about now is how to interrupt this... I mean, maybe you're a people-helper and you're listening to this podcast, but most people who are listening to this podcast are listening because they're not married to someone like that.

So what I want to talk about now is how to interrupt the cycle that you are in because I promise you, your abuser is not going to interrupt it. The abuse cycle serves him beautifully. Why would he want it to end? It keeps him from taking any responsibility, it caters to his toddler beliefs and emotions and whims, it provides him with emotional energy. Yes, it does. You get drained, but he gets energized. So since he is never going to interrupt the cycle, that leaves you. You're the one.

Interrupting might mean a lot of different things, but I do want to give one caveat. If interrupting the cycle means that you endanger your life or the lives of your children, then you definitely need to get outside help when you get ready to interrupt the cycle

because if abusers like how the cycle is serving them, they are not going to like having it interrupted. And as we all know, when an abuser gets their panties in a knot, they can go crazy on their victims. So interrupting the cycle for you might mean secretly visiting a local domestic violence center in your area to get help, to create a safety plan, to find out where your resources are, find out what your options are. You are not going to want your abuser to know that you are planning a future interruption.

Now, to that point, I want to briefly bring up something else. We're going to go down a little rabbit trail here. I get a lot of women in our private forum who express guilt over being secretive in planning their interruption. They have been so programmed to believe that their abuser's rights are paramount, while the woman in their body is worthless and deserving of no rights, that they feel guilty when they think about the possibility of taking away their abuser's perceived rights to abuse them.

And not only that, but plotting behind the abuser's back? I mean, we are good Christian women, right? If someone kidnapped us and we were planning our escape, we would need to be honest and tell the truth to our kidnapper: "I'm actually planning my escape. Just wanted you to know because I'm a woman of integrity." Does that make any common sense? Not really.

So if a younger version of yourself who is programmed with this thought, "Never keep anything from your authority," then you might have to sit down and have a little talk with her and explain how that's actually not how it works in the universe. That was a lie that someone told her when she was small so that a bigger person could control her. We call that propaganda, and I talk about this in my book, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage." Which, by the way, if you want to get that book, you can get it on Amazon. It comes in paperback, Kindle, and Audible formats. I'm the reader of the Audible one. So, anyway, if you want to learn more about that and you haven't read my book, that's a good place to start.

Okay, now that we've debunked the idea that you're not allowed to secretly plan your interruption or else you'll lose your integrity as a Christian woman, let's talk about some ways that you can interrupt the abuse cycle.

First, you have to see the cycle, and that means you need to start tracking it. When you are in the honeymoon phase, write down the dates so that you can see how long it lasts. When you start to feel his mood shifting, write down the date or even the time. I mean, sometimes an abuser can complete an entire cycle in a day or even in an hour. Other times it can be weeks or even months for a full cycle to complete.

One time in my former marriage we moved to a new home and my husband was incredible for almost an entire year. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. It was evidence to me, at least what I was thinking is, I was like, "I must have been making it up in my head before. My husband really must be a good man." But eventually, that honeymoon phase also ended and we began the cycle again. Now, that was the longest honeymoon phase that I ever experienced, but it certainly wasn't the only one. I went through hundreds of those.

So create a little chart for yourself in a secret journal somewhere — yes, you can have a secret journal — and track the dates or times, as well as what happens in each phase. You'll also want to start noticing and tracking your own thoughts and feelings in each phase so that you can observe those patterns as well. We don't want to just look at what our husband is doing. We want to see how we are feeling in our body in each phase.

And then we want to think about, "Hmmm, I wonder what I'm believing right now." So like in the honeymoon phase, you might be feeling really good. Here's how I felt. I felt tons of relief, just relief that everything was going to be okay. I loved that feeling of relief so much. It was like it released all these really good hormones inside of me. It gave me dopamine. All those good hormones, they just would flood my body and then I would settle and I would have hope. And I'd be like, "It really is going to be good." And so my thought, "This is going to be good, everything is going to be okay," that helped me feel amazing in my body.

And then what did I do when I felt amazing in my body? I just hunkered down and we kept going, and then it would start to ramp up again. And when it started to ramp up, then I would be thinking, "Oh no." My thought then was, "I better be careful. I've got to be more careful," and I would be on the hyper-alert lookout for any... I would watch every little flicker across his face, all of his body language. I observed that man and I knew him inside and out. I could tell when things were going to go south.

And then when it went south, then I would usually think, "What the heck? It's all going to hell in a handbasket anyway," and then I would usually defend myself. I would fight back verbally. I would argue with him. I would try to get my thought... Well, actually, I'm going to get to that in just a minute, so I'll move on here.

But my point is, create a little chart for yourself in this secret journal and then take your journal to your therapy sessions if you're getting professional counseling. This will be really helpful for your counselor or your therapist to understand what you are going through as well as your own thought processes in each phase of the abuse cycle. You

and your counselor are going to get some valuable insights. That information is going to be gold. And tracking the cycle for your husband's behavior and for your own thoughts and feelings at the different parts of the cycle is a very important step one.

All right, step two. Once you can see the cycle clearly, you may have to record it a few times so that you can start seeing the patterns. You want to get to the point where you can anticipate what your husband is most likely going to do or say next and where you can also sort of watch yourself falling into your own patterns. That's when you get to decide where you want to interrupt what you typically do, right? Because we can't change the husband. We can't stop what he does. He's going to stay in the cycle. But once you start seeing what you typically do, you can decide, "Hmm, where in this process do I want to interrupt and do something different?"

I remember being caught up in the cycle over and over again, and I was starting to see my own knee-jerk reactions when he would bait me with his words. Mine was very covert and very passive-aggressive and very negative and critical. So it got to the point where I would have an argument with myself. I would say, "Okay, Natalie, this is it. This is the part where you try to make your case, you try to get him to understand, but don't do it. It never works. Just walk away, walk away." And I would literally watch myself slip right back — basically not walk away, okay? I was not able to interrupt that until I learned how to actually slow it way down. As in, I learned how to notice what exactly I was thinking in that moment, and then I would analyze it later to find out what my underlying belief was.

So, in this way, here are some of the things that I learned about myself. I learned that some of my underlying beliefs included things like this: "I am unable to tolerate disapproval." I really believed that. I believed I was not able to tolerate it. I believed, "My husband should be kind and respectful because he's a Christian, so I need to get him to be that way. I need to do it by saying the right words, by giving him the right feedback, by showing him how his disrespectful, critical, nasty words are hurting me. I need to do that because he should be kind and respectful." Another thought that I realized I was having over and over is, "My husband needs to believe me," okay? Do you see that? Those were my thoughts. I'm responsible for my thoughts and beliefs.

So the first thing I had to interrupt in the abuse cycle were my own thoughts about what was going on. I had to come to a place where I believed things like this: "I can tolerate disapproval." "My husband maybe should be kind and respectable, but the fact is, he's not. That is the reality of the situation. I thought I married a cat, but I actually married a duck. And ducks don't meow no matter how hard I try to make them." Or this: "My husband doesn't need to believe me and have my back. I need to believe me

and have my back.”

You guys, I have a new book coming out in early 2024 that chronicles my story of how I was programmed and how that programming impacted my life on a daily basis and how I eventually deprogrammed and then reprogrammed my thoughts. Basically, I was doing what God tells us in Romans 12:2: “Don't follow the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person.” By what? By how? “By changing the way you think.” You guys, it's right there in the Bible. “Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” How does He do that? He changes the way you think. Then the verse says, “When this happens, then you will know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” I could not be transformed into a new person until I changed the way I was thinking.

A couple of months ago, I met with over sixty members of Flying Free and Flying Higher in the Twin Cities for our annual Butterfly Bootcamp. And in one of the sessions we talked about this verse and how the behaviors and the customs of this world, they're not talking about getting tattoos or body piercings or wearing pants or letting women have equal rights and opportunities. That is not the behaviors and customs of this world. The behaviors and the customs of this world in this verse is referring to the fact that this world operates on a power-over hierarchy. That is the custom of this world. The custom of this world is actually very abusive. It's very undercutting of one another.

And Jesus came to dismantle that kind of thinking and to usher in a new way of thinking and a new way of living, which involves serving and loving and honoring one another — not killing each other, not powering over each other. And this is not just women serving and loving and honoring men. It's also men serving, loving, and honoring women as well. Jesus didn't come as a powerful ruler, okay? He came as the most vulnerable and weak, poverty-stricken baby conceived out of wedlock — that's the impression His birth left behind — born in a barn with animals.

That is a far cry from the power-hungry religious leaders of Jesus' day and the power-hungry religious leaders of our day. That is the worldly behavior and customs that we are to change our thinking about, and it begins in our homes. And also, until the church does that, the church will not only be ineffective, but the church will be a destructive force in this world, and ultimately, completely irrelevant to what God is actually doing in the world. And I really believe that that's what's happening. And that is a little rabbit trail for you.

But I want to tell you that if you join me inside Flying Free, you will get to take classes from me and other advocates, authors, and experts in this field. You will also get to

learn how and to get practice with changing your own thinking so that you can transform into the next new version of yourself, as well as discover the good, perfect, and pleasing will of God.

Okay, so step two is to interrupt your own thought process, the thoughts that you have right before you take action in the same ways that you typically take action in your relationship. Eventually, I was able to see... Like, for example, this thought crossed my mind: "Oh, there is my belief that I can't tolerate disapproval. Huh. When I think that thought, I feel fear in my body because I'm afraid of disapproval, right? And when I'm afraid of disapproval, I avoid using my voice. I stay silent when I should speak up. Instead of doing that, I'm going to interrupt the pattern and open my mouth and say something. And then I will ride the waves of pain when my husband disapproves of the truth that I am bringing to the table." That's one way that I interrupted the abuse cycle in my former relationship.

Here's another way. Let's say he criticized me and I'm ready to defend myself. So I noticed that thought cross my mind: "He should be kind. He should believe me." But then I remember that while he should be kind, the reality is he is not kind and he really doesn't have to believe me. He's an adult — he can do what he wants. But I do need to believe me and I do need to have my own back, and that's enough.

And when I remember that, see how I changed my thought? Instead of defending myself now, I can choose to walk away and let him think whatever he wants to think. And I started to do that. I started to disengage. I started to detach and detox, which is another class course I teach in my program. Do you see how changing our own thoughts interrupts that cycle? All right, so that's step two.

Step three: We create healthy boundaries for ourselves. Another course that I teach inside of Flying Free is all about boundaries. One of the misconceptions that many people have about boundaries is that they believe if they create a boundary, why, then the other person has to respect it.

But that's not true. We don't create boundaries to control other people. That's not even possible. Abusers hate boundaries and they don't respect boundaries. So if you have a boundary, they're going to look for ways to press the envelope and violate your boundary.

You might decide you want to have a boundary about getting dressed in private, let's say. If you ask your husband to stay out of the room while you're dressing, he may not respect that. So what can you do? You can go in the bathroom and lock the door. That's

one idea. That is your boundary. Do you see that? Your boundary is not, "You can't watch me dress." Your boundary is, "I go to the bathroom and I lock the door," okay?

In other words, telling your husband not to watch you getting dressed is not setting a boundary. That's just a request. Your boundary is what you do with your body to protect yourself. It could be locking the bathroom door. It could be an in-house separation. It could be moving out. Your boundary is for you. It's not for the other person. Your boundary says what you will do with your body to keep you safe. That's it. All right, so that's step three.

Step four: Prepare for the cycle to spin out of control. If you think that hamster wheel was going around and around quickly before or that merry-go-round was going around fast before, you just wait until you set some boundaries and you start interrupting the cycle, and you are going to see that cycle... You're going to see your abuser rotate through that cycle like lightning. He's going to get really triggered when he perceives that he's losing control over you and you are now exercising your right to be an autonomous adult.

If he's a yeller, he's going to yell more. If he's passive-aggressive, he's going to get more passive-aggressive. If he's a gaslighter, he will gaslight you even more. If he criticizes you with nasty words, he's going to criticize you with even more nasty words. In other words, when you interrupt the abuse cycle, you are not solving anything, okay? There are some misconceptions around that too. You're not solving any problems when you interrupt the abuse cycle. All you're doing is shedding a big, huge spotlight on the real problem in your marriage, and that is your abusive husband.

He will show up in all of his abusive colors when you interrupt the abuse cycle, so make sure you have the support you need. Emotional support, physical support on the ground if you're concerned about physical violence, spiritual support. That's the kind of support that we offer inside of Flying Free. You can also get it with insightful friends and family members and a good therapist.

Step five: We plan to get off the merry-go-round for good. I have this image in my mind, I just have to say. I have this image in my mind of a hamster on a hamster wheel. Not in a cage, but on a road. He's going around and around the hamster wheel, going nowhere. Where could that hamster go if he stepped off the wheel and just ran on the road? He could go wherever he wanted to. Well, until something ate him. But you know what I'm saying? That is what it can be like for us.

So once you see the cycle for what it is and you radically accept that this is your reality

and that the cycle doesn't end, you may decide to leave that cycle altogether. This means that you may choose to separate permanently or you even may choose to obtain a legal, life-saving divorce. And I talk about all of this in more detail in my book, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," and we really do a deep dive in the courses that I teach in the Flying Free program.

When you join Flying Free, by the way, as an annual member, you join for a year, you will get a free PDF copy of my book and the companion workbook. In fact, it's the only place that you can get the workbook in digital format. I don't sell that anywhere other than Amazon, but Amazon only sells a physical workbook. It's actually a really nice, big workbook on Amazon. It walks you through your own life with probing questions that are related to each coordinating chapter in the book. So it really helps you process the book and figure out what's going on in your own relationship. Just incidentally, it also has eleven adult butterfly coloring pages. So if you're an adult coloring lover or whatever, then you may like it for that reason too.

Okay, so let's recap today's episode. The abuse cycle is a circle we get in with our abuser that involves a tension-building phase, an explosion, and then a honeymoon period. The only way out is to interrupt the cycle. We do that by first observing the cycle and recording patterns that include our husband's behavior, as well as what we believe about that behavior and how it makes us feel in our body, and then what we do or say as a result of our belief about the abuse.

Once we can see the cycle for what it is, we can notice our default thought and we can make a conscious choice to think something new, something that's more true, that actually empowers us to show up differently than we normally do. And when we show up differently, the abuser's tactics are going to get worse. And then when they get worse and the spotlight is shown on the problem, which is our abuser, then we are actually more able to radically accept our reality. Very, very key to healing.

When we accept our reality, then we can look around us for opportunities to change that reality if we want to, not by changing our abuser — he ain't never gonna change, people — but by creating healthy boundaries, which may eventually lead us to get out of the destructive relationship when the time is right. And again, if you would like help and support through this process, consider joining Flying Free, and you can learn more about that at joinflyingfree.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, and until next

time, fly free.