

## STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH TOXIC COMMUNICATION CYCLES

*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 the Flying Free Podcast. Today, I have Mikki Gardner with me. She is a Certified Life and Conscious Parenting Coach, she's the host of Co-Parenting with Confidence Podcast, and today we are going to have a discussion about how to break free from the toxic communication cycles that we find ourselves in with our husbands. Welcome, Mikki.

MIKKI: Hi, thank you. I'm so excited to be here and talk about this. This is such a good topic, so I'm excited to be here.

NATALIE: Yeah, it is a good topic. I'm really excited to hear what you have to share. I have lived more years of my life dealing with people who communicate in toxic ways than I have years of life living with people who actually have healthy communication styles. So I've experienced dealing with people with both, and it can feel pretty hopeless when you start going in these communication circles with someone and you know they're not listening, they're not willing to meet you halfway, you know that there's never going to be this closure where you both feel heard and seen and validated and respected, and there's never going to be a meeting of the minds.

So that's why I'm excited about what we're going to learn from you today because I think this is a huge pain point for a lot of our listeners, especially when it comes to communicating with this kind of co-parent about what is most important to us, which is our kids.

So to kick us off, Mikki, can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your journey? Where are you coming from, how did you get to where you are now where you're actually talking about this and helping other people with this topic?

MIKKI: Thanks for having me, and I'm really excited about this conversation. I think I might be a little bit different from your average listener in that I am no longer married. I am divorced — I am a single mom of one thirteen-year-old boy. I still cannot get over that he's thirteen. Still not getting over it, and he's going to be fourteen soon, so I've got to get over it.

NATALIE: Is he taller than you yet?

MIKKI: Yes, he towers over me. I was hugging him yesterday and it's like I have to reach up and he's no longer that little guy, but it's the most fun in the world to watch them grow up and turn into their own little people. But how did I get here? So I call myself a Conscious Co-parenting Coach, and I'm a Certified Life Coach. I'm also a Certified Conscious Parenting Coach. Both of which, I think like most of us, we come to these things because it's what we need to learn.

And for me, divorce was not something that I ever intended on, not something I wanted, not the way that I saw my life going. I had checked every box to make sure that I had the perfect life, and what felt like an instant, it came crashing down, and I was left with not the life that I thought I had. And most importantly, the marriage that I believed I had, it was not really what was happening.

And I had to do a lot of work to come to that place. We tried every which way from Sunday to figure it out. And for us, this was the right path for us to move forward. I still consider us a family. We're in two homes. And I also define co-parenting different than a lot of people, I think, in that I define co-parenting is parenting with anyone that you don't agree with a hundred percent of the time.

NATALIE: I like that.

MIKKI: It's pretty much all of us, right? Because we all have our ideas of how things are going to go. And then when you have a parenting partner or a co-parent, they have their own set of ideas, values, parenting styles, all of the things, experiences, trauma, on and on and on. And so what I learned is that I couldn't just parent the way I wanted. I had to learn how to sort of open up my lens and figure out, "How am I going to parent with this person who I once loved?" He was my partner, he was my person, and then he wasn't. And I had to learn how to still parent with him for the betterment of my child. And it was a rocky, rocky road.

And along it, I really started to see how we get in our own way from really showing up. We have really good intentions of showing up well, of being the best parents, the best co-parents, and a lot of times we can get in our own way. And so for me, I started to understand and learn all of these tools, and I'm so grateful now that I have those because my ex-husband and I have a great relationship, we have a good relationship as a family. But I really help moms now navigate co-parenting in a calm, clear, confident way. And none of that has anything to do with their ex either agreeing with it or participating in it.

And I think that's where this conversation is interesting today because all of the same rules apply even when we're married. We still have to look at it as, "How am I coming to the situation? How am I being part of the problem or the solution?" and learning how to get past these different communication styles, different parenting styles, because they really trip us up. And if there's one thing I've found, it's parenting is one of those things that will bring you to your knees, and we all want to do it so well, but many of us don't have sort of the tools and the skills and the strategies that we need to do that to support ourselves. There's this idea that "You're just a good mom" or "You're just a good parent." No, those people are made, right? They do the work, they learn the things.

And so that was a long-winded way of saying I sort of went all the way around on a very rocky, up-and-down journey to find myself here. But I really love being in community with moms and being a mentor for them as they walk through this journey of learning how to really empower themselves and show up the way they want to, regardless of their situation.

NATALIE: Yeah, because my audience, they're dealing with partners who are abusive to them and often to their children as well, so then sometimes you're not going to see eye to eye with someone who is intentionally trying to hurt you and your kids for their own benefit or their own kicks and giggles. Okay, so why don't you tell us what is the toxic communication cycle that people can get in?

MIKKI: So the one that I think so many of us see because now text is the way that a lot of people communicate — I don't know when this just became the norm, right? But I believe that text is meant for groceries and, "Did Billy get his homework done?" Kind of yes and no questions.

Unfortunately, we use text as a second language. The danger of that is that you can't hear the inflection in someone's voice, you can't see the full context. You're only seeing these words that pop up in a bubble. And then you're putting all of your current state, your beliefs, all of it on it. So what I see so often is one person — let's say the mom in this case — she sends a text just asking for a simple request. And maybe her partner comes back, "I can't believe you — you always do this. You never help me out," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Well, so right now she, "Oh my gosh," right? "He misunderstood," or "I can't believe he's doing this," so she feels the need to defend. So she sends a text back.

And this can happen in a conversation too, right? But now we're into defense. So she sends, "No, you didn't understand me," or maybe there's over-explaining or maybe

she's attacking back, and then boom, the next one comes, right? We're upping the ante. And it becomes this vicious cycle: attack, defend, attack, defend, attack, defend.

And oftentimes we don't know that we're in it until we're really in it, right? We're already thirty messages in and you realize, "Oh my gosh," right? "I'm in this cycle." And so part of what I believe our work is is to start to get out of reactivity. The majority of people, I think, are living in a state of reactivity, meaning they aren't aware of what is happening. They're simply reacting, right? The example that I just gave is a reaction. It's not a choice. It's not a stopping, thinking, and choosing. It's just boom: "I have to defend myself, so I'm going to defend myself," right?

I always preface this with if you are being abused — physically, emotionally, otherwise — that's not okay, right? And so I want to be really gentle of your listeners who are experiencing this. I don't want these words to come off very cold or dismissive of what's happening. What I do believe is that the more we are aware, the more empowered we are to change, right? And so the first thing we have to really start to do is understand when we are reactive, when we have been "triggered."

A lot of people use that word: "triggered," "activated." So as soon as we realize that we're in that mode, that we have been triggered, this is huge because this is your moment to choose differently, right? Instead of the reaction — let's go back to that little example I gave — but as soon as you realize that you're in the defense and attack, you have a choice of what you want to do, if you want to continue in that cycle, but it first takes just the awareness to know that, "I'm in it." So as soon as you feel your body... Like, for me, when I'm in that cycle and I feel really defensive or attacked, I have a knot in my stomach, there's usually a lump in my throat, right? I'm having a physical reaction. And so part of learning how to be less reactive is to start to understand and notice when our body is sending us these messages so that we can get out of the reactivity and into what I call taking responsibility for our life.

But the way I define responsibility is the ability to respond, right? So we don't want to react. We want to respond. And so that's why as soon as we realize we're in reaction, we then have a choice. And the first step is to pause, right? When we have that lump in our throat, the heaviness in our chest, the tension in our shoulders, the knot in our stomach, all of these things are your body's way of trying to tell you that you are in a reactive state and we have to calm ourselves down. Not calm ourselves from hysteria. What I mean is take our nervous system and bring it down to a place where we're breathing on a normal rate, where we'd become more aware to the present moment. Because when you're in the present moment, you have more power, right?

And so it's understanding, "What is happening in this moment? What is happening in that moment of that cycle is my partner said these words and I got defensive or triggered or angry." And yes, you probably did, and it's probably totally reasonable. But we can't continue in that cycle and expect for anything different to change. And so it's really stopping to understand and stopping to pause so that you can sort of step out and choose differently.

NATALIE: Yeah. Can I jump in here for a quick second?

MIKKI: Yes, please.

NATALIE: Because I want to say one of the things that I recommend for survivors to do because they get in these conversations in person if they're living with their partner or if they're separated or even... Okay, so let me just give you my own personal example. When I was still living with my ex, it was hard for me to do what you're describing, to stop and notice my inner reactions. I just reacted because I grew up in a family that was very manipulative in the same ways, and then I had been married to this person for so many years. So I was so used to being in that pattern. It was hard for me to stop, slow the whole thing down to be able to see why I'm reacting and even what I'm reacting to.

So the thing that helped me was actually starting to put everything in writing. So I did start using email where I said, "I'm only going to communicate with you now via email so that I can slow down and think about what I want to say and also so that I can slow down and read what you are saying and see it for what it is." I actually needed to get all of the inflections and all of the drama out of it to just see what the words were saying.

And then I do work with a lot of women who are separated or divorced, and a lot of times they have to use writing. They're not on their phone getting into these crazy conversations with their ex. They are actually texting or they're using an app like "Our Family Wizard" or "Talking Parents." And those are really, really good opportunities to actually practice what you're talking about. But I just want to acknowledge for anyone listening who's like, "I don't think I could do that in the moment," I don't think I could do that either.

MIKKI: No, and so here's the best thing about awareness because awareness doesn't have to come in the moment, right? Again, it can come hours later, days later, but it's to start to understand, "What happened there that I got triggered and jumped into the cycle? What was it that pulled me in, or was I overwhelmed and running around and then this came in?" Okay, if that's the case, then part of a boundary, an internal boundary, would be to not read them when you're not in a place to be able to do that,

right? It's like what you're saying.

Or I have a lot of clients that they do only communicate via email, and we have to put together plans of, "How are you going to best serve yourself?" to be able to do just what you're saying. Read through everything, and I always tell them, "Print out the email and read it and go through it and scratch out anything that isn't a fact. Anything that's opinion or fluff or just abusive, just scratch it out. Just take a sharpie and get it out," and then you get left with the facts. "Well, the facts might be we have X issue to deal with. Okay, that's what I'm dealing with, but I'm going to remove everything else."

And this is what I mean by the awareness of starting to understand, getting ourselves out of reaction, and getting ourselves into a more grounded place that we can start to choose, "How do I want to show up? How do I want to take care of myself?" And that's why I always say parenting or how you're showing up has less to do with the other person and more to do with your choices of how you're coming to it.

I'm not saying other people are amazing and that you're not doing it right. No, not what I'm saying. But understanding that we can't control what other people do, say, think, feel, anything, but we absolutely do get a say in how we experience the situation. And when we learn how to be less reactive and start to take more responsibility — again, that ability to respond — that is what energetically changes the game because you're coming from a more grounded, powerful place of awareness of what's actually true.

NATALIE: Yeah. I remember learning how to... I didn't cross out, but I love that idea of actually physically crossing things out. I think that'd be a great first step. Eventually, you can get to the point where you read something from your partner or your ex or whatever and you find the one thing that, either they have a question, or sometimes they don't have a question. Sometimes they're just like throwing up on you, and if they're throwing up on you, you don't need to respond to things like that. Or you can say, "Your opinion is noted," or whatever.

But to find the one little question or the one, like you said, the issue that needs to be solved and only address that with no emotional words, no emotion or drama at all. You try to make it as transactional as possible. And sometimes even that will trigger the other person because I know with abusers, they often want to trigger emotions in you because they like to get a rise out of you, and so it will bother them that they're not getting that rise out of you and they might amp up a little bit to see if they can.

MIKKI: Oh, absolutely.

NATALIE: And you've got the power there. I mean, just notice that you are now holding all the cards. And now they're the ones that feel powerless and they're trying to control you and get a rise out of you. When you can stay in that place where you are in control of yourself, you take all of the power away from them, which is...

MIKKI: Yeah, absolutely. And it's like they always say, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," right? We have this idea that the loudest voice or the heaviest hand or the biggest person is the one who's the most powerful. It's completely opposite. And we know that by nature because when you look at sound waves, when sound waves go very high in frequency — so that's anything: anger, yelling, very loud things — they're very high in frequency, which means they're very unstable. It's like they're actually really unstable in the world. When you look at the really low frequency, the calm, steady one, that's the strongest frequency in the universe. That's what we want to tap into.

NATALIE: That is so interesting.

MIKKI: Yeah, that's where we're tapping into like you just said. And the more and more that you can start to learn that, to tap into your own groundedness, creating your own peace and calm, by learning how to get out of reactivity and start to step into taking more response, you, just like you said, you'll see them and they'll start to go at that really high frequency, and you just know your only job is to stay grounded and to stay at that calm, grounded energy.

And so it's like you almost expect them to do it, right? You expect, "Okay, he's going to get really agitated when I don't follow through on this one or when I don't give in. Oh, okay. Well, I see that coming and I'm going to go ahead and do what I need to do to take care of myself so that I can hold that." And then you're going to get triggered because we all get triggered and we all make mistakes and then there's awareness. "Huh. What happened there? What can I learn from this?" right?

It's like, again, awareness doesn't happen... Everyone feels like, "Oh, I didn't do it in the moment." Okay, totally fine. I just did something. I acted like a child — I mean, a child. I didn't see it for ten days. And then it hit me and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I cannot right now," right? And I had to come back and come back to it, and we all do these things. And so awareness, when it comes, is beautiful no matter what because it gives you the opportunity to understand what your choices are because we always have choices, and then start to step forward in a way that is getting you where you want to go. Maybe not when you're in it, but eventually.

NATALIE: I'm thinking that this is also applicable even to parenting, to dealing with kids.

MIKKI: A thousand percent — oh my gosh, a thousand percent. Yeah.

NATALIE: Okay, so let's talk about triggers. How can we learn to identify that we're getting triggered or what our specific triggers are? Because we probably, if we're triggered by this version, then other versions of that are also going to trigger us in different ways. So help us out with that.

MIKKI: Absolutely. And I think what you said too, it's like we have to also remind ourselves that we're being triggered, yes, on the surface because of things that are going on, but triggers are almost always subconscious, right? They're from the past. Whenever we go from zero to sixty on the emotional scale and when you get triggered, you're just like, "Oh my gosh," overwhelmed completely. It's a whole-body experience.

Whenever that's happening, that's not something new. That's not like we're just experiencing something new. That's like an old wound that somebody just poured salt in, and you're "ouch." And I think the understanding of that is that triggers are really sort of these old beliefs or these old wounds that need healing. That's why parenting is the gift to be able to heal yourself emotionally, right? Because we're giving these little children to trigger the bejesus out of us. That's what they do, right?

NATALIE: Yes!

MIKKI: And I believe that our children choose us, right? Before they arrive here, I think that that is just the way because otherwise, you wouldn't get the exact, perfect child you need to heal your wounds. They're our little teachers, there are little people who are here and they're triggering us and they are our opportunity for growth if we choose to believe that and work towards it.

But you know, we do get triggered, again, because there are these old beliefs or these things that we're not even aware of that are going on, and so when we are triggered, again, it's this like full body experience. The quicker that we can become aware that we've been triggered, the better. And so I always tell people to just stop, right? Hit the pause button. It doesn't matter what's going on. If you can just pause and take three deep breaths. And do you feel a little bit calmer, right? A big breath in through your nose, out through your mouth. If three breaths don't do it, right? Or you might be in a place where you can't stop, right? There might be something going on that you can't take a moment. That's okay. You can come back to it later, but to start to look at it and say, with curiosity and compassion and without judgment, "What was it that triggered me?"



And I usually like to offer to people, "Ask 'why' five times." When I do it to my clients, they get so annoyed with me, because I'm like, "Why, why, why?" right? But when we do it with ourselves, it's like peeling back an onion. When we get triggered, "Why did that bother me?" "Well, because he was really rude." "Why was that? Why did you feel that was rude?" "Because he was insulting me," right? "He didn't think that I knew what I was doing." Okay, why is that a problem?" "Because then I feel insecure." "Okay, why is that a problem?" "Because when I'm insecure, I can't do X, Y, Z," you know?

So when we start to ask ourselves and peel back, we start to see, "Oh, okay." Whether it was our child, our partner, our ex, our boss, the random person in the traffic line, whatever, we start to see what's really the issue that's underneath. It's not what's on the surface. It's something underneath. And when we start to understand that, well, now we have the power to change it or we simply have the power to be aware of it and to say, "Oh, okay. So when this happens, how can I choose differently?" right?

Einstein always said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. So when we get triggered repeatedly, which is how triggers work, we can either choose to continue in the trigger cycle or the toxic communication cycle or whatever it is, or we can choose to step out and do something different.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so you have said that you have a four-step formula for escaping the vicious cycle. Do you want to share that with us?

MIKKI: Sure, sure. So it's based on the three-step framework that I teach with Conscious Parenting, but it really is, again, the awareness piece. As soon as we become aware, and it's typically our body is sending us messages, right? Again, any feeling or sensation in our body, you can almost think of it as like a little messenger that your body is trying to send to your brain to get your attention.

So if we have that knot in our stomach, lump in our throat, whatever it is, that is our ability to stop, which is step two, to pause, and to gain more awareness over what is happening in the moment. So we have to notice that we've been triggered or that we're in reaction, pause, stop, and actually just take a breath, let our nervous system come to a little bit more of a level place so that our thinking brain can get on.

The third step is really stepping into agency. And "agency" is simply a fancy word for choices. And the universe is really nice to us a lot of the time and made it easy. We only ever have three choices. So a lot of times we feel like we have no choice. I don't know if you hear that often, right?

NATALIE: Oh, yeah.

MIKKI: But I know I will say that. My clients say it to me: "I had no choice but to react. I had no choice but to do this. I had no choice." We always have a choice. And so learning how to look at, "Well, what choices do I have?" again, it takes the awareness that I'm triggered, I'm reacting, pausing, and then saying, "What are the choices available to me?" Well, typically the three choices are we can accept something. That doesn't mean to condone it, but it means to accept it as it is without changing it. A lot of times that's really hard when you're being triggered or you're in a difficult situation. We don't want to accept it, okay?

So the next one is change. Well, we can't change other people and we can't change circumstances. So is there something that I can do to change this situation in a way that is going to help it out? if that's the case, great. Do that, right? Again, that would be if we've made a mistake, apologize or rectify something or change the way that we're interacting with the person.

Now, if you can't accept it and you can't change it, it leaves the last option, which is leave. Now, oftentimes we can't just leave, right? Can't just leave our children, we can't just leave the situation we're in, but leaving also can be figuratively or literally. And so, like going back to that example I gave at the top of the toxic communication cycle, you can leave a text stream. You can leave an email chain. And it's really deciding, "I am not going to engage in this cycle because it doesn't serve me." And so leaving, we often think of as, "I have to storm out and never come back," but it also is preserving your own peace to say, "I'm not going to continue this."

NATALIE: Yes. And it can be a peaceful leaving. It can be very gentle, quiet, you just walk away from it and that's it.

MIKKI: Absolutely. Less is more sometimes. So those are our choices always. And for me, it was really powerful to start to learn, because you either feel like you have no choice or there are too many choices, right? But when we break it down and we start to look at it, "Well, if these are my three choices, what can I do in this moment to move myself forward?"

And then the fourth is aligned action. Starting based on the choices that you have, "What is the action that is going to get me aligned in the direction I want to go?" Now, that's not necessarily a straight line to getting along with your partner and never fighting again, right? That's not an action we're ever going to find, but it's starting to understand, "What is the action that is going to get me aligned with what I want?" Again,

so this might look like having to set a boundary, this might look like needing to get ourselves into responsibility and out of reaction, it might look like compromise. It might look like many things, but it's starting to really come from a place of, again, that grounded energy to understand that you have far more power than you can ever even imagine.

And we step into it when we are present, when we're aware of what's happening in the present moment and making choices from right here versus from the past or from the future. And I always ask clients and talk a lot about it, and I use it in my own life, but I have to ask myself, "When I am triggered, what time zone am I in?" Meaning, am I in the present moment where my power lies or am I stuck in the past, either in regrets or sadness or whatever, or am I stuck in worry about the future? Because you can't change the past or the future, but you absolutely can deal with this moment.

NATALIE: Yes. This makes me think of a... Here's an example that happened in my private forum. One of the members in Flying Free, she actually posted her text conversation. She needed help for something and she asked her husband for a favor, and his response was something along the lines of, "Well, I suppose if you absolutely need me to do it I will, but I don't really want to." And her response then was, "Well, okay, then never mind, I'll do it myself." But then it kind of ended up kind of getting into an argument about, she thought that he should say, "Yes, I would love to do that," even though he didn't want to do that.

And so what we ended up getting down to is that she thought that it was her responsibility to manage his emotional needs. Like, if he was put out by doing something for their child and helping out, that was her responsibility to make sure that he was never put out by that instead of just allowing him to be a responsible parent and do the thing to help out, which is what parents do. Sometimes parents have to do hard things. We have to do things we don't want to do, right?

So we got to the point where she realized she could have just said, if when he said, "No, I don't really want to do that. I'm willing to do it, but I don't want to," for her to say, "Great. Well, then pick him up at such and such a time. Like, it doesn't matter if you don't want to do it. This is what needs to be done," right?

So that's just an example of taking the choice that you're making and aligning it to in the direction that you want to go. You want to go in a direction where you're no longer managing everyone else's emotions around you — particularly your ex or your partner — you don't have to manage their emotions. They are responsible for managing their emotions. If they don't like getting up in the middle of the night... Do you like getting up

in the middle of the night? I mean, no one likes getting up in the middle of the night, right? It's not our job to make sure that they always feel comfy and cozy in their beds and we're always the one that gets up in the middle of the night. It's okay for them to be uncomfortable sometimes and help out.

I only say that because I feel like, especially with Christian women, which is where I'm coming from, we always have this idea — and even, really, women in general in society — have this idea that it's our job to just make everyone else's life comfortable, but we throw ourselves under the bus. This is where we actually end up being responsible for saying, "I'm not going to throw myself under the bus anymore. I'm not going to do it." And some people will actually respect that and will go, "Okay, I'll get up." You might be surprised.

If you've ever wondered, "I wonder if things could change with my partner and I," try this out and just see if that person is able to rise to the occasion. If they can't and they are still shaming you and blaming you and cursing you, then you know, "Okay, I guess I'm dealing with a baby," but otherwise, you never know. If you stop managing them you never know what they're capable of actually.

MIKKI: Yeah. And I appreciate you bringing that up and I think you're 100% onto that. That is one of the hardest things to do is to hold what you're asking for. And especially as women, we absolutely have been indoctrinated, ingrained, washed over with this, "Be seen and not heard, be a good girl, don't have needs, get everything done." It's people-pleasing and it is a disease. And my book, "The People Pleaser's Guide to Co-Parenting Well" is coming out on December 5th.

NATALIE: Oh, that sounds amazing.

MIKKI: Because I am a recovering people pleaser, right? And so many of my clients are. But what you just described is we have an inability to sit with our own feelings about someone else's uncomfortable feelings. Because when we are a people pleaser, we think that it is our responsibility to make everything okay, to please everyone, otherwise something has gone wrong.

But conflict is normal. And I think we have to normalize conflict and understand even anger. A lot of times we avoid conversations. She asked — good for her. She's stepping up and she asked. A lot of times we don't even do that because we just want to avoid the conflict or the potential argument at any cost. And it's a lot of times because we don't understand that conflict is normal. Conflict is always going to happen. Married, divorced, whatever. Two humans in relationship, there's going to be conflict. So the

more that we can understand, it's almost the unhealthy side of it that we're afraid of. It's when people aren't managing their emotions — that's what's scary, not the actual conflict.

NATALIE: I do want to give a caveat, though, because a lot of the people that we're talking to right now, they're not just experiencing your average conflict.

MIKKI: True, yes.

NATALIE: I mean, I'm in a normal marriage right now, and my husband and I have conflicts sometimes. It is nothing. It is not even on the same level of what I experienced in my prior marriage. So I have to be really careful about what we say here because what they can often hear and what I heard back when I was back in the day when I was like, "I'm sure everything is fine. Oh yay, this conflict is normal. Now I can just hunker down and stay in this abusive relationship because it's normal." I just need to be careful that people understand the difference.

MIKKI: Thank you. It's almost what I was referring to — it's like the being willing to ask, to being willing to go into and open up to whether there are different opinions or whatever, but certainly, again, abuse, that is a different conversation. But I think it's really important to understand that all too often we're just really uncomfortable with other people's feelings because we don't know how to handle it because we don't know how to handle our own. And so the more you are aware, the more you can start to understand, "What are my feelings? Why am I having these feelings? What are they telling me?"

It takes some of the fear out of it. It takes some of the sting out of it. And we can start to see them, again, as these messengers to understand, "What's going on in this situation that I'm in and how do I want to move forward?" Because we have to be aware of what's happening.

NATALIE: Exactly. This is good, too, for people who are listening who are wondering, "Is my relationship just a normal relationship like your average, garden-variety relationship with average conflicts, or is it actually abusive?" When you do set boundaries or you do give an ask and they're willing to do it, but let's say they pout or they whine or they start cursing you out or calling you names or maybe make you pay — there's like a payback later on — that's when you can stop and go, "Wait a minute. This is more than just them being uncomfortable doing something."

I always say, think about a really, really close friend that you have. If you asked your

friend to do something, would she ever come back and say, "I'll do it, but I don't want to, and also you're just a blankety blank blank and I can't believe that you blah, blah, blah, blah, blah and you never do this for me and you always do this for me," do you experience that kind of behavior from your friend? And if you say, "No, I would never — I can't imagine my friend doing that," that's how you can know the difference between a healthy relationship where your friend might say, "I'd rather not do that, but for you, I'm willing to do it because I care about you and I can tell you really need the help." That's normal versus, "Fine, I'll do it, but you always ask me for everything and you never do anything around here," when you're bending over backward to try to manage everything and you've done a simple ask. There's a big difference there.

MIKKI: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

NATALIE: Okay, so since we've brought up boundaries, let's talk about how to honor and uphold our own boundaries then with the other co-parents so that we're not just throwing ourselves under the bus in order to keep the peace or to co-parent peacefully. You see this on television, even in shows, you'll see the divorced couple and then the kids, but they're all really a happy unit, and it sounds like you have a good relationship with your co-parent, and that is kind of like the dream. Well, I could never have that with my ex. There's never going to be the dreamy, where we all get together at the holidays even though we're divorced, and that's just never, ever going to happen. But that's because I have to have my own boundaries about what I will allow into my space, and his drama is not what I will allow into my space.

MIKKI: I think you bring up a really good point though because I feel like we have two ends of this spectrum. It's either there's zero contact, there can't be anything, it's all fighting and high conflict, which actually is an experience so, so many people have. Or there's the happy family and then like the blended family where everybody's together all the time, dressed in matching outfits, smiling. Either is concerning on some level.

So what I really think we need to think about is it's what do you want, right? What is it that you want from family? What are your values? What is important to you? You know, I can't tell you what you want your family to look like, what you want your relationship to look like. That's up to you and what's important to you and what matters to you and doing the work to start to understand, "Here's what I really want in my life." And then when we set that vision and we start to understand, "What do I value? What is most important to me?"

You know, for me, honesty, communication, and openness and respect, right? Those are kind of my big values. Those are my values as a parent, those are my values as a co-

parent, and they change, right? We evolve during different seasons. But to start to understand, "What is the value that I have?" and that's where you start to use them almost as like a funnel to make decisions because things are constantly evolving and people are changing and doing other things, but it's really, "How am I coming to this and what am I choosing here?"

We didn't go from being married to being where we are today overnight. There were a lot of not great times. There were a lot of moments that were not wonderful. And I learned the hard way because I didn't have support, I didn't know anyone, there wasn't as much out there as there is right now. We have so many resources, how to co-parent and parent, and there's so much out there. I didn't have a lot of that, so I've made a lot of mistakes and learned and got on a different trajectory. So I just want to say that you really do get to choose. I believe that wholeheartedly, that every mom has the capacity to decide and create a harmonious environment for her children based on her choices and her actions. And it might not be today, but can we work towards it, right? And that's where we start to start and make changes one moment, one choice, one step at a time.

NATALIE: Yes. I would add to that, okay, so you started by saying, "How do you want your family to look?" That's basically taking personal responsibility for what the choices that you get to make and casting your own vision for how you want that to look and that that's up to you is so true, but you also have to scan the horizon and look at what your reality is too. Sometimes your partner or your ex might not be capable of bringing that much to the table, so what you want to make possible, you might not be able to include him in some of those things because he would actually sabotage what you want to make possible.

But I think you're absolutely right. We don't need to let this other person dictate what's possible for us and for our family. I've never, ever thought in my mind that, "We are a broken family," ever. That thought has never crossed my mind. I don't believe that. I believe that we are a complete, intact family. Their dad lives somewhere else and they see him and they have time with their dad and then they have time with me and their stepdad over here. I'm constantly filling my mind with, "My family is amazing," even when my family has fallen apart and my kids have had different problems. "My family is amazing. My kids are amazing. They have so much potential. We love each other. We're always going to have each other's backs," and it has nothing to do with the fact that we are divorced.

But I will say this: When I was living in the middle of my abusive relationship, it was very, very hard to take control of my thoughts in that way and think that way. Back when we were married, that was when I had thoughts of, "This family is falling apart.

This family is splintered. This family has problems." And it's because we were roiling around in the cesspool of abuse and we couldn't get our heads above the water to get a breath of air. It's interesting because I know people tend to think, "Oh, if you're divorced, it's all over." But for us, divorce was our redemption story. It didn't look like that at the time, but ultimately that's what it's turned out to be.

MIKKI: Yeah, it's exactly what you make of it. And I think for me, I made the decision because it was important to me to preserve my family, and for me, that's what that looked like. And so I think being able to step back. And again, there's a lot of cultural things. There's a lot of things that society and religion and all the things, they all believe there's this one way, but there's not just one way. And it's really deciding. I think back to your point, if you know someone historically has come into a situation and sabotaged it but you keep inviting them in because, "Oh, I want us to all be together," or "I want us to be here," it's we have an expectation and then there's reality. We expect them to be able to meet you: "Oh, they should be able to do this." As soon as you say "should," you've got to stop yourself, right? Because that's an expectation, but then there's reality. Our pain is what's in the middle of that.

And so we have to really stop and say, "What is really important to me?" Let's say it's a holiday dinner. "Well, being around the table with the people that we love, enjoying, sharing gratitude, laughter, that's what's important." Okay, what's going to get us there? Is inviting him in going to get me there? Probably not. He's probably going to come in and act a fool like he always does. So I'm going to choose to not invite him so that I am preserving my own peace and the peace of what I want that experience to be.

It's a shift in mindset because a lot of times, again, we're just reacting. We're just trying to make everything work out. But it's pausing and slowing down and saying, "What do I need to do here that's aligned with how I want to be showing up? If I don't want to be reactive, what do I need to do today? Well, I probably need to get enough sleep, probably need to drink enough water, right?" We're just animals, right? So we need some basic needs. But oftentimes we get triggered or we get into the toxic communication because we kind of fall into it and it's understanding, "Well, how can I support myself to not go there? What do I need to do?" and reverse engineer that so that we start showing up differently.

Again, I want to leave you with this one little analogy. You know the giant cruise ships? When it's time for them to turn to go to a different port, they don't just turn the wheel and turn the boat. It would just capsize, right? They turn it one degree. And that one-degree shift over a very quick amount of time will take the boat in a completely different direction. So we don't have to change everything. We're just looking to, "How



can I shift one degree towards what I want, towards what is getting me in a place that I feel better, that I can respond more proactively?" That's what we're looking for is, again, that grounded state so we can start to just shift one decision at a time.

NATALIE: Yeah, so good. Okay, so how do we know when it's time to look for professional help if we're really struggling with this?

MIKKI: I think we all need help. I'm a firm believer that it would have been amazing if everybody's child popped out with a user manual: "This is exactly what to do," or "This is exactly how humans work." That would have been helpful, right? But we didn't learn any of this, and most of us didn't learn about our feelings. So I am a firm believer that we really do need help. There is no shame in that. But to understand what's going on in our brain, what's going on in our nervous system so that we can start to make different choices.

And if you feel like you wish someone could be there to help you answer some questions, that's your moment. Reach out. There are so many resources. There's so much more online, there are amazing coaches, therapists — there is help. And so please, please, please reach out because we all need help. And when we do that, we're going to shift. This world is shifting as we become more aware, as we become more conscious. And part of that is just being willing to ask for help.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so you have a podcast of your own. It's called Co-Parenting With Confidence. I just want to reiterate that again if you guys didn't catch it at the beginning. So if you want to hear Mikki talk about similar things to this, that's where you can go find it on your favorite podcast app. Do you have a website that they can go to as well?

MIKKI: Yes, it's just my name: mikkigardner.com, and that's my Instagram handle too. So it's pretty simple, it's all the same. But yeah, the podcast is where I talk about all things co-parenting and all things conflict and learning how to communicate differently and boundaries and all of those fun topics. So I talk a lot about that there, and then I'm on Instagram as well.

NATALIE: Okay, at the time of this recording, it's November, but people are going to be listening to this in January, so your book will have come out. So why don't you tell us the name of your book again?

MIKKI: It will, thank you. It's called "The People Pleaser's Guide to Co-Parenting Well: How to Stop Playing Peacekeeper and Start Parenting Peacefully." And again, it's really

all about starting to learn how to do that three-step framework of learning how to become more aware, have agency, and then really starting to take aligned action in the direction that you want to go because I believe that every mom has the ability to reshape her world and her children's world. And so when we stop and we learn how to do these simple grounding things, they really do make a profound impact on ourselves and our children. And so the book is going to be out. There's going to be a lot of freebies around it. So you can get that on the website and I'm really excited about it.

NATALIE: Yeah, I think it sounds like a great topic. I wish you the best with that book.

MIKKI: Thank you.

NATALIE: We will put a link to it too, because we'll be able to find it by the time we publish this, and we'll put a link to it in the show notes. Is there anything else that you wanted to offer our listeners?

MIKKI: Yeah, thank you. I have a — I think it might be helpful here — is a Conscious Co-parenting Masterclass, but it's really learning how to create calm in the chaos. And it's a little bit more in-depth on the three things that we talked about, because I think we all get triggered. And learning how to slow down and learning how to empower ourselves to do that is a simple — not easy — but a simple way to really make profound change in your life when we can learn how to be less reactive and start taking responsibility. So we'll share that link, but that's an easy way to kind of start to move into that process and become just more aware of it because awareness is the first step always.

NATALIE: Okay. And we'll put a link to that in the show notes as well. Is that available on an ongoing basis?

MIKKI: Yes.

NATALIE: Okay. If they go to the link, they can get in there — okay.

MIKKI: It's always there and it's short. It's twenty minutes. There's a cute little workbook with it. I try to make it really short and easy and doable because we don't have a lot of time, right? We moms are very busy and we have a lot going on.

NATALIE: I love that.

MIKKI: But I wanted it to be really short and easy but doable, right? Some simple, tangible actions that you can start doing today to, again, if you just shift one degree

over the course of a little bit of time, you'll notice huge results.

NATALIE: Yeah, I love that. Okay, thank you so much, Mikki, for having this conversation and sharing your expertise with us. Really appreciate it.

MIKKI: Well, Natalie, and thank you for all you do and your vulnerability and honesty and openness on this topic, and I really appreciate all you're doing, so thank you for having me.

*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.*