

## IS TEACHING BOUNDARIES VICTIM BLAMING?

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 264 of the Flying Free Podcast. This episode is going to be a clarifying episode. Its purpose is to clearly state what it is we do here together, what it is that I do to help people, and what kinds of people I try to help. And then I want to address an issue that I see bobbing up to the surface more and more, and that issue has to do with boundaries.

But before we get into that, I want to say that my books and my podcast and my programs are all geared toward women. So when I hear people say, "That's not fair! Why don't you talk about men too? They are victims too," you guys, that's like telling a kindergarten teacher, "Hey, it's not fair that you just teach little kids. What about the teenagers? How come you aren't teaching them too?" We would think that was stupid, and yet I get this a lot. I should be helping men too.

Also, I narrow my focus down even more, making my books, podcasts, and programs all geared toward Christian women. And sometimes I'll get these kinds of comments: "That's not fair! People who don't have a faith or have a different faith are abuse victims too. How come you don't have books and podcasts and websites for those people, you big meanie?"

And guess what? I narrowed my focus down even more, making my books, podcasts, and programs all geared toward Christian women in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages. And I get comments about that, too. "It's not fair! The things you are saying will get all the victims who are being beaten killed if they do them."

That's true. The advice I would give to someone in the kind of marriage that I used to be in is not the same kind of advice I would give to a woman in a physically abusive relationship. But I have never said that I am offering advice to women who are in those kinds of situations. My mission is clearly stated on every public-facing thing I have on the internet. I help Christian women in emotionally and spiritually abusive marriages. That's it. That's all I help. I help no one else, or at least I don't make any promises to.

Now, here's the beautiful thing about all of this. I am only one of eight billion people in the world. And that means I can focus on my niche and there are likely thousands of others focusing on men, people of other faiths — agnostics or atheists — and people who are in violent relationships.

So if you're listening or reading and you don't fit exactly into the niche that I'm trying to

help, you are more than welcome to listen in, and I hope that you get some good insights. I've actually had men reach out to me on the back end and say, "Hey, I am actually a male victim, but I want you to know I listen to your podcast every week and I get so much out of it, and I just flip the genders and everything that you say applies to me too." Good for them. That's really smart. And anyone can do that if you want to, if you want to just glean what you need. But please don't expect to get the help that you need from me if you don't fit into that niche. I'm not your girl and I don't apologize for not being able to help all eight billion people on the planet. I am not a supernatural goddess, last I checked.

Now, if you are a Christian female in an emotionally and spiritually abusive marriage, then you are in the right place. Everything I say is going to resonate with you. Well, maybe not everything, but a lot of it is. I promise if you hang out with me and other people who are like me — or just like you, I should say; just like all of us — then your life is going to change. We're always influenced by the books we read, the things we listen to, and the people we hang out with. So pick ones that are going to move you forward in your life. Now, if that's not me, then why are you wasting your time listening to this? Go find what you need that's going to nourish you in your particular life.

Okay, next, I want to say this. It is not my practice to go around and pick apart other people who are trying to help people in other niches. So I don't go around to other people's websites and freak out that they are teaching something that I disagree with — I don't have time for that for one thing, but I don't even have a desire to do that — or something that is specifically for women who are being sexually abused, which is not my area of expertise at all, or physically abused or what have you.

Instead, what I try to do is to bring on different voices here on my podcast when I can, and I try to learn from a variety of those voices and introduce them to you. Now, that doesn't mean I agree with 100% of what they say, but I also do not view myself as the information police. I have faith that you as listeners are adults and you can make those decisions for yourself of what you want to believe or not believe. I believe in you.

However, there are people out there who do make it their practice to pick apart other advocates, twist their words, and sabotage their work. I don't think that's serving themselves and their self-development, I don't think it's helping in their own healing, I don't think it's serving the survivor community at large, and I'm going to call that out today.

I want to talk today about the idea that teaching women to have boundaries is the equivalent of victim blaming because I'm seeing this message a lot out there right now.

If we teach abuse victims how to protect themselves by creating a boundary, that is the same thing — this is what these people are saying — that is the same thing or equivalent to accusing them of being at fault for being abused when the abuser does not respect their boundary. So these people are saying that if I or others teach boundaries that we believe that if victims just set a boundary, then they wouldn't be abused.

I can hardly believe that this is being said, but that's what they're saying. Let me phrase this a different way. They think that I'm doing this: If I teach my teenager how to protect herself by creating a boundary of saying no to a date who wants to get in her pants, that is the same thing as me accusing her of being at fault for having a boy who wants to get into her pants in the first place. It's like I'm teaching that if she just said no, then no boys would ever want to get into her pants.

Do people seriously think that I believe or teach that? That's a really big stretch, and yet that's what I'm seeing out there. And I'm not the only one being accused of victim blaming simply because I believe in empowering victims. I've seen other advocates whom I have tremendous respect for and who are doing amazing work and changing thousands of lives with that work, and they are being accused of the same thing. We are being accused of victim blaming simply because we help women understand what boundaries are and what they aren't and that every woman has a right to control her own mind and body. And I will stand on that until the day I die. That is a belief, I believe, that's rooted in love and respect for adult women and their rights to their own voices and their own autonomy.

So the purpose of this episode is to publicly state where I stand, what I believe, what I teach, and who I help. Now, I do not expect everyone to agree or to be respectful. I can't control how everyone reacts to this. I'm sure there will be a lot of people who don't agree with me and have no respect for me. And that's okay. I give you permission to feel however you want to about me.

Here's what I do expect: I expect nothing from anyone else. I do expect a lot from myself. I expect myself to continue to show up for my own life and work because that is the only thing I have control over. And here we go. Now, you can read my memoir to learn more. It's called *All the Scary Little Gods*. You can get it in paperback format or Kindle or Audible. But basically, I spent most of my life surrounded by significant people to me, meaning a parent, a husband, a sister, who enjoyed taking everything I said and twisting it to mean the opposite of what I was saying and then using that as a weapon to exploit, manipulate, and abuse me. And I don't like that. I didn't like it then, and I still don't like it. I think it's mean.

So let me be clear that if my 250 episodes and thousands of hours of teaching and writing on this are not yet clear enough, I just want everyone to know I do not believe, nor have I ever taught, that it is a victim's fault if she is being abused. And I call into question the integrity and motives of anyone who says otherwise.

Now, I'm going to read a Facebook comment that explains this perspective that some of these people have. And this particular person articulated her viewpoint clearly and respectfully, and it was very helpful for me to understand where they are coming from. I didn't agree with it, and I'm going to go into that in just a minute, but at least this person was respectful. I've seen a lot of very disrespectful comments out there on both sides, really, honestly. I've seen a lot of catfighting, and it's gross. It's like, "Wait a minute, why are we going back to..." Anyway, I won't get into it. But I very much appreciated how this person responded on my Facebook page. Not everyone who has commented on my Facebook page has been as respectful.

So here's how she started: "Emotional and spiritual abuse is always a risk factor for physical escalation, particularly when new boundaries are instituted by a victim survivor." Okay, so far I agree 100% with her and I warn women about this all the freaking time. We talk about this in our coaching calls every week. If you're going to establish a new boundary, you will get kickback. Yes, absolutely.

Okay, she goes on to say, "The point that survivors are making in this comment thread is that whether the abuse is mental or physical in nature, boundaries are never respected by the person allergic to them." Again, thank you for saying that, but what you just said is the very definition of an abuser. Abusers don't respect their victim's boundaries. Again, I have over 250 podcast episodes and seven years of social media posts, blog posts, and classes in which I've reiterated this fact. Saying that on my Facebook page is as if they are arguing with me about this is like thinking that you're arguing with McDonald's if you go to them and insist that if they just sold burgers and fries they could make a lot of money. It just doesn't make any sense.

All right, the next thing she said is this: "This commentary is suggesting to people that the victim is to blame for the abuse they are experiencing due to something they inherently lack, which is in this case, boundaries." No, I've never said that abuse victims are being abused because they have no boundaries. Here's what I have said. I have said that abusers, when looking to groom someone, will statistically pick easy targets. That is human nature. I mean, it would be insane to argue against that. Humans always pick the path of least resistance.

I asked this person a question after that just to find out more about her own

understanding of this, and I asked her this: "Do you believe that religious 'Christian' abusers prefer to date women who say no and speak their minds," like feminist types, "or women who say yes and are submissive and cooperative? What has been your observation in this area?" And there was no response.

So if a Christian woman grew up like I did with the belief that she had no rights of her own, that her purpose in life was to be someone's servant and sex slave, an abuser in particular is going to like that because his potential for being able to suck more blood from her before she gets out of the relationship is so much higher. Case in point, me. It took me twenty-five years to get out. Not because my husband's abuse of me was my fault, but because of what I believed I deserved or didn't deserve.

If I had grown up in a very feminist family and was a feminist badass and I believed in immediately divorcing anyone who treated me like dirt and I had my own back... Well, I probably wouldn't have married my ex in the first place. But if I had, six months into the marriage I would have been like, "I'm divorcing your ass. I'm not going to hang around for this." But I didn't believe that. My beliefs kept me in that relationship, all right? Again, what he was doing wasn't my fault, but my beliefs made me stay in that relationship, and our beliefs will always dictate our own choices. They don't dictate the other person's choices. They dictate our choices.

So going back to the women that I work with, they are Christian women, many of whom grew up in homes just like I did, brainwashed with some bizarre and misogynistic beliefs about women. Is it a child's fault that she believes those things? Absolutely not. A child is not responsible for her programming.

So what do we do? Do we just sit together around a campfire and hold hands and say, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault over," and over again? How is that helping these women unhook and get out? Yes, McDonald's knows that burgers and fries are it. And yes, we know it's not the victim's fault. Do we really want to just stay there and talk about it all the time? Are there no opportunities for victims to actually move forward with their self-development, or are they doomed to weeping in their tea for the rest of their lives as powerless victims? Dear God, I hope not. I might as well just hang up my hat and shut this whole thing down if that's the case.

All right, then she goes on to say, "When in fact, many victims initially entered into abuse relationships with intact boundaries, which were eroded over time under psychological abuse. Hence why this commentary is being viewed as victim blaming." So she's saying the reason this commentary is being viewed as victim blaming is because many victims went into their abusive relationship with intact boundaries, and then they

were eroded over time with psychological abuse.

Now, it might be true that some victims... I'm not going to say that all victims do this, because they absolutely don't. I was one who, this did not fit my MO at all. But some victims maybe initially entered into an abusive relationship with fantastic boundaries. Now, I would like to see some actual statistics on that. You can't just throw something out there and then assume that's a fact, because here's the thing. I have actually worked closely — I don't have any stats — but I have worked closely for several years with thousands of Christian women who were brainwashed with very specific ideas about men and women, and I have heard their stories. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of stories. I hear their stories every day. I get emails, I interact with these women and their stories in our private forum and on social media.

I have never ever once heard this story from any of them or any version of this story from any of them: "I had amazing boundaries going into my abusive relationship and I always had my own back. And then the abuser took all of that away from me." I haven't heard any version of that. But the story I do hear over and over again, like a mantra, is this one, some version of this: "I believed I was doing God's will and it was my job to serve and suck it up and give him sex and submit if I was a good Christian, and I was never allowed to leave."

And you know what sets those women free, finally? When they discover the amazing truth about, guess what? Boundaries. That they also have rights to their own mind and body and that they can say no and that they can have a voice, and that often they can leave, which is the ultimate boundary if they want to.

Now, obviously, I've talked about this before. Not everyone can leave right away, right? I'm not going to go into that here, but I'm just saying many of them can leave and they do leave. I've watched them, I've helped them, and then I've worked with them after they've left. Hundreds of stories, you guys. And those women will all tell you, "It all started when I first realized that I was a separate person from my husband and I could say no and I could have a boundary and protect myself. I did not know that. I didn't know that I could walk out of the room if I wanted to. I didn't know that I didn't have to answer a question if he was berating me and badgering me about something. I had no idea. I had no idea that I could just not make him dinner if he was going to complain about it that night."

Now, again, a lot of people are going to say, "Well, what if the husband is going to beat you if you don't make him dinner?" But remember what I said at the very beginning of the podcast episode? Who do I talk to? I'm not talking to women who are in danger of



getting beaten or getting killed. My work is with women who are in emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships. These are women who are married to husbands who are in churches and they know exactly what lines they can and cannot cross, and they often make sure that they just bring their big toes up to the line and they don't cross it. The women of those husbands, that's who I'm helping.

Now, maybe the survivors that these particular people are helping are in a different niche than the one I'm helping. Maybe the victims that they're used to helping all used to be badass feminists with rocking boundaries. Maybe that's the story over there. If that's the case, then yes, their message would ring true for those women, and I say go. Give those women that message and go help them.

But again, I'm not talking to that kind of woman. The women I'm working with are the ones that are on my Facebook page. They're the Christian women in emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships. So I don't go around to other people's Facebook pages telling them what they should and should not teach and that if they don't teach what I'm teaching, then they're bad people. I'm not telling everyone, "Don't listen to those people over there, but you should listen to me instead." Heavens to Murgatroyd.

Here's another part of the quote: "Also, in my experience and observation, survivors are experts at staying alive and safe. The lack of boundaries is often part of our survival mechanism to get through what is being experienced." Yes! Right. Burgers and fries. So this can be reframed from "You were abused due to lack of boundaries" — which I have never said, by the way — to "You did everything you needed to in order to survive," which is something everyone who works with me knows I believe and teach.

And then she says, "Which is an inherently more empowering message." Yes. Again, we are telling McDonald's how great it would be if they only sold burgers and fries. And then she says this: "How to develop safe exit strategies and emergency plans is an important conversation, and the topic of reestablishing interpersonal boundaries comes next." Except that I would argue that developing safe exit strategies and emergency plans is creating boundaries. That is the very definition of what a boundary is. Making your own choice for your own mind and your own body and your own life. Burgers and fries, people.

I want to also point out that this comment is referring to victims who are in a situation where they are in physical or mortal danger. And yes, if you have to choose between saying yes to a rapist or getting strangled, then boundaries are not the issue at that moment. Survival is. Burgers and fries. But my page is not for women who have to decide between staying alive or having boundaries. That is not who I'm talking to. So

we've got this situation where people are coming onto my page and telling me that McDonald's should really sell burgers and fries. But you know what? My page is all about Taco Bell.

The abuse is a fact. It's happening. It's something that is outside of us, it is outside of our control. It is not our fault that that is happening to us. Step one is a radical acceptance of this reality, and I teach this all the time. All the time. I repeat it ad nauseum. But we can't just stop there. Step two is turning our focus away from the abuser and all of his drama and tornado activity and refocusing our energy on us and our opportunities. Our opportunities are our boundaries.

So let me give you an example. If someone had broken into your house and you were hiding, your hiding is actually a boundary. It's you saying, "Hmm, I don't want that person to invade my personal space and hurt me, so what can I do? He's coming for me. It's not my fault he's coming for me, but I still need to strategically think about what I can do in light of this unfortunate circumstance. Hey, I know. I'll run away. I will hide." If you had a weapon and you shot them in self-defense, that's a boundary. If you got kidnapped and you placated and fawned to keep yourself safe while you were plotting to get out, that is your boundary.

Context is important, you guys, and you have a right to pick the boundary that's going to work best for you at any given time. But telling victims that learning about how to have boundaries somehow means that the abuse is their fault or their responsibility is destructive, in my opinion. I think you're taking away or shaming them into not accessing an important tool in their toolbox that can help them get free, that can help them gain self-awareness to figure out where their opportunities are. You're keeping them stuck in a place where they will remain hopeless and helpless. Since it's not their fault, then, therefore, nothing is in their control, including their own thoughts and bodies.

That is like declawing a cat because you think that if a cat has claws, then it's somehow their fault if they get attacked by a big dog and defend themselves. No. We need to teach women about their claws and how to use them to protect themselves, not use their claws as another shaming mechanism.

Learning about boundaries and that I could have them and use them was a game changer for me. And I would argue that unless a woman protects herself by establishing boundaries, she will continue to be preyed on by predators. Not because she is making the predators prey on her, but because she doesn't have claws to protect herself. Don't declaw women.



When I was married to my ex, my mom would often say, "Well, if I were in your shoes, I would not put up with that." And I would say, "Well, what would you do then?" And she would say, "Well, I would do this and this and such and such," and then I would tell her, "Okay, well, if I did that, here's what he would do in return. He would accuse me of such and such, and then he'd call me a dumb rat." And then she would say, "Well, if he did that to me, I would just laugh. He's ridiculous." Now, the odd thing is that my mom was also emotionally abusive and she doesn't have a lot of empathy for very many people. So it's easy for her to dismiss crap and not take someone's insult on herself. She doesn't give anyone credibility. She thinks everyone is a loser and she's awesome.

This is the point I'm making: She did not have a hook inside of her that my husband could hook into to shame her in any way. So her reactions to my husband's abuse were not hooked into needing him to love her or know her or be kind to her. She could care less. But I did. I had a hook inside of me that his words could grab hold of and hurt me. Did I put that hook there? No. Is it my fault that my upbringing gave me that hook? No. It's not my fault. But it is my hook, and that makes it my responsibility. My abuser is going to keep being mean. My only opportunity is to remove the hook inside of me so that when he is mean, it doesn't land.

My mom didn't have the hook that I had. She didn't care, but I cared. I insisted on believing a lie that my husband should love me, he should be kind to me, and that he most likely did but that sometimes he was just in a bad mood because I failed him in some way, and then I would think that was my fault. See my beliefs? My beliefs were the hook that his abuse grabbed onto and burrowed into my life. If I want to be free of his abusive voice in my head, I need to get rid of my own hook somehow so that when the abuser abuses, and he always will, it cannot land in my heart.

The abuser will always abuse. It is not his victim's fault he abuses, but if she wants to get unhooked internally, she needs to figure out a way to get rid of that hook inside of her so it's lies about her no longer land on her psyche and destroy her.

Okay, think about it this way: If a tornado ripped through your neighborhood and your house was demolished, is that your fault? No, it's not. However, it is your responsibility now, right? If you want to have another house or rebuild that one or figure out another way to have shelter, are you just going to sit on the crumbled doorstep and go, "Well, I guess that's it for me because this wasn't my fault"?

Of course not. You're going to go figure it out. You're going to go find another place to live. You're going to go either live with friends or you're going to rebuild your house. You're going to do something because it's not your fault that that happened to you, but

now it has become your responsibility to figure out what you're going to do with your own mind and body about this very unfortunate circumstance that has happened to you.

So getting rid of that internal hook, that is exactly the work that we do in the Flying Free program. Now, if you don't have a hook and nothing lands on you and you're full of love and respect for yourself — and by the way, you know how you know that you're full of love and respect for yourself? It's when you overflow with love and respect for others, regardless of whether or not they agree with you. So if you're good to go, then you don't need me. You don't need Flying Free.

But if you grew up hearing messages that you weren't good enough, that there was something wrong with you, that your voice didn't matter, that you were only good for what you could give to other people and that the way to getting love was to give and give and give and give until you croaked, and if to this day those messages that were downloaded into you have created self-doubt within you and fear and shame or the inability to take risks or make decisions and this drive to manage your husband and your kids emotions, and if you're not able to tolerate the disapproval of other people and you feel fear and shame when they disapprove of you, then I can help you, because that is exactly what I do.

Don't let anyone ever tell you that setting boundaries somehow means that you are to blame for your abuse. That is a lie. We want to get at the heart of our own thinking processes, which at the end of the day are the only thought processes we have control over. We cannot control the abuser's thinking, only our own.

Someone recently told me that their counselor asked her why she kept falling for her husband's lies. And this woman, this survivor, felt like she was being blamed. But I suggested to her — and I don't know, I just threw this out there — maybe the counselor was trying to loosen up her belief that her husband was a person who was like her, a person who didn't lie. Maybe she was falling for those lies because she had this embedded belief that her authority, or a man, or someone like that, is someone who would never lie. He's someone who would never intentionally deceive anyone.

Until she could see that her abuser lived in a completely different universe than she did, she would keep repeating her own dance steps, steps that kept her believing her husband's lies and kept her stuck. And since her husband wasn't going to budge on his bad behavior, her redemption or freedom was only going to come about by her own change and transformation.

So in my work with women, I am constantly asking them questions much like that one just to get them to tilt their minds a little bit and see other possibilities. And this requires something of them. We do not sit around a campfire in Flying Free and say, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault." It's not your fault. Burgers and fries. That's done. We're moving on from that now. Now we're going to get to work to create transformation in our own lives.

This does not mean the abuse is their fault, but victims who are unwilling to examine their beliefs will forever be stuck in those beliefs, whether they are free from their abuser or still living with him. And trust me, I have heard hundreds of stories from women who have told me they've gotten free from their abuser but they still hear and believe his voice internally. And because they insist that there is nothing they can do, they continue to live in a place of ongoing trauma, triggering, and shame.

Romans 12:2 says, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person," — how? — "by changing the way you think." Not changing the way your neighbor thinks or your kid thinks or your husband thinks or your mom thinks or your sister thinks. Changing the way you think. This verse implies that we should maybe change the way we think in some areas. Does that mean that God is victim-blaming? Hmm, interesting. It goes on to say, "Then you will know what God's will is for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."

Abusers are never going to change the way they think, but we can only if we want to be transformed into a new person. So if anyone is listening to this and thinking, "Well, are you implying that victims need to change?" I would say no. Nobody needs to change. Everyone who's listening to this who wants to be exactly who they are today twenty years from now should seriously consider hanging on to all of your current beliefs. And I promise you will get exactly what you want. No change. I am only sharing this stuff for the victims who want to change, and I'm saying what God says. If you want to change, then get ready to change the way you think first. It all starts there.

One of the most important books I have ever read in the course of my life is called *A Failure of Nerve* by Edwin H. Friedman. I would challenge every person who believes that teaching boundaries to victims is victim blaming to read that book. When you look at that book, you're gonna be like, "This isn't a book about boundaries." It's a book about boundaries and a million other things. This book will rock your world on so many levels. It will take your thinking processes to new vistas and open up whole new worlds and paradigms for you. If you are a leader of any kind in any field, this book is a must-read. I read it simply as a mother thinking about being a leader for my children, but I

got so much out of it. It is just one of the richest things I've ever read. It was life-changing. I can't recommend it enough.

I'm going to close with a quote from the introduction of Part Two of my memoir, and it's a very appropriate quote to end this time and this subject today. "As a child, I had no control over my programming. Neither did you. We were programmed by our environment, parents, siblings, teachers, peers, churches, and experiences. We had no choice about what was planted in our minds. But as we move into adulthood, we do have choices about what we will allow or not allow into our lives. However, most of us will make those choices based on the programming of our past.

In Part Two, I made choices that I look back on now and regret because, at the time, I chose to continue in much of my early programming. On the one hand, I understand why I made those choices, and I have compassion for the young adult version of me. She did the best she could with the resources she had. On the other hand, if I want to heal and grow into the next version of myself, I need to take personal responsibility for my adult choices and the programming I have reinforced through my choices of friends, books, music, churches, and intentional experiences. If I don't take responsibility, I will always blame my lack of growth and stuckness on outside forces, and that leaves me in a powerless position."

By the way, I will insert this. This is not in my book, but I'll just insert this. This is what abusers do, you guys. They blame their lack of growth and stuckness on everybody else. Now, when we do that, I'm not saying that we're abusers. I'm just saying that it's a human thing and you don't have to do that. You don't have to be like that. You can gain self-awareness and change.

So back to my book: "I've chosen to take my power back by being an adult who takes responsibility for my own self. I can't blame my family, my ex, my kids, my church, my pastors, or anyone else for my own choices. But I also don't blame myself. Taking responsibility is not blaming. It's owning, and owning is something only adults can do."