

BREAKING DESTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS YOU LEARNED IN YOUR FAMILY OF ORIGIN

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 34 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Judy Herman, a speaker and the author of "Beyond Messy Relationships." Judy is also a licensed professional counselor and mental health service provider. Today she is going to be giving us insight into family of origin stuff and how covert abuse shows up in couples counseling, as well as an important tool to help us get unstuck and move forward. If you stick around to the end, you will find out how to get another free downloadable tool as well as links to other helpful resources for your healing journey. Are you ready? Let's get started. Judy, I want to welcome you to the Flying Free Podcast today.

JUDY: I'm so glad to be here, Natalie. It is, I think, a divine appointment, actually. I think you have some awesome, brave women who are listening in, and I'm very honored that you asked and honored to be here. Thanks so much.

NATALIE: I'm really excited about the topic we are going to be talking about today, because it is something that I have been going back and working through myself, and it has to do with family of origin issues. One of the things I've noticed for myself and for the women that I work with is that when we are waking up and figuring out what happened in our marriage and what is going on there, it also uncovers a lot of stuff about our growing up years. The patterns of behavior that we learned you call "dances of behavior." Is that correct?

JUDY: Yes, because we are the other part of that relationship whenever there is covert emotional abuse or spiritual abuse going on. We are the other side of that, and we should be aware of those patterns that we have been groomed with even in our early development with our family of origins, our caregivers, and our brothers or sisters. How we related and how we moved toward pleasure or away from pain is what we inadvertently take into our adult relationships. It's so worthwhile to look back and see what our part is and raise our level of awareness.

NATALIE: Especially because there are a growing number of women in my private group that are either divorced now or they are in the process of getting divorced, and many of them are asking the question, "How do I prevent this from happening again?"

A lot of these women got married when they were in their early twenties. We don't have a lot of life experience back then. We really don't know a lot about relationships other than what we experienced in our families. Like you were saying, we tend to follow those same patterns and are maybe even attracted to people who remind us of what we are familiar with, maybe even if we knew our family wasn't completely healthy, but we still thought it was normal. Can you talk a little bit about that?

JUDY: Absolutely. Keep in mind, this is so very profound. When I first learned about this and now in the recent years, all of us know more about the human brain and how it develops. Maybe most of you already know that the brain is not fully developed but is still under construction until about the age of twenty-five years old. It is impossible to have insights as an early twenty-something or late teen if you got married then, but we have the capability of insights and looking back.

What happens when we are growing up in our families, there are parts of our brains where we have conscious memory and parts where we have unconscious memory. When we get triggered in our adult relationships, we may not even be able to put the pieces of the puzzle together. What happens in the brain, it's a very primitive part of the brain in our development, so that part of the brain will tell us we are in danger. We go into the fight, flight, or freeze mode of the brain. Then we develop stories around that.

That's why I think it is so valuable to go back and go into our personal histories. A lot of us don't want to do that. We think, "The past is the past. I can't do anything about it now." But what you can do is reframe it. You now have the capability in your brain development to be able to, instead of seeing, perhaps, some childhood abuse in the past through the eyes of a five or six year old mentality, you now have the ability to have a different story. The past can be reframed.

Most folks do need to go to a therapist to help them with this. I guess what I want to say is that none of us wants to dishonor our parents. I get this all the time in my counseling office. "They're not like that now. They used to be, but they're not like that now." They are really fearful of saying anything negative or talking about those traumatic experiences. But we're not talking about blaming our families of origin, our parents, or those who cared for us. They are also limited as well.

None of us grew up with a perfect childhood, but it's important to have a level of insight, to raise our level of consciousness, and to raise our level of awareness so that then we can make choices. When we are unaware, we can't be intentional or make choices that have good judgment. We can only look at the past. We cannot look at the future, but can gain some wisdom from a different perspective, a healthier story, so to

speak.

NATALIE: You mentioned that people would probably need some help, some therapy, to do this. For a lot of people, it is really hard to find a good therapist. I've tried several different people, and I haven't really landed on anybody that I really resonate with or that I gel with. Either they were not skilled or not experienced. Recently I found someone who was very skilled and very experienced, but her personality and my personality just were not compatible.

What do you suggest for people when they look for someone? I know a lot of women have a counselor, but they don't feel comfortable with them. But now they think they will make that person feel bad if they don't go to them anymore. I've heard that.

JUDY: Oh my goodness, yes. It is so important to get a good fit in a counselor. I heard some statistics way back that it takes about five different tries or trial-and-error to find the right therapist.

NATALIE: That's good to know, actually.

JUDY: Yeah. So if you have disclosed to one or two they haven't been good fits, do not give up. I actually have a blog post I can put in the show notes on how to find the right therapist. It's important on all those levels. You must be able to resonate personality-wise. You must be able to, even after a first session with a therapist, feel heard and understood. As far as offending your therapist, I tell my clients all the time, "You will not offend me if we're not a good fit, even after two or three sessions. It doesn't mean that you're married to me or married to my therapy. It would help if I knew what the glitch was so that I can improve myself, but feel free to try others out."

Also, ask if they provide a free consultation or schedule that first appointment with the understanding that you are checking them out. You are hiring that therapist, and you do not owe them anything except for what you would pay for the session, of course. But don't worry about offending. If you are offending your therapist, then there's something wrong. That therapist might need some therapy, and actually that might be a question. I would be glad to create some resources on what questions to ask a potential therapist. That might be a really good resource, actually.

NATALIE: Oh, that would be awesome.

JUDY: Some questions to ask that therapist: "Have you gotten therapy?" If they haven't gotten therapy themselves, I wouldn't trust that. They need to be on their own journey

of awareness. Just because they are therapists, trained in mental health, and licensed by state boards and all of that does not mean that they have their act together. One of my passions is to help other therapists, because I come across it all the time. I'm not saying I'm the best or anything like that, but I am on this journey as a therapist to deal with my own stuff. I deal with my own stuff in my book for sure. I'm a client of my own book.

NATALIE: I will interject here. Judy Herman has a newer book out called "Beyond Messy Relationships: Divine Invitations to Your Authentic Self." The unique thing about this book is that it is kind of a memoir/self-help book in a way. She intermingles her own personal journey (and she makes herself very vulnerable in this book, by the way) along with her perspective as a therapist: The tools, skills, and insights that she brings to the table as a therapist. You get her own personal experience as well as these great tools and insights that you can apply to your own life, so it's a very unique book that way. I am halfway through it and have really been enjoying it. I have a couple of therapy questions for you.

JUDY: Can I go back to the book? When I was writing the book, it was something that I was compelled to do. I couldn't not write the book because of a trauma I was experiencing in my life and in my marriage. But when I did, I had a whole lot of anxiety and some sleepless nights because my thought was, "My gosh, if my clients read my book, they are going to say to me, 'And why are we seeing her as a therapist?'" It is a very vulnerable thing. Most therapists don't write so openly and vulnerably.

But we have our issues. We are like flog people, and we have our issues. There may be some things that you as a client, if you do feel this vibe in a counseling session, are triggering in this therapist. So be open. You go to a therapist for expertise, and they should be able to differentiate when they are triggered or be authentic with you in session. But if you feel something, it may not be you at all. I love the title of your book, Natalie, "Is it Me?" because it may not be you. It may be the therapist. Anyway, just take us off the pedestal. We're trained, and you deserve to have the right fit in the therapist.

NATALIE: Yes. So I have a question. I'm sure you've experienced this, but if you have a couple come in with marriage problems, how do you as a counselor tell what is actually going on there? Most of us who are listening to this podcast have been to couples counseling with a husband (or if there are any male listeners who have a wife like this) where it actually looks in the counselor's office that it is the opposite of what is actually going on. How do you as a counselor tell what is going on? How do you know that there is covert abuse going on?

JUDY: Good question. By the way, I will say “Me Too” because in that first marriage when we were going to a therapist... I’m thankful that they did see some of this very clearly, but there are many therapists that miss it. The spouse can come across as extremely charming. “If only she would (this), then we would be fine.” When those kinds of things come up and even in the dynamics of the conversation, I may notice things. I likely can spot things a mile away compared to some other therapists who have had a nurturing, caring, and growing marriage. I think that makes a difference. Yes, it is our therapy, but it is also our personal experiences and what we have attunement to.

In my book, I talk about the three levels of coming into therapy. Number one would be, “I’d like to have some tools. Our communication is breaking down.” That might be premarital couples being proactive to come in so they don’t have the disasters to work through. That’s one category.

Another category would be, “We are heading for some major issues.” But usually it is the one who drags the other one in. One will minimize; the other one will maximize. That middle category is, “Hey, we’d better do something.”

The third category is, “If this doesn’t work, we’re going to get divorced. I’ve already made up my mind.” We must differentiate between all of these. There are toxic things that show up even in premarital couples.

I will encourage both of them to look at dynamics as a relationship dance so it kind of takes away the “you’re the victim and you’re the perpetrator” kind of thing. If they can become aware that there is a pattern that they weren’t aware was going on and they can both look at the covert abuse as something they need to learn about, they can make sure their relationship doesn’t have it. It may have been normal in their family of origin, but they certainly don’t want it now. If they are at that stage, that is a couple that I can work with.

What happens sometimes, though, is that I will give them Lundy Bancroft’s book “Why Does He Do That?” and I preface it to the man with, “This will probably raise some anger issues, but it takes an attitude of curiosity. It’s not that we’re saying you’re a bad person or that this is going on, but let’s just be open and aware.” If a man comes back and he’s angry with me for recommending that book, I may think we need a softer approach, but they definitely need to be educated about this. If there is push back and entitlement, it’s a problem.

There have been times when I’ve told them, “It’s going to be best for the two of you to go to separate, individual therapists. I can’t work with you anymore.” I have done that.

Marriage therapy works when both individuals, both spouses, can honor the “otherness” of the other person. We are learning how to honor their individuality, how to hold the tension of differences.

We all need to know that 100% of our conflicts are not going to be resolved. With the research I provide in my book, I asked people what percent they think it should be. Many said, “Ninety percent of issues we should be able to resolve.” Even with the very core, fundamental differences with healthy, growing, resilient couples, the ratio is that 31% of their conflicts are resolvable, and 69% are unresolvable.

NATALIE: What does that mean, “unresolvable?” Does that mean that they agree to disagree, or does that mean that they just sweep something that really matters to one of them under the rug?

JUDY: It doesn’t mean to sweep it under the rug. It does mean to honor them. I know this is a group of Christian women, so if you have a non-Christian spouse but that non-Christian spouse honors your faith – let’s say they are of a different faith or maybe no faith at all – can that marriage be healthier than two Christians where there is abuse going on? Yes. In other words, you are likely more equally yoked if your spouse, who may have a very different viewpoint, is fundamentally different. That’s maybe an extreme example.

I talked with some couple friends who had been married for forty years. In a social setting, I can spot them from a mile away if there is tension in a social setting. But this particular couple has lived life. They raised kids. They have gone through stuff. She is a Democrat, an elected official who is a Democrat, and he is a staunch Republican. I asked them what the secret was and how they did that. What they did was to find a way to partner and to equalize. They go hiking together. They climb mountains together. It evens out the partnership of their relationship. They have learned how to accept their “otherness.”

NATALIE: Yes. I love that! That’s very important. One of the things people always ask me is, “What is the main thing I need to identify if I am in a covert, emotionally abusive relationship?” Tell me what you think about this answer from your perspective. I tell people that in a covert, emotionally abusive relationship, one of the partners just cannot take responsibility for anything they do, and they dehumanize the other person. They don’t see the other person as a separate, differentiated individual like you were just describing. They see the other person as like an object. The other person feels objectified.

The main thing, though, is that they don't take responsibility, and because the other person is objectified, they put all the responsibility for that relationship and for anything that goes wrong onto the other person. So what do you think about that?

JUDY: Some women I know choose to stay in that, but here's where I think the resolution needs to come. If you are going to stay in that type of thing, there are all kinds of stories. A person could come from where her husband tried to kill her versus if she remarries and this new person is still covertly abusive, but it is way better than fearing for her life if she left. So there are degrees of emotional and covert abuse, as we all know. As a spouse grows, if she chooses to stay in that marriage... Some of us will be raising kids or some of us will be in the empty nest stage, so those values that are so crucial at one stage of life may not be as crucial in another stage of life.

Let's say your kids are grown. What is it that he isn't taking responsibility for? Is he not putting food on the table? Is he not paying the mortgage? Is he spending money frivolously? There are all kinds of scenarios. What I think a woman can do is to surround herself with people – friends, girlfriends, groups – and make sure that she is validated in other places. If she is going to stay in that relationship and in the marriage, does that covert stuff happen just during times of stress when other things are going on, or is that a fundamental way that she is experiencing him? She needs to develop her sense of self, her authentic self, and move forward and not hang her hat on her husband being the only mirror to her soul, so to speak.

NATALIE: Right. That's really good. So if you are working with a woman like that who has decided, because of the stage of life she is in or because of her convictions, to stay in the relationship even if it is problematic, how would you help her cope with the stress of being in that relationship?

Your advice about building other relationships that are actually validating to her and where people are seeing her, and she is able to thrive in those relationships – that's excellent advice. What about when she is at home, though? Or what if she's not able? What if she has small kids at home and her husband doesn't like her to leave the house much? What would you suggest for her to deal with the stress at home?

JUDY: That's a good question. This is a journey of awareness for all of us. I'm sure some who've read your book got this punch-in-the-gut feeling. It takes time to process, and people's level of readiness for leaving a relationship is going to be varied. Or leaving the pattern. We're talking about divorcing the toxic relationship patterns.

This is actually a real thing where a woman is so beaten down and has perhaps even

gone to in-patient hospitalization because her depression and anxiety is overwhelming. She's not ready to get out of that relationship until she herself is well. It's sad, but it's true. You've got to have the stamina with which to experience the push back, and not everybody is there. But they can be on this journey of being there. Does that make sense?

NATALIE: Yeah. How do they get well, though, when they are still breathing in that air?

JUDY: I agree. That's why one of our biggest enemies is isolation. I use the acronym of breathing in fresh AIR, which is our growth. All of us are called to grow and to grow up. Every living thing is called to do that. We're not supposed to stay stagnant or stuck, whether it is depression or anxiety or anything. It takes all these three elements.

"A" is the awareness. Reading your book or listening to this podcast is like an "ah-ha" moment coming up. Or perhaps going through family of origin patterns and figuring out what your part of the dance is. Those are some "ah-ha" moments that are so needed, and awareness is the very first thing we need to do.

Then the "I" is intentionality. What is our next step? We plan. Maybe you need to plan, "I've got x amount of dollars in my savings account, and I need to plan and interview five therapists and see which one is going to be the best for me." Or it might be planning a lunch date with someone that you know will take a whole lot for you to disclose to, maybe your best friend who thinks things are fine, and tell them the truth. That is intentionality. You plan, you pray, you write. Intentionality might be something like keeping a journal and keeping your head clear even in the crazy world. That is what I've done for years, and it's really helped.

The "R" in AIR – breathing in AIR – awareness, intentionality – the "R" is risk. What is the risk for me right now? This is something that Brené Brown talks about when she talks about vulnerability. This is your journey toward your authentic self. It's going to be risky. It's going to be a very fearful thing, because you don't know what the outcome is. What is that first risk you are going to take? Is it to call your friend up, have lunch with her, and say, "I believe my marriage is toxic, and I am drowning?" When you tell one person and they are trustworthy, they are not going to make you feel worse, but you look for friends that can handle the real you and what is really going on.

You start on this journey. It's not a one-time thing. This is a pattern of breathing in fresh air every single day, meeting God in the midst of breathing in awareness, intentionality, and risk. Our lives are risky. That's part of my own faith journey. I come from a very conservative Christian upbringing – certain spiritual principles. I identified a lot with

you, Natalie, reading your book and your journey. "If I pray harder or longer, then God will answer my prayer."

It was profound, when I went on a spiritual retreat with my spiritual director, and he said something that was almost heretical to me. He said, "Judy, God's love is not enough." I thought, "Wait, what does that mean?" (I named my ex-husband Richard in my book.) He said, "God's love must be received. You cannot receive it for Richard. He has to do that himself." So I was face-to-face with, "Okay, Lord. What do I need to receive from You? What do I need to say a whole-hearted 'yes' to?" That was a risk that I needed to take.

I've got to tell you (and since you're halfway through my book you may already know) that it took me years. I've got four grown children. We as women are caregivers. We sacrifice so much for our children. But I think the biggest thing we can do for our children and grandchildren is to model this AIR – awareness, intentionality, and risk. We model our own growth, our own resilience, and then we give them the courage to take risks themselves and continue to grow out of the family dynamics and the toxic stuff that has gone on or what they have been used to. So God is not through with any of us yet.

NATALIE: No! I love that AIR acronym, and I can totally see that in my own life. It took me, from the time I started waking up to what was actually going on – obviously you know something is wrong your whole marriage, but when you start waking up and realize, "Oh my word, this is what's happening" – until the time I was out and thriving again was probably a six year journey. It's not like when you read a book.

I think this will really encourage some of you who are listening out there who are at the beginning of your journey. Maybe you picked up my book or picked up another book and started reading it, and you are just beginning to realize, "Oh my word! What's happening here?" That doesn't mean that you are going to go out and file for divorce tomorrow. This is something that takes a long time.

I love that "breathing in this air, breathing it out." It won't start with a big huge risk of jumping off a cliff and filing for divorce. It's going to start with the risk of, as Judy said, telling someone what you are learning. It's scary to listen to a podcast like this and hear more information that makes you think, "Oh my word." Once you realize that there is something wrong and it is serious, then you are faced with the fact that you must do something. "What am I going to do now?" That's a very scary realization. Just realizing that and admitting it to yourself is a risk.

JUDY: Absolutely. It is. That's where it starts. All our journeys are different. Just honor the process. I was not a therapist through the first difficult marriage that ended after twenty-nine years, but it was through my regular journal writing and writing out my prayers. Writing out my prayers was huge for me. In my book I did reference these stories, some that I had totally forgotten about, but that was my sanity – to go to God in prayer. Not only that, but to write them out.

There is some real value in handwriting in a journal as opposed to even keystroking on a computer app for a journal. There is something very powerful mental health wise to take your thoughts and your feelings and conceptualize them. Then you can ask yourself some questions, which I included in the book, to test your automatic thoughts. This is a process, so I've got about four decades of prayer journals with which I've referenced.

By the time of the divorce of the first marriage (and by the way, I am still married to my second husband, which is another issue and another podcast to tell you about, because some of these same old dance patterns sometimes show up), I was at a place where I had peace deep within my heart even though I struggled hugely with theology. Then I became a therapist and started a private practice the very same year of the divorce because I had to provide for myself.

My dad died when I was six years old. When my children were playing baseball and we were practically living life on a ball field, I had these thoughts sitting on the bleachers of, "Oh my gosh. This is not the kind of history and childhood memories I want my kids to have." Then I thought, "Well, my dad died suddenly after six weeks when I was only six years old." So these were some of the thoughts I had that I was able to take some of the stuff from the past. I thought, "My mom didn't have the time to prepare to be a widow, and I know my marriage is..." I thought, "I may not have a marriage." That was years before I filed for divorce, but I began to take classes and get my master's degrees. This was a process and a risk for me to do all of this to prepare myself.

I want everyone to know that I haven't always been a licensed professional counselor in private practice. This has been a journey for me, and it was a risky thing. So, what can you do now? Maybe it is to have lunch with a healthy friend, or maybe it is to think, "How can I prepare myself to prepare for what might be inevitable when the kids are at such and such an age?"

NATALIE: Right. This has been so good, Judy. I'm so grateful for your time. Can you tell the listeners where they can find you? Also, you mentioned you had some things that you were going to offer for them that would add more value and take them even

further than what this podcast can do. Can you describe what you have for them?

JUDY: Yes, and I can get that set of questions for what to ask a potential therapist. I can add that to what I was going to give away. I'm going to give away a personal timeline and family of origins pattern PDF. It is a diagram that you can fill in and use as a model. I'll give you instructions on how to use it, but it is to raise your level of awareness of the family of origin patterns that you have grown up with.

Be gentle with yourself. It's best to ask yourself in your adolescent stage of life, "How did you experience your mom and dad? What got on your nerves?" List three positives and three negatives for each one. That's going to raise your level of awareness to get you grounded in your history. I do this all the time in my counseling office. It's amazing when you put things in a diagram. You can have so many "ah-ha" moments that it gives you some objectivity rather than being all caught up in not looking at these things. It can help. That's one thing.

Also, my book is released September 10. ["Beyond Messy Relationships: Divine Invitations to Your Authentic Self" is now released and available to the public!] You can get it at Amazon, Books-A-Million, or Barnes and Noble. But between now and then, you can certainly download the first three chapters. I would love for you to stay in touch. I'm developing a community – not a Facebook community – called "Mighty Networks." If you want to join me there, I'd love to connect with you more, because I'm going to be trying out some more products and would love some Beta folks to do that with.

NATALIE: That sounds wonderful. By the way, the name of her book is "Beyond Messy Relationships: Divine Invitations to Your Authentic Self" by Judy K. Herman. I will have all those links to the places you can download the PDF, you can sign up to get the first three chapters of her book for free, and where you can sign up to join her community in the show notes. If you are listening, just go to my website at flyingfreenow.com/34. There you will find all of these links and downloads.

JUDY: Awesome. As far as my website, it is judycounselor.com/flying-free for those resources. If you forget, just go to messyrelationships.com.

NATALIE: Thank you again, Judy.

JUDY: My pleasure.

NATALIE: For the rest of you, fly free.