

## HELP! I'M STARVED FOR AFFECTION!

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

**NATALIE:** Welcome to Episode 37 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today our guest is Stacey Womack, the founder and executive director of Abuse Recovery Ministry & Services, ARMS. She has dedicated herself to building community awareness around domestic abuse issues from a faith perspective through programs she has developed since 1997. She has served victims of domestic violence through women's victim recovery classes. These classes, written and developed by Stacey, are now offered in Oregon, across the U.S., Mexico, Kenya, and Canada.

In her commitment to addressing these issues, she has also written, developed, and currently co-facilitates ARMS batterer intervention programs specific to men and women of faith, offered to both voluntary and court-mandated clients. Stacey has co-chaired both the Multnomah and Washington County Family Violence Coordinating Council. She was the 2012 recipient of the Judge Herrrell Award in Multnomah County for outstanding collaborative efforts to end family violence.

Stacey's dedication and determination have grown a small grassroots endeavor into a viable organization that has done much to end the cycle of abuse for thousands of men, women, and youth. Stacey has been married for thirty-nine years to her husband, Jerry. They have six children and eleven grandchildren. She enjoys writing youth fiction and spending time with her family. Stacey, I want to welcome you to the Flying Free Podcast.

**STACEY:** Thank you so much. I'm grateful to be here today.

**NATALIE:** I am excited about this subject, because we've got women across the board who are actually depleted. You use the word "starved." They've not only not been given love and affection, but they've had it sucked dry, like, they've been a host and a parasite has sucked all of that from them, and they are left with nothing. Also, many of them have experienced this for their entire lives. They've been given messages when they were children and when they were adults saying that they aren't even worth love and affection. Where do you even begin to address this subject? Where do they begin to heal from something like this?

STACEY: For us, we do a specific class just on this in our program. We start with the childhood issues, just like you mentioned, that have a really devastating effect, especially when they start in childhood. We have to start there with their unmet childhood needs. Like you said, we all have this need to be loved, secure, safe, valued, respected, and protected. When those things don't get me as a child, they create all kinds of issues for us that make us almost crave after affection from others in an unhealthy way.

NATALIE: When a woman is in an abusive relationship, what does she do to get those needs met?

STACEY: You must look at, first of all, what she does normally. I think part of that is trying to find someone who is going to meet this great need inside of her, these things that have never been filled for her, through another person. This is normal for all of us. Anybody who has not had these needs met, we look for ways to fill them (because God created us with this place inside of us that needs to be filled) instead of going to God. If they don't even know God, they wouldn't know to do this; but even if we do grow up in church, we can still find ourselves running after this. So her part in the abusive relationship is one of pressing forward to have this intimate relationship to try to get this need for affection filled.

Yet as she does this, when she first meets him and he is this wonderful man who is lavishing all this attention on her, she thinks, "I've finally met this person who is going to meet these needs for me." There is always going to be a problem if we look to another person to meet the need that was only meant to be filled by God. Of course, God created us to be interdependent with one another, but first and foremost, that need must be met by God. So when we go running to this other person to meet this need, it causes issues. We've been fed this our whole life, that "someday our prince is going to come" and we will have this happily ever after. But God is the only one who can truly fill this deep, deep place inside of us.

So she runs after this and is sure she can share with him in such a way, communicate to him how his behavior is affecting her, that he will understand and he will go, "Oh my gosh! I didn't realize. I won't do this anymore," and he'll change. But he doesn't, because he's not living in the same mindset as these women are. The women are still trying to work mutually, and he's in this power-over mentality. To meet on her level means giving up his power and control, which he is not usually willing to do. That creates problems. On his side he's pulling away from her as she is pushing forward to try to reach out for him to meet this need. The answer really is being completely filled and satisfied with God first and foremost.

NATALIE: How does that look? I know a lot of these women - I think most of us - have grown up in not-so-healthy families just because that is human nature. It's the world that we live in. A lot of us come into our marriages already feeling like we're not worth much, and like you said, we're looking for that Prince Charming. We think that is going to be the answer. We didn't get those needs met as children, so now we are going to get them met as adults, and everything is going to be great.

I remember growing up and hearing in church as a teenager the whole "Jesus is your boyfriend" kind of thing (which is kind of weird, I think), but with the idea that God can fill that empty spot. But what does that look like on a practical level? Let's say that you've got a forty-five year old woman who is getting out of an abusive relationship, and she kind of feels betrayed by God, too. "Why did God allow this to happen to me? Now I'm supposed to feel that God loves me and I need to get my needs met by Him?" How would you address that?

STACEY: It's like I mentioned before, we have a program that we take the women through. Probably the most common thing we hear coming out of the women going through the program is first that they are not alone. Secondly, now they believe that God loves them and values them. Because those beliefs change about who they are, it changes their behavior. When a woman comes in, she comes in not trusting God, feeling like God has betrayed her, feeling like all the things she believed in suddenly weren't true. Yet I know, even personally for myself, though I'm not a survivor of domestic violence, but in my darkest moments as I've cried out to God in my deepest heartaches, that's where God began to speak to me personally about Who He was to me and how faithful He'd been to me, even though I couldn't see it at the time. I keep requesting, "Lord, show me your faithfulness. Show me your faithfulness." Because of what I had experienced, I felt that God had completely betrayed me in all of that.

I think that you can't really get to this place of true intimacy without this heartache that comes with it, because it pushes us into this place of realizing that we have this great need for God that only He can fill. In a practical sense for me and the women that we serve, it's to begin seeking God. "God, I don't get this." Be honest. I don't think God is afraid of our anger or afraid of our feelings. I feel like He understands all these things. He's not put off by them. We can tell God how we feel and continue to seek Him.

In one of our lessons, we talk about Job. Job went through horrendous things, but his redeeming quality was that he continued to seek God and seek God and seek God until God answered him. That got him to a whole new place in his relationship with God. I know personally for me, while I wouldn't wish what I went through on anybody else nor would I want to go through it again, I would never go back and change it now because

of the great gains and the intimacy that I had with God.

I went from this place of loving God (because I'm a pastor's daughter – so I knew I needed a Savior), but it took this difficult situation for me to realize that I didn't just need a Savior from a head place or knowledge base, but from a heart place God showed me my need for Him. Then I went from loving God to being in love with God, to where God became enough for me and everything I needed. That's an ongoing thing, because life continues to come at us.

For the women who are still in abusive relationships and who are still facing this constant attack on their self-esteem and their value and their worth, it's really difficult. For them to be able to make the steps forward in healing, they really do need the support of others who have gone through what they have gone through. They need to be in a place where they can just feel safe and feel validated for their experiences. That's what we've seen in the over 26,000 women that we've served.

NATALIE: I totally agree. I know for me, my relationship with God was one of the things in my life that I could actually control, that was all mine. I didn't have to share it. It wasn't monitored by anybody. It was just mine. So I really valued my relationship with God. I didn't really struggle in my faith at all. I felt it was very strong throughout my whole process. I struggled with my faith more after I got out and I looked back. I could see God's hand through it, but I started talking with all these other women. I was watching them go through really horrific things. Then I was questioning, "God, why? Why do You let this happen to women?" I could see God's hand in my life, but I wanted to know, "God, are You going to come through for them? Are You going to come through for my kids?" I just want everything to be made right. Plus, the other problem with faith is that a lot of us, as women, have been told by our churches that the ways that we were being abused were actually not abuse. They were actually really good for us.

STACEY: Yeah, that's a lie!

NATALIE: I know. But we were immersed in that, so we sort of associated God... Unfortunately, He got thrown into that mess and got all tangled up in it. Now one of the challenges for women coming out of abuse is separating God and Jesus Christ from the lies and false messages that we got in our churches and from our Christian friends – well-meaning people who just didn't understand the full scope of what abuse entails. When you are a person of faith, spiritual abuse is part of it, because they are using God and the Bible as a method of keeping you quiet, keeping you controlled, and keeping you from lifting your voice. If you raise your voice as a woman in a church and you say,

“Hey, there’s something wrong here,” you are viewed as rebellious.

STACEY: Right. Yes, that is true, unfortunately. Statistically, clergy are the number one place people to go for help, but unfortunately, they are some of the most uneducated – not uncaring, but uneducated – people around this. Oftentimes they treat this issue like normal marital conflict, but it’s not the same. It’s about power and control. Since it is so complicated and they haven’t received training, oftentimes they become more concerned with saving the relationship than being concerned with the individual person and the heartache they are going through.

We use the scripture out of Jeremiah where he says, “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” I think the churches do that sometimes. They say, “Go back and God will bless you through this time of suffering.” They pat themselves on the back because they have sent her back into an even worse situation than she was in before because they didn’t support her and give her the help she needed. In reality, it’s like if you were stabbed. Someone wouldn’t expect you just to get up and start walking around and living life like it was normal. You would need time and attention given to the wounds that you had received. A lot of times women who have experienced abuse in any form – emotional, spiritual, or whatever form it has come in – are not given the right to have the appropriate time and attention to the healing process. So it is very misunderstood.

NATALIE: Not only that, they are actually told to go and have sex with the person who is harming them. They are told that it is their Christian duty. It is unconscionable.

STACEY: When you take it back to “What would Jesus do?” – I know that sounds cliché – but the reality is that Jesus’ heart was to lay His life down and to serve. That makes Him the head servant. He was the first to give up His way and His rights in order to bless us. This is the command that was given to men in loving their wives. This is a very difficult and high calling. It’s very opposite to the way our world presents how a man should be, even in our faith communities.

But the man is to be the first to serve, the first to forgive, the first to be kind, the first to give up what they want, rather than the other way around where the woman is supposed to serve him. I can never see Jesus forcing a woman or telling her that she needs to give him sex because he wants it, because that is not the character of Christ. It conflicts with that. That is a part of what we call spiritual abuse, and yet it is common. It’s very common.

NATALIE: I noticed in the materials you guys offer that you do have some resources. I am going to make a page for pastors that links to resources for them. I don’t work with

pastors or leaders like that, but I know other people do. Sometimes I will get an email from a pastor and he'll say, "Where can I go for more information?" So I'm going to make a page on my website, and I'm going to link to some of your stuff. But I'm wondering what kind of success rate or feedback you are getting from clergy as far as the help you've offered or the information that you have? Is there any hope?

STACEY: Oh yeah, there's hope. I've been doing this a long time – almost twenty-two years. Over the course of time, things have definitely changed. But it's kind of like a slow-moving barge. Belief systems have been around for thousands of years, and it takes a long time for people to begin seeing it. We are all raised in it – both men and women. So there is a lot of misconceptions that we all buy into.

I do a lot of pastoral trainings and things like that. I'm seeing more pastors be open to it. But then we will still have pastors who we will contact who say, "No, it's not a problem in my church," which we know is not true. We know that in every church there is something that is going on. But I can tell you every time I do a training for a church – the staff or the faith community – I always have pastors come up afterwards. They will say things like, "I've been doing a lot of things wrong, and I'm going to change how I do things." So there is hope.

I did a training in Texas one time where it was only three pastors. We were expecting more, but there were only three. I thought, "Am I wasting my time, God?" God is so great at showing us that He is doing something. Later that same day I got an email from that pastor saying, "I want you to know, Stacey, that as soon as I left, there was a woman sitting outside waiting for me who had fled from domestic violence. I knew what to say to her because of what you shared with me. I knew what to do."

NATALIE: Wow! That's wonderful. Another question I have along those lines, I know that the church that excommunicated me had just received training from Chris Moles, actually. Are you familiar with him?

STACEY: Just his name.

NATALIE: He came and did a training with the elders and the pastors. I went to Bethlehem Baptist, which is a very large church in the Twin Cities, Minnesota area – John Piper's old church. At that point in time, they were trying to figure out the whole abuse thing and they got this great training. But then a year later they excommunicated me because I ultimately ended up filing for divorce, and you aren't allowed to do that.

What I noticed is that they understood, or were beginning to understand, the physical



abuse piece. Prior to that, even John Piper said once online, "Well, if she gets smacked around a little bit, that's okay." That was their mentality before. So the light bulbs went on with the physical violence piece, but the emotional abuse piece and spiritual abuse piece, that completely went over their heads. I'm wondering, how does your organization address that? It is much more subtle. It is more complicated.

STACEY: We have eight different categories that we use to talk about abuse: Verbal, psychological, physical, financial, sexual, property, spiritual, and animal. We look at it from every angle and every aspect. We talk about how emotional safety is as important as physical safety. While physical abuse is more obvious, illegal, dangerous, and all that, the reality is that no matter what form of abuse a woman is experiencing, it is bringing death to her. So helping her to understand and helping the church to understand how none of this is okay. Any use of power and control in the relationship is not what God intended for marriage. God intended for marriage to be very mutual and equitable.

It wasn't until after Adam and Eve sinned that these problems came into being. They didn't have power struggles before they sinned. When Jesus came to die and then rose again, He came to make right what was wrong. That included everything from our relationship with God to the problems in the relationship between husband and wife. But it had been this way for so long that man had the power and the control in the relationship, and men felt very justified in that.

I think in a deep, underlying, subconscious belief in our culture today, even though there have been some strides forward, there is still a lot of underlying belief that says women are less than men and don't have the same rights as men. So all these more subtle kinds of things that aren't as obvious that people wouldn't recognize as being abusive. Someone can be verbally abusive and never yell. People can be psychologically abusive, and it looks like normal marital conflict. How do you explain that to someone? It's confusing to a lot of people.

We don't make that determination, whether someone is in an abusive situation, when they call us. We just get her the resources that she needs, even if she isn't sure if she's in an abusive relationship. We'll give her something to read or invite her to this group. She will usually relate to it.

I remember one pastoral training I did for a whole group of pastors. At the end, I was mad that I didn't get to rebut a comment. This one pastor made a comment that we needed to be careful how we were questioning women, or we would be creating victims - which again implies that women are either lying or crazy, the most common responses that women get when they go to their churches. I have to just say, because I

know some men out there who really are passionate about seeing women who have experienced abuse experience what healthy men look like and who want to be a part of this movement but aren't sure how, because they are told they can't be... There are men out there who are good men who do want to make a difference.

NATALIE: Yes, I agree. I am married to one, so I know they are out there.

STACEY: Me too.

NATALIE: Another thing that I tell people is that emotional abuse is physical abuse, because as you cannot see the physical abuse happening, you cannot see the damage that it's doing. But studies are now showing that it does brain damage. It damages your brain. It damages your endocrine system, your heart and pulmonary system, your digestive system, and your ability to fight disease. I don't know if you've seen this, but I've seen across the board where women in my groups are all dealing with a lot of the same physical symptoms.

STACEY: Yeah, the health issues. They have done studies at Oregon Health and Science University about the connection between health and domestic violence. Our bodies weren't meant to be under a constant state of stress. Stress can be created in all kinds of ways. Abuse, even when it's non-physical, creates a constant state of stress. Your body is flushing out this cortisol that is supposed to save you from the saber-toothed tiger. But we weren't supposed to be running all the time. Our bodies can't keep up with the cortisol being dumped into our system. Our hippocampus, which is in our brain, goes to counteract the cortisol, which is very damaging to our body, but it can't keep up. It is eating away at our organs.

They haven't been able to diagnose exactly how it happens. They think it is the weak link in whatever your family genetics is. A lot of our women deal with health issues. Once they are out of the abuse and they begin healing, a lot of their health issues either completely go away or are greatly improved. That's the good news. We just weren't made to be under that kind of stress. That's why all those forms of abuse, regardless of which it is, are killing women. While three women a day might die from abuse, which is the statistic out there, the reality is that millions of women are dying a very slow death. It's like taking a little bit of poison every day.

NATALIE: Yes. I look forward to the day when that kind of information and research is something we all know, like we all know smoking is bad. We all know that emotional abuse is bad because you can see the symptoms in a person who's going through that kind of stress – even in children. Teachers could identify children who are being abused



at home if there were markers.

STACEY: There are, and I see them. A lot of teachers I know say they can recognize them, especially if they themselves have been in an abusive relationship, they recognize it in the kids. I feel like yes, we need help for the kids, but if we don't help the parents, the kids are powerless. They still must go home. So we need to get help for mom and dad, at least one of them, to begin making the changes that need to take place.

We work the whole gamut, so we work with women who are abused (our largest program), but we also work with men who are abusive and women who are abusive. We have a full picture of how this looks. If we can help that child have one healthy parent, you can change the whole course and stop the cycle of abuse for the next generation.

NATALIE: Yeah, that is very, very hopeful. I'm also hoping that one day this information will be mandatory information and learning for people coming out of seminary, because if you are going to be in a people-helping role but you don't know or understand the abuse dynamic, you are missing out on an entire mission field of...

STACEY: I think it should be an entire class for every social services, counseling, seminary, and Bible-college degree and in every single helping profession, like you are saying. It shouldn't just be what counselors get to know, which is usually a couple of chapters in a book and a couple hours of training. It needs to be a full forty hours at least of training. That is industry standard for domestic violence. We offer that, but at the same time we help them to understand that this is a really big issue. You'd be hard pressed to walk through any crowd without realizing it and not have multiple women in that crowd who have experienced abuse or are experiencing abuse.

NATALIE: Yes. It's a huge, huge problem. What are some things that women who have experienced abuse do to meet their need for affection in healthy ways? I want to end on a hopeful note.

STACEY: Right, absolutely. One of the things we suggest they do is to learn who they are. When you are in an abusive relationship, you lose yourself because you work to become who this person calls you to be. So part of that is asking God, "What is your plan for me, and who do You say I am?" Even writing down what they like and what they dislike, because that is part of regaining. You know what he likes and dislikes because you have to survive the chaos of abuse. But can you learn to figure out what you like to do and what you dislike doing, and to regain the things you gave up because it bugged him and upset him?

Sustaining yourself. Learning the difference between what your wants and your needs are. What can you do to begin meeting some of those? We've had women who wanted to go to college to become a nurse or a CPA. I've watched them take these steps. It's scary. They don't believe they can. They've been told they are stupid. It's taken months and months for them to be able to even fill out the application online. Then they do and they get straight A's. It's just an amazing thing.

We tell them to learn to say "no" to the abuse, which is really about believing in their value. If you are valuable, then you will say, "no" to the abuse. You will begin to do things to step away, to find what kind of boundaries are going to be appropriate in the process. You are going to learn what healthy relationships are about. If you grew up in abuse and then you married into abuse, you may not even have an idea of what "healthy" looks like. We often suggest that they watch other couples. There is no perfect couple out there, but to watch and surround themselves with people who are living out their relationships in a healthier way to regain that.

But first and foremost is going back to spending time with God and seeking Him and letting Him show them how He is there for them in the midst of all this. There's a scripture that I love that says God doesn't want us to die. Abuse brings death to us in so many ways. In Deuteronomy 30:19 it says, "I've set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life." So we want women to choose life.

Sometimes that might mean setting boundaries that might mean ending the relationship. I know most women don't want that. They just want the abuse to end. There are a lot of boundaries you can try before you do a separation. But we find separation is very helpful for our women, and we tell them if they separate to plan for at least six months, because anybody can behave well for a while. It gives you a chance to see if he is actually going to follow through with the things that he has promised. It gives you a chance to heal, and that way you can make some good decisions around your relationship.

It is really hard, like you said, if you do decide that ending the relationship is your only option and the church doesn't support you – that is really hard. It is sad that a lot of women either have to find another church... I've had hundreds of women tell me, "Stacey, I love God, but I hate church," because of the spiritual abuse they experienced from their own church body. It should have been the safe place for them to go. It should have been there to support them. They didn't understand, so they didn't handle it well.

I want to encourage them to know that it is possible, and we see it over and over again.

It's not something where you can snap your fingers and have it done. This is a journey for every woman, and every woman's journey is a little bit different. It's really between them and God, and God truly cares about what they are going through, what they have experienced, and wants to bring life to them.

NATALIE: If listeners wanted to... You have a group – or it's a study. Can you tell us a little bit more about that, and if there were listeners who were interested in doing something like that, how could they get involved?

STACEY: Sure. The program is called HER Journey. We kind of gave it a name like that so if they are still going through abuse, they can say they are going to a woman's Bible study on emotional healing. We're trying to make it safe. They can call our office to get location information. We are across the United States, but we're not everywhere. For the places we are not in, we have a couple of live phone conference calls that women can call in to. Actually, women call in and start talking and having conversations before the leader is even on there, sometimes. They build friendships even within that. They have found it really helpful. We're growing that right now and have added a lot of new leaders.

There are fifteen lessons, and we continue to rotate through them. So it really doesn't matter where they step into the program. We just want to be available to them the moment they need it so they don't have to wait at all. They don't even have to give us their real name. They can bring a female friend with them for support if they want. They don't have to talk. It is a lot of listening and hearing God's heart around them. The second half of class is spent on hearing each other's needs and praying for the women in the group, which is just as powerful as the lesson itself. We've seen God do amazing things. A lot of our leaders were once women who went through abuse themselves and have gotten to a healthy enough place that they can lead. That's been an exciting thing too.

NATALIE: That's beautiful. We will have that phone number that you can call if you are interested in finding out more information. The only way that you can find out where the locations are or how to join one online is by calling that number. So we will leave that in our show notes.

STACEY: Our website has all kinds of information, help, videos, and testimonials that can be a help to them.

NATALIE: I will include all those links in the show notes. If you are listening on your phone, you can head over to [FlyingFreeNow.com/37](https://FlyingFreeNow.com/37). You can go there and find all the

show notes for this episode. Stacey, thank you so much for taking your time and sharing the things that you know and the things you are doing to help eradicate abuse in this world, especially in the lives of women of faith. I appreciate your time.

STACEY: Thank you. I appreciate being on your show today.

NATALIE: For the rest of you, until next week, fly free!