

I CAN'T STOP HOPING HE WILL CHANGE HIS ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR

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 39 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I are going to be answering a question. Hello, Rachel.

RACHEL: Hey!

NATALIE: Rachel is going to read the question, and then we will dig in and talk about it.

RACHEL: Here we go: "My biggest challenge currently is trying to stop thinking and obsessing about the marriage and whether there is any hope for us getting back together. Will he change the emotionally abusive behavior? Also, although he's not good for me, I still feel a very strong attraction and am pining for him. It takes up so much of my thoughts, and my heart feels heavy. Is this trauma bonding? How can I recover from this? I find it especially difficult when well-meaning pastors say things like, 'God put you together, so don't let the enemy steal your marriage,' and 'It's always possible to change,' et cetera. It makes me procrastinate even more. I'm trying to do no contact, and I'm amazed at how tough I'm finding it." So — is this trauma bonding? I think we can say yes.

NATALIE: Yeah. I looked this up online. I found an article on Wikipedia if anyone wants to look up the article. All you have to do is Google "trauma bonding," and this article will come up. Trauma bonding is the "intermittent reinforcement of reward and punishment." That's how you become trauma bonded. When you think about abuse, that is exactly what it is. It is this intermittent reinforcement of reward and punishment. That's why it is so difficult. The longer that you are in a relationship like that, the more difficult it is going to be to extract yourself from it.

RACHEL: Yeah. I think for a lot of women, the experience is that at the beginning of the relationship their husbands are looking at them and treating them like the most beautiful, wonderful person in the entire world. They are so in love, and they treat you so well. Maybe there are a few red flags here and there, but for the most part, they are love bombing you. They are acting as though you are their everything.

Then, as the relationship wears on, maybe real life comes into the mix, there are more

red flags popping up. After a while, they are completely into this power mode where they use their position as your spouse in the relationship in order to take control. They have very specific expectations for how they want you to act, and if you don't meet those... Those change a lot. The goal posts move all the time. If you don't meet them, whatever they are that day, then there is some form of punishment. They withdraw that love and attention.

What that does to people in both an emotional and physical way — in a chemical way in your body with stress and love hormones — it causes you to do everything you can to get that love, that attention, those compliments — all of that affection — back. It is devastating! This is a real thing. This is like a drug addiction. You are reliant on something for your well-being that is bad for you. Eventually what happens is that it doesn't take many rewards for you to bear it out, to keep putting up with the punishment or the bad phases, hoping for that reward. It doesn't even have to come very often, but if you know it could come, that is what keeps you going. It is horrible.

NATALIE: It is. I've noticed that when women separate or are thinking about separating, what ends up happening is that their partner will give them more of that positive reinforcement, then. It is so tempting to want to go back into that then because you experience this relief. That feels normal. Getting out feels very abnormal. It is going against everything that you think and believe. You are swimming upstream, whereas sliding back into that normal acceptance of love, even if it is not real, even if you know it isn't going to last — it just feels better.

RACHEL: It does. It is so uncomfortable. More than uncomfortable: it is really devastating to see. My husband was bringing home flowers. He was helping me with some kids I was babysitting (which he had never done, even with our own son). He was playing an active role in kids' lives because there is nothing more attractive than a man who is helping with a baby, right? He had never done that before, so I was seeing him with new eyes and seeing what he could have been.

It was so hard, because you are just living on that hope. I've talked about this before. I lived on the hope of what could be over and over again. It certainly wasn't my reality, but I knew it was possible. So I kept working towards it because I had seen little glimpses of who he could be, but he chose not to be that person. I had to accept that. I had to accept that he made a conscious decision that he wasn't that person.

NATALIE: Yes. That is the very first step to extracting yourself. I'm not sure if they call it deprogramming. What do they call it when you are coming off an addiction?

RACHEL: Detoxing.

NATALIE: Detoxing, yes. The first step is to let go of that fantasy thinking, that magical thinking, and to stay rooted in the uncomfortable truth of reality. That's hard to do when, as you said, they are holding the baby or acting super nice. It's hard to push past that and think, "Okay, this is not real." You want to believe that is real, but that is the fake part of the relationship.

RACHEL: Exactly. I want to key in on a phrase that you used which is so important. It is letting go or surrendering. One of the most pivotal moments during the time when I was coming to realize what was truly going on in my marriage was when I was reading Leslie Vernick's book, "The Emotionally Destructive Marriage." There was a page where she talks about surrender. She asks, "Would you surrender the outcome of your marriage to the LORD?" I remember collapsing on the floor of my laundry room because I was so overcome with fear about what would happen because I had held on so tightly and had tried to make things work. It just wouldn't, and I knew it. I said, "Yes, I will." It was the first step in allowing his responsibilities to be his responsibility and my responsibilities to be my responsibility. That is key. You cannot control what they do; you can only control what you do.

NATALIE: Right. The other thing I was going to say is too is that the other piece that makes this so hard is that you aren't the only one who is fighting against yourself. You have other voices telling you, "Look at what he's doing. Look, he's turning his life around. Look at all of these good things." You are having to push past your own inner voice that wants that relief and the voices of everybody else who are... Do you know what it's like? It's like a drug addict with his drug addict buddies telling him or her...

RACHEL: Yeah, they are junkies.

NATALIE: Yes, the other junkies: "No, come on! Just shoot up one more time! It's going to feel so good. You are going to get relief." Yeah, you don't want to do that. That's another part to your healing. You need to get away from the other junkies. You need to start hanging out with people who are going to tell you the truth about your drug addiction.

RACHEL: Exactly. Here's the thing, Natalie. They are so rare. The people who are willing to sit in uncomfortable and messy situations and not give you pat answers like, "Don't let the enemy take away your marriage," as if it hadn't already been taken away... They want to give you some nice little scripture or spiritualizing message, put a bow on it, send you on your way, and then feel good about themselves and what they've done

instead of sitting with you in the messiness and the pain and acknowledging that there is not always an answer for why people do what they do or why God allows people to do what they do, to acknowledge even the depths of evil that is truly present in the world, as we see so often in abusive marriages.

NATALIE: Another thing you had said earlier was that you can't control what they do, so the other step you need to do... We didn't really put these steps in order, but I think this is step or strategy number three: start focusing not on your relationship with this person — in other words, don't focus on the drug. You need to start focusing on taking care of yourself. If you know that something is not healthy for you, something is destroying you, and you care about yourself, you are going to remove yourself from those situations and take care of yourself. When you start focusing on your own mental health, your own emotional health, and your own spiritual health, that will create a shift in you that follows. Sometimes we must do things physically before our feelings catch up with us. We might feel like this woman who said she felt obsessed.

RACHEL: Her heart feels heavy. She knows that he's not good for her, but he takes up so much of her thought life anyway.

NATALIE: Yes! The focus there, obviously, is the other person. She is not focusing on her health. She is obsessed with that drug. I love that drug analogy. I'm going to use that all the time now.

RACHEL: It works!

NATALIE: It totally works. Rachel, can you think of practical things that you did to take care of yourself that helped you make that shift in your thinking away from him and onto yourself? Again, you must go against all the Christian cliché teachings that you learned that say you shouldn't take care of yourself, you shouldn't love yourself, and you should just die to yourself.

RACHEL: Yeah, it's the turd in the glass of lemonade. There's some truth there to not be completely selfish, right? But you can't love others if you don't love yourself. There's no love to give. That is something we really must get into our heads.

As far as how to take care of yourself, that is something I am still learning. I heard an analogy recently about treating yourself like a trauma patient, because you really are. You probably have some complex-PTSD. You wouldn't expect things from a trauma patient lying in a hospital bed that you would from someone who hasn't been through those things. Your body needs rest. That is one of the things I prioritized, and I still try

to. It is so hard for me to get to bed early. I always have things I could be doing when I'm up late. Wake-up time is always the same time, and it's always so early. Try to get enough sleep, eight hours of sleep, if you can. It's not always possible.

I have this whole thing around food. Food has always been a source of comfort for me. I know how to eat healthy, and I try to do that. But I also try to give myself lots of grace in that area in terms of not being totally strict on a diet. It's a double-edged sword, because food can also make you feel like crap if you aren't eating what your body needs. The principle here is giving yourself grace for what you can do and giving yourself credit for what you are doing.

I know in my mind I could have a very full day, but I can still feel like I haven't done anything or that it isn't enough, because there is always more I could have done. These are patterns of thinking that result from abusive relationships, because it really wasn't ever enough in my previous relationship. I could never meet that standard. So to think back and say, "I actually did get a lot done. My list may not be completely checked off, but there is tomorrow, and I will tackle those things then." Give yourself grace and credit and congratulate yourself.

You talk a lot about self-affirmations in the mirror. I think that fits in with that. I felt so silly imagining myself, because my ex-husband was a huge mocker and would scoff at anything like that, and I had a hard time getting into that. But your encouragement to do that is invaluable.

NATALIE: I still do that. I still talk to myself in the mirror. I am working on a blog article about the whole topic of exercise. Exercise has always been hard for me. But I have this playlist that I have been putting together. It's like an empowering women exercise playlist. All the songs have an exercise beat to them, but it's not like those exercise playlists that have that same boring tune. All these songs have great empowering words, great beats, great melodies, and great voices.

When I get on my elliptical and listen to this playlist, I get shivers, goosebumps, on my skin. Those are endorphins. Endorphins get released into your body and are stress-relievers. Your body releases dopamine, which is another hormone that it releases when you are in that love-bombing phase. So you can get a dopamine release from exercising, and it releases serotonin and a bunch of feel-good hormones. If you have a chemical imbalance, this would be the same thing (keeping with our junkie analogy), it would be the same thing as a nicotine patch, maybe? You need to be getting those feel-good hormones from another place.

RACHEL: Exactly, yeah.

NATALIE: So, exercise. You don't even have to do it for very long, twenty minutes, and you will feel amazing. I tell you this from the perspective of someone who hates exercising. I think it is super boring. I just want to get on with my day. If I exercise with no music, I feel drained and exhausted afterwards. If I exercise with relaxing, sort of Christian pop music, I also feel drained. (There is some Christian music I feel really empowered by.) I will be releasing that article before this podcast is released, so go check out the website. It will be called something like, "An Empowering Drug that You Can't Live Without," or something similar. [This article is no longer available.] Anyway, exercise.

RACHEL: I want to encourage her to really get to know herself. Find the things that she likes. That particular music and exercise works for you, and I think that would probably work for a lot of people. But get to know who you really are. That is something I have to do. I do little check-ins with myself: "How do I really feel?" I spent so much of my life (actually, all of my life) ignoring what was going on inside of me, so a lot of times I am so indecisive because I can't figure out what I even really feel. It is so packed down. So get to know your identity.

Giving yourself permission to have an identity after an abusive relationship is important. Speaking of Christian music, I got to go to the Hillsong United concert last Friday. If you don't know who they are, they are a great long-term band. I'm sure if you are a believer you have sung their songs. Anyway, it was an amazing worship experience. I have been struggling some with... I was in an abusive home growing up and in an abusive marriage, so I was sort of asking God, "Why? Why has this been allowed to happen?"

The sense that I got and want to share is just because I lived in lies about my identity, about who I was, and about what I needed to do, does not lessen the truth of God's love for me that entire time. All I had to do was uncover the crap, untwist from the crap, and really get to know who He was and what He said about me. I thought I knew Him. I sort of did, but I wasn't allowed to believe it or live it out because of my environment. So the lies do not make the truth any less true about God's love for you.

NATALIE: That's right.

RACHEL: Get to know Him. He is there, and He will meet you there. Bring Him into your deepest pain and your deepest questions. There was so much I held back from Him because I was so ashamed and so overwhelmed by it too. It doesn't make sense. It's

counterintuitive, but it was so hard to release that. Surrender is a long-term process; it's a daily process of giving all that pain and all that heartbreak over to God.

NATALIE: That brings us to strategy number four, which is that we want to try to escape those bad feelings and emotions that you get when you get off your drug cold-turkey. But here's the thing: the best way through that pain is to embrace it, sit in it, and be willing to accept surrender to the fact that this process is painful and there is no getting around it. You cannot escape it. If you try to escape it or numb out... There are all kinds of ways that we as humans escape our pain. If you do that, you will not come out on the other side where you can be truly free and healed from it.

RACHEL: Yes. The world is full of people who will not deal with their pain, so it spreads out to all the people around them in various ways. They can't help it. I think dealing with your pain, taking a deep dive inside yourself and allowing yourself to feel that pain, is one of the most courageous things anyone can do.

NATALIE: Yep. I think it was Patrick Doyle who said that denial is the root of all pathology.

RACHEL: Yes, it is Patrick Doyle quoting M. Scott Peck.

NATALIE: Oh my goodness! You have a great memory.

RACHEL: No, I don't, but I remember that somehow. I've been meaning to read "People of the Lie" for a long time, and I think it's from that book.

NATALIE: It's such a good book! Another strategy after you have gone through all of that is to process through all of this with support, not just by yourself. This would be having people around you. In Alcoholics Anonymous, they have non-judgmental people around them. People who will validate what you are going through. They will just be there to listen. They are not there to give you advice. They are not there to tell you what to do. They are just there to support and listen.

It's sad that you have to look at Alcoholics Anonymous to find something like that. You should be able to go to the church. But in the church, usually you don't find that. You find lots of advice, but not just listening. So process with support.

I'm going to put in a shameless plug for the Flying Free group. Rachel is the community director of the Flying Free group, and I am the founder. There are hundreds of women in that group right now who are processing what they are going through with the

support of us as well as other leaders in the group and their peers — other women who are right in the thick of what they are going through. You can find out more about that group if you go to joinflyingfree.com.

Also, I have a workbook coming out. I just finished it, and it's in the editing process right now. It is a workbook that will comprehensively and thoroughly walk you through each chapter of my book, but it is something that you fill out yourself. It is your personal workbook. It will dig deep like a surgeon's scalpel. It will dig deep inside of you, pull out stuff from inside of you, and help you to process. By the time you are done working through that workbook and reading my book, you will have... It's like counseling on steroids. [The companion workbook for "Is It Me?" is now available to the public!]

If I would have had this, I could have done without... Well, I didn't have great counselors. I don't know if this would replace an outstanding, phenomenal counselor. But you could do this with a counselor, too. I'm hoping that people will lead small-groups and do this in their communities. Have I brought this up before?

RACHEL: I don't think you have on the podcast.

NATALIE: So, the last strategy is to rebuild your life. After you have worked through some of your personal healing, focus on other relationships. Just because this relationship failed or is failing doesn't mean that... You are still wired to live in relationship, intimacy, and connection with other human beings. So it's important that you have that.

RACHEL: Healthy ones are out there. You just have to give yourself the tools to know how to identify someone who is healthy versus someone who isn't. "Safe People" by Cloud and Townsend is a book we have recommended on here before, and is a good one to get to know those traits that people who are safe possess.

NATALIE: That book again is "Safe People." It went by fast, but it's by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. It's a great book. Do you have anything else you want to share?

RACHEL: Support is so crucial. There are incredible, life-changing relationships that are built in the Flying Free group. I'm not the only one who would say that. The ladies in there are some of the most genuine, loving, kind, supportive people you will ever meet. They love the Lord, they encourage you in the Lord, and they give you truth about the Lord and remind you when you need it. I can't recommend it enough.

NATALIE: I've heard some people say, "I'm afraid it's going to be a man-bashing thing." It

is so not. Have you ever gotten that impression?

RACHEL: Never once, no.

NATALIE: That's not to say that people don't share what they are going through. What they are going through is that men are treating them poorly. But most of these women truly want to honor God with their lives, and most of them truly care about their partners. Even if they are separated or divorced from them, they truly did want the best for them and had given decades of their lives in trying to help their partner with that. But it just didn't work out. These are very mature Christian women. I say it all the time. They are the cream of the crop of Christian women. They are the ones that have been excommunicated and ostracized from their Christian communities. I think they are God's precious daughters. There are some new things coming out. We're going to be selecting a woman to get a one-year scholarship each month.

RACHEL: That's exciting!

NATALIE: There's an application process, but one woman each month will get selected to have a one-year scholarship. [This offer is no longer available.] Also, we are going to start doing one drawing a month for new subscribers to get three months for free. (I may let other people who've already subscribed get in on that first drawing.) So it's a three-month trial period. One person each month will get three months for free. That could just be anybody. [This offer is no longer available.]

The other thing I just added is something called office hours. I'm not going to be doing any private coaching anymore. I'm going to open my office for an hour each week and members of Flying Free can come in and talk with me. I had my first office hours yesterday. There were two women who came in and we had a great... Really, it was like a coaching session with those two women. They encouraged each other, they encouraged me, and I encouraged them. It was great. That's going to be another feature, but that is for members only. So that's another perk of being a member. [Office hours are no longer available for Flying Free members, but we now have a live Q&A every month! Learn more about the Flying Free Sisterhood at joinflyingfree.com.]

Patrick Doyle is doing a workshop in the Flying Free Group on October 6th. When you join, you get access to all the past workshops and all future workshops. There's a new workshop with an expert in the field every single month. There's lots of great stuff.

RACHEL: Patrick is so great. He is such a blessing. And I just shared my butterfly story in September.

NATALIE: That is right! If you want to hear Rachel's story... The other thing we have is a monthly butterfly story. A different woman who has gotten out of abuse and has rebuilt her life comes in and shares her story of getting out and rebuilding. Some of the women are single. Some of the women have been remarried. But they are all thriving and have amazing stories to tell. It gives other women hope along the journey.

RACHEL: Yes, it is always so encouraging to hear these women, and you feel so connected with them and can pick up pieces of those stories from your own life. I love listening to butterfly stories.

NATALIE: We're going to end there. We look forward to talking with you again next week, and until then, fly free!