

THE HOLIDAYS MAKE SEPARATION AND DIVORCE EVEN WORSE

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: Hey, welcome to Episode 44 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have a guest with me. Her name is Rachel Harden. We're laughing because this is actually Rachel Whitten, but she is no longer Rachel Whitten. Her name is now Rachel Harden. So tell us why your name is Rachel Harden all of a sudden.

RACHEL: Well, I got married two weeks ago. It was a wonderful day. We had a lovely honeymoon, and we're getting settled into life as it should be when you get married — happiness and peace and support for each other. I can tell you it is amazing. Not to say it's not hard — but it is amazing. I love it! I am so grateful.

NATALIE: Wow! What is the most crazy, awesome thing about it compared to what you experienced in your prior marriage?

RACHEL: One of the things I've been recognizing about my relationship with my husband now is that he's just there with me. I've talked about this before, I think, on this podcast. But it is such an amazing thing and it is so different, because in my previous marriage, I was alone. I was abandoned every single day. I never shared about my day. I couldn't because there was going to be criticism, blame, some sneering remark, or some sort of scorn. I just sort of shut down. When I did go to him for support, it just didn't exist.

But what I'm finding now is that I can actually feel my feelings, which is key for being human. What I've done for most of my life is just numb out — distract myself, try not to feel my feelings, tell myself that feelings don't matter. (That's what my ex-husband used to say all the time: "Feelings don't matter.") But now I can work through them. There was some hard stuff at my work this week. I shed a few tears, and then the next day I was okay because I allowed myself to grieve whatever was going on. Then I have the benefit of perspective after that, and it's okay.

It's a true partnership, and I just am so thankful. I can't even begin to describe how it makes for such an amazing quality of life when you have someone with you moment by moment, and you know you can always depend on them no matter what. So I am just over the moon. That is true romance. It's not just that you are swept up in the romance

of feelings. It's just being together is what romance is.

NATALIE: Yes.

RACHEL: So I am so thankful.

NATALIE: Oh, I am so happy for you! You're right. That is exactly the way it is supposed to be. That is how God designed relationships, and especially marriage, to be.

RACHEL: Absolutely! It's intimacy. It's valuing what the other partner values and being with them whatever is going on, even if they made a mistake or could have done something better. Just being with them no matter what.

NATALIE: Yes. I'm so happy that you have this experience. You and I, I've experienced this, and there are many other women that we know who are friends of ours that are also moving into new relationships or are already remarried. We just spent a weekend a few weeks ago. That was our last podcast, and there were several women there who were remarried or getting married.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: It blows me away. On Twitter this week, I posted this thing that John Piper had said about how wives who were being abused just need to live with it for a season and then get help from their church. I had made the comment that, "I did that. I lived with it for a season of twenty-five years and then I got help from the church, and then they excommunicated me. So yeah, that really worked well." But God, on the other hand, unlike John Piper — God in the Old Testament had this law that said that if a man was to put away his wife, he had to give her a certificate of divorce, and that certificate was her ticket into a better... into a relationship (hopefully it was better) with another man. She could get remarried then and be taken care of and be loved.

RACHEL: It was for her benefit.

NATALIE: Yes, exactly. So I love seeing God's provision for His daughters in this respect of being remarried. So what we're going to do today, though, is talk about the holidays. The holidays are upon us, and holidays for women who are living in destructive relationships can be difficult. A lot of times the drama that surrounds a family in which there is a dysfunctional person creating that drama can be really traumatizing, especially birthdays or holidays or other special events. But in addition to that, if a woman does decide to get separated, then that poses a whole new set of agony and

pain, because all the traditions get thrown out the window. The family is fractured. If she is divorced — same thing.

You and I are divorced. We have children, but we share custody of our children. So now on holidays we don't even get to see our kids on some of the holidays. The last several years have been extremely painful for me — although the last year and this year have been much better. We were talking before we got on the air here, and you were talking about how it's been difficult for you as well. So I thought we'd talk about our experience of holidays before we were separated and divorced, our experience now, how we made that transition, and how we're making the best of a situation that is probably not ideal. Why don't you start? Tell me what some of your traditions or beautiful things were that you did during holidays and maybe how your husband sort of sabotaged things.

RACHEL: I don't know. I think from my own childhood the holidays are a little bit hard for me anyway, because it all comes down to expectations. The culture puts on us a lot of dreamy ideas about things and the way things should be. We all know life is not really like that all the time — in fact, hardly ever. In my relationship with my ex-husband, we were very much enmeshed with his family. His mom basically was very much involved in our lives, and so we always went over to his parent's house — always. There were always lots of presents. It was what I knew. That was our tradition for fourteen years. It was everything that our son knew as well, because we would open presents at our house and then almost immediately leave to go to his parent's house.

So it was different the first year. It was really sad because my family is spread out everywhere, and there are difficulties there as well. Different kinds of difficulties. We're not big gift givers, and that's always been a struggle for me as well. Wanting to do the right thing with gifts but also not wanting to go overboard but also not wanting to do too little. That creates a lot of anxiety in me, because I feel like whatever I do is never enough. That's the thing I struggle with in my regular life, too. It's funny that I'm talking about that, because I had the same feeling come up when I was organizing my wedding. I felt like what I was doing was not enough — like with the reception, people would be annoyed because the reception food wasn't enough or the decorations weren't nice enough or something like that. It was totally false, and it's actually false about Christmas every year — except that I still struggle with that feeling of anxiety every year.

So we would always go over there and it was fine. Again, tons of gifts. Their family is big into stuff, and I was always trying to gear us more towards experiences. But they were just always focused on stuff.

The first year that we were separated, I was able to book a flight for my son and I to go out to Seattle to visit my sister and her family. That was good. I'm grateful because that would have been very lonely at home. He and I ended up leaving on Christmas morning. I couldn't take him before because he had to be with my ex-husband's family on Christmas Eve. That's such a struggle too, as you sort of referenced — the custody issue. I would have loved to have taken him much longer, but you must work within those parameters. This year we probably won't be able to do that because my ex-husband has him on Christmas morning. So I don't know what we're going to do.

It is a little different, too, because I just got remarried. That was good, and we were actually able to do that two years in a row where we left on Christmas morning. Actually, this past Christmas was the first time that he and my now husband were together for any length of time, because he drove us to the airport. That was really tough. My son did not want to be in the same car as him, and he was having all these issues. I kept being very insistent that this was how we were getting to the airport. It was going to be fine. What ended up happening was that it went great, and that was the start of me being able to integrate the two of them together and the start of spending time together, whereas before, it had been completely separate. I had kept them separate.

Now, eleven months later, we are married. So it's amazing what can happen. I am so grateful because, Natalie, you encouraged me to just push forward. I am always so afraid of rejection, especially from my son, and that's understandable. But you can't just live in fear. So I did it in a respectful way of my son's feelings, but I was also firm that this was the plan and he was going to drive us to the airport. I'm so grateful I did, because it started good things.

NATALIE: That's awesome. I've found that kids — they struggle. You don't always know how deeply they struggle. They do, but they also are resilient, and they do bounce back. If there is warmth and love and support and empathy for what they are going through, I think all of us can go through almost anything if we've got relationship.

RACHEL: Yes, exactly. That's where we should never just assume that our kids will be fine, that they are resilient and that we don't have to do anything — we don't have to support them — because that's not true. It has to be done in relationship and with understanding. You're exactly right. If you've got the support you need in your life, you can weather anything.

NATALIE: Yeah. We're in this together. I've seen that. I've seen moms who have really tight relationships with their kids, and they kind of band together. I think Lundy

Bancroft talks about that too in his book, "When Dad Hurts Mom." He talks about how you can really make it like a team. "We're going to get through this together. We're going to make some brand-new neat memories together." With that attitude, I think it really helps kids to have more hope and more healing rather than thinking, "The whole world is falling apart. It's never going to be the same again." Let me say that with a caveat. There is grief-work to do during the holidays, I think.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: Because you are grieving... Kids, especially, are grieving — well, all of us. We're all grieving inside. So my situation was that in my family, Christmas was a big deal. We made the rounds to all my grandparents' homes and my great-grandma's home. We had set traditions every year. Nobody ever died and everyone was fine. Then I got married and my mom hosted Christmas Day every single year for my entire marriage with my former husband, with my sisters, with their husbands, and with all their kids. The cousins all played together, and it was... It wasn't all peachy. There was an undercurrent of craziness going on.

RACHEL: For sure, yeah.

NATALIE: Just family dynamics. But for my kids, there was that magic. We had Christmas Eve traditions that we did every single year, and Christmas Day traditions. So when I separated from my husband the first year that we were separated, all of that was gloomy. I don't even remember much about that Christmas other than I cried all the time. I was crying all the time — the whole month of December. So I went through these motions of decorating and playing Christmas music, but I felt just totally numb.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: I was still hoping that my husband and I could get together, but I wasn't seeing any effort on his part and I was just grieving. I was starting to realize, "This man doesn't care at all. He just does not care." It was absolutely devastating to me. Not only that, but also my church had just completely abandoned me. So the following Christmas was not that much better. I was still just separated. I hadn't decided to file for divorce yet. On a scale of one to ten, the first Christmas was a one, and this was maybe a two.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: The following year I filed for divorce, and by the following Christmas I had

started building a friendship with Tom. I was in the middle of a divorce, and Tom, my current husband, and I had become good friends. We met several months after I filed for divorce and started building a friendship. Tom and I grew up together, but we didn't really know each other that much. (I don't know how much of the story I have told here.) Anyway, my kids didn't know Tom yet because I hadn't introduced them to Tom, but I was happier. Because I was happier and I felt more supported and I felt like somebody cared, I was able to be a better parent because I wasn't drowning in my beer, so to speak.

RACHEL: Yeah. There was a little bit of light there.

NATALIE: Yes, there was light at the end of the tunnel. So I was able to make Christmas happier and I was happier. Then by the following Christmas, I was already divorced, and Tom and I were married. That was the happiest Christmas; although my kids spent Christmas Day with their dad, and they spent Christmas Eve with us. But then on Christmas Day, Tom and I celebrated with his parents and it was really special.

Over the years, it has gotten different and better. My dad also died. Unfortunately, he died a year and a half ago, so last Christmas was the first Christmas without him. My mom is no longer hosting Christmas at her home, and in fact, my family of origin has completely splintered now. I am no longer in contact with anyone from my family of origin anymore through a series of really sad, disappointing, but sort of not surprising circumstances. So Christmas is very different. My entire Christmas — all those traditions — they are completely out the window, and we have ushered in brand new traditions. Now they kind of feel like they are our traditions. It's amazing how you get two years under your belt and you've got a tradition.

RACHEL: It's amazing, yeah. It builds up so quickly, which is wonderful news.

NATALIE: It is, and the little kids don't remember anything of the old stuff. They only remember what we do now. The older kids remember the other stuff, but some of them didn't really like some of the other stuff anyway. So they were kind of glad to not have to do some of those other things. It has worked out. I guess what I am hoping we can communicate through this podcast episode is that if you are struggling and you are grieving, that you can and you should.

RACHEL: Yes.

NATALIE: I think you should cry all season long.

RACHEL: Please. Please do that, yes. It's okay. It's good.

NATALIE: And ugly cry, because here's the thing: Your tears are very healing, and they help you process through the pain. That's part of grieving. For all of you who have lost a loved one, the first Christmas after you lose a loved one is horrible. All you can think about is the empty spot where that person sat. This is no different. You have lost a person if you are separated or divorced. You've lost a person. You may have lost a family. You may have lost friends. You may have lost a church. Maybe you're in a position where you're still married and living with your husband, but you are thinking about leaving and you're anticipating how horrible it's going to be during the holidays.

RACHEL: Yeah, which can be just as bad. I mean, the anticipation and dread is just as bad.

NATALIE: Exactly. "What is next Christmas going to look like?" Or maybe you're still with your partner and you're not thinking of leaving, but you are enduring another season of dysfunction. Maybe it's not just your partner that's a problem, but maybe you have a dysfunctional father-in-law, a dysfunctional mother, a crazy uncle, or a sibling who is very covertly abusive or controlling, complaining, critical, and whining about everything. If that's the case, then holidays are not fun. That's probably a conversation for another time — just setting boundaries. A lot of people wonder, "Is it okay if I just don't get together with these people? They're my blood relatives and I feel like I should." It's actually okay not to — but that's not really the subject for today. Maybe that's something we should talk about. How do you set boundaries during the holidays to protect yourself?

RACHEL: That would be really helpful. One other thing that you must grieve is your dreams. I talk a lot about how I lived on dreams. I lived on hope for the future. That was such a big part of letting go of that marriage. I had to realize, "It is never going to be like that. He is never going to be the person that I thought he was or could be, and we are never going to be the happy family that I dreamed of being and worked towards being every day." So the dreams are really big, and that is super painful because reality is so harsh, especially if you have been living in a numbed-out state where you are sort of going through the motions and trying to keep the pain at bay. Just let it in. Just feel it. If you can't do it all the time, do it for a little bit. You need to keep yourself safe and healthy as much as possible, so don't let yourself go completely and feel you have to be aware and present all the time. But start little bit by little bit. "Stick a toe in," like my therapist said.

NATALIE: Yes. I love that. Before we go, I'd like to throw out some ideas of things that

we've done while we've been in this transition phase of going from one family and marriage to the family and marriage looking completely different. I'll share one and you can share one, and we can go back and forth.

RACHEL: Yeah, that's great.

NATALIE: Actually, this is a brand-new idea that I want to do. I just got this idea from my hairdresser, and I'm going to do this. She said one of the traditions they do with their kids is to go to a Caribou or Starbucks and get their special hot chocolate for their kids. Then they go look at Christmas lights.

RACHEL: That's awesome.

NATALIE: They bring some snacks — caramel popcorn or whatever — in the car. They drink hot chocolate and eat snacks and look at Christmas lights. I guess you can look in the paper and find neighborhoods that have... I don't know. I've never done it, but we're going to try that this year. That's going to be a new tradition. Related to that, in our town, in Minneapolis, the Dayton's building used to have an amazing Christmas display every year. We used to, when I was married to my former husband, we would take our kids to that. You walk through it and then there's this Holidazzle parade we would watch with all these lights. That was a tradition. They no longer have it, but we also no longer do it. It's something I had to let go of, so we let go of that tradition. Instead, we're going to try this hot chocolate looking at Christmas lights thing.

RACHEL: I love that. I wrote that down. I want to implement that for this year — a new tradition. One of the things, as I mentioned, was that I was able to take my son out to see my sister two years in a row. That was really healing and special because it replaced the void of what we had done with something exciting and new, because we had never been able to travel at Christmas.

I think the principle there is don't be afraid to start spending it with new people. It's maybe a little difficult to make arrangements, but filling the void when you can with other people who are healthy is really healing. Being surrounded by people you love, even if it's not your family... Maybe it's your friends, and you ask to join them or invite them for Christmas dinner. Just being with people who are truly there and truly love you is really important, if possible. I hope that's not naive advice, because I know that's not possible for a lot of women, and they already know that. But that was really helpful for me.

NATALIE: Yes. Related to that, I know one thing we've been able to do now that we

aren't getting together with my family is that we've been able to have people over who don't have a family to go to. So maybe not going away, but having other people in.

RACHEL: Yeah, hosting.

NATALIE: One of our traditions with my family of origin, we'd get all the kids together and we'd do a cookie bake every year. We would decorate sugar cookies. We don't do that anymore since I'm no longer in contact with them, but what we've done the past few years since I've been separated (this will be our fifth year, now) is to do these gingerbread houses that are already built. You don't have to build them. You just decorate them, which the kids love. They just love to decorate. But they have pre-built ones at Costco that are only ten dollars. So we buy a bunch of those for each kid (I've got lots of kids) and we play Christmas music and we decorate gingerbread houses.

RACHEL: That's so fun. I'm writing that down too. I want to do that as well.

NATALIE: You can also get those at Target. If you want to build your own, you can. It's just messier. You can probably only do that with older kids. We used to do that with my family of origin. My mom hosted the whole thing — she didn't host, but she'd bring all the stuff. It was kind of a pain in the neck with the little kids because they didn't know how to make the walls stick together and they would get frustrated. The older kids had fun. This way, it's super easy. It's easy clean up and they really have a lot of fun.

RACHEL: So do the kits come with the candy, or do you have to buy that separately?

NATALIE: No, the kits come with everything. The frosting, the candy; they come with everything. The Costco ones are the cheapest, the most detailed, the nicest, and biggest by far. Hands down, Costco has got the best option. Another thing that we've always done is that we've always decorated for Christmas the day after Thanksgiving. We play Christmas carols and decorate the house. But this year, their dad has the kids the day after Thanksgiving. So you know what we're going to do? We're going to decorate on Thanksgiving — because why not!

RACHEL: Yeah, that's a great idea.

NATALIE: I'm getting a Thanksgiving meal from HyVee. I'm not even going to cook the Thanksgiving dinner. I'm getting everything from HyVee. I'm going to go pick it up. We're going to heat it up. We're going to eat it, and we're going to spend the day decorating. We're also going to do our gingerbread cookie houses that day. So it's going to be a fun day. I don't care if it's not what we've done in the past. We're going to have an amazing

Thanksgiving day.

RACHEL: That sounds wonderful. You're giving me all sorts of ideas because, to be honest, this is something I'm still working through. Obviously, this is going to be the first Christmas that I am remarried and everything. So these are really good ideas. It makes me excited.

NATALIE: Here's another idea for you too, then. Does your son have friends that he likes to hang out with? And do you know them very well?

RACHEL: Some of them I do, yeah. He's in high school now, so I think there are some that he is good friends with that he just sees at school and I'm not familiar with them. But there are others that he has known since kindergarten.

NATALIE: Well, and he's a guy. He probably wouldn't like this. So, I have a lot of girls. (Well, I also have a lot of boys, I guess.)

RACHEL: You've got a lot of kids in general.

NATALIE: I do. When my kids were little, we would do a caroling party and just have the neighborhood kids. But I've debated about doing another caroling party, too. That's really easy to do also. But I don't know if your son would be into that.

RACHEL: Here's one of the things — just an aside. One of my favorite things in the world is worship music. I listen to it all the time. My ex-husband hated worship music. Unfortunately, he has tainted my son on a lot of music and singing in general. That's something we work through, so that might not be one of the most successful things I've ever done.

NATALIE: No. I have a son in high school. He's a senior in high school. He would rather slit his throat than do a Christmas caroling party.

RACHEL: I'm sure your girls love it, and that's what's wonderful about having a lot of kids.

NATALIE: My girls would just love it, and they've got lots of friends. I've thought about having them all over for pizza and then going Christmas caroling. Then come back and have hot chocolate.

RACHEL: That's a lovely idea.

NATALIE: Anyway, do you have any other things you have had to change?

RACHEL: One of the things... This is sort of funny. My ex-husband always would have a real tree. I know people have different opinions on this. There is no right or wrong.

NATALIE: And strong opinions, too.

RACHEL: I grew up with a fake tree, so I'm okay with it. So now it is so easy just to go down to the basement and get the tree. Decorating is so much easier. No, it doesn't have the beautiful smell. But that is what's nice about not having that presence there that is overtaking everything like narcissists do. You get to personalize it and make decisions that are going to work for you and how you are right now instead of trying to jam something in that doesn't feel right. Not to say that having a real Christmas tree is wrong, and I sometimes enjoyed going to pick it out. But it's just so silly. His family always had firs, and I like pines. So they would always criticize how I would always get the pines. It was just so stupid.

NATALIE: I have a real Christmas tree story and then we'll close. When I was married to my former husband, he loved real Christmas trees as well. So we did that at first. But you know how we got out of it? One year we got a real tree and we went away. It was a very weird season weather-wise. We didn't know this at the time. We went away to visit grandparents. We were gone for maybe three or four days. We came back and our tree had been infested with spider eggs.

RACHEL: Oh my gosh!

NATALIE: So they all hatched while we were gone. So there were millions of spiders. Most of them were dead underneath the tree when we got home, but, of course, some of them were older than others and bigger than others. They were all over our house. That was the last year we got a real tree.

RACHEL: I am absolutely horrified.

NATALIE: I guess that year it was a thing. A lot of people had the same problem that year from this one particular farm. Anyway, that's my Christmas tree story. I think we're going to close now. Thank you for joining me for this episode. I'm so glad to have you back.

RACHEL: Yes, thank you.

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