

## CAN MY ALCOHOLIC HUSBAND CHANGE?

*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 51 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I are going to be answering two listener questions. Let's hear the first one.

CALLER 1: Hi. My husband is an alcoholic and has a lot of anger toward the church and my religious beliefs. There's also a lot of emotional abuse in our home. We have three toddlers and I have been a stay-at-home mom. I find it hard in our marriage to raise three kids in a Christian way when my husband has a lot of anger towards my beliefs as well as the alcoholism and the emotional abuse. I guess my question is how long do I keep hoping that he will change? We've been separated for quite a few months now, and I just don't know how to cope with all of that, the spiritual, the emotional, and the alcoholism on top of that, and then his extreme hatred towards my faith. I'm just at a loss of words for how to deal with this. I feel like the alcoholism is just the tipping point for me. Any advice would be great. Thank you.

RACHEL: Natalie, I remember the feeling of desperation and confusion and not knowing what to do when... I think it was when I was in-home separated but leading up to out-of-home separation. I so desperately wanted to see change in my husband but also coming to the realization that the change was not happening. My heart goes out to you, whomever you are and wherever you are. This is hard stuff. I'm glad you reached out to get help. First, there is alcoholism in my family of origin. That is a whole other horrible issue on top of the other things you are dealing with, including the emotional abuse. I would encourage you to go get connected with a local Al Anon group. There are chapters all over the country. There are people there who understand all the things that come along with alcoholism, including emotional abuse. You're going to find people who understand what is going on, and you can start getting support for setting down boundaries with his alcoholism.

If you are not a member of the Flying Free Sisterhood, I would encourage you to do that to get support from other women of faith who are experiencing emotional abuse. There are quite a few women in the group, if I remember, who also have husbands who are addicts on top of the abuse. My husband (it's amazing because you have all ends of the spectrum) had never touched a drop of alcohol in his life. It was a big point of pride for him. He thought of himself as too pure and wouldn't defile himself with alcohol.

That was one of the things my mother-in-law pointed to when she was asking me to put up with all the other stuff. "At least he's not out drinking, smoking, and running around on you."

But that's beside the point. I would encourage you to get some support you need and to get clarity and to get truthful about where you are. Do you want to be married to him? Do you want to stay and wait for a change that might never come? Maybe he'll decide that he needs to go to AA, he needs to sober up, he needs to deal with his own issues. That does happen with some alcoholics. When you've got emotional abuse on top of that, a lot of times what Natalie and I see is that they don't change because it is that toxic pride, like in the case of my husband and Natalie's husband, that is the very thing that keeps them from being able to humble themselves and repent. That is the thing that they need most.

You are going to have to decide how long you are willing to wait. Maybe it is that you will give him another three months and if you see some progress, then you will reevaluate. Or if there is no progress, then that is when you will leave. If you do decide to give some sort of time limit, don't let him know. Don't share that with him because that will be used to manipulate you. Make it just internal between you and a counselor. Or you can say, "I'm done now. I can't put up with this anymore. I need to be able to raise my kids the way God is leading me to raise my kids in the Christian faith. I need to get them away from the horrible example that their father is setting." This is a personal decision.

One of the things that is so hard for us when we've been emotionally abused is getting in touch with what we truly feel, truly think, and truly need. For me, it was easier to think about my son's needs and then use that to get in touch with how I really felt. His needs were my priority, and that led me to this ridiculous idea that my needs were also important. This is something, Natalie, that I remember you talking about how you went away for a weekend to a hotel just by yourself. You were looking back over your old journals and really thinking and praying about what to do next. You gave yourself some space, right?

NATALIE: Yes. It sounds like this lady has toddlers, so she's probably your age or maybe younger.

RACHEL: That might not work for her, then.

NATALIE: I was a lot older when that happened and some of my kids were a lot older. I was also an avid journal writer, and not everyone does that. But the journals helped me

to see things clearly because I would write in my journal and then put it away and never re-read anything. When I went back through all those journals, it was like a slap upside the head as I realized that, wow, I'd been living with the crazy for ever and ever and ever. I'd been trying to get help for years and years from other people. I had tried to do my own changing and tried to do my own fixing, but it was still the same problem only worse, now, because it had been so many years. It was never going to change. I realized I was facing a future of it possibly never changing.

I think you also said, Rachel, off the air, that if getting separated doesn't help them to see their need to change, then what will? Honestly, I think even separation and boundary setting with people like this, we hope it's going to wake them up, but it's aesthetic, outward change. A lot of times they do. It doesn't sound like it's made any difference to this particular man in his life. But a lot of guys will think "Oh, I don't want to lose my target, so I will go through the hoops and make it look like I have changed." But they don't really change on the inside, therefore, it is just aesthetic. Then when the woman gets back together with him, of course it goes back to the same-old-same-old. And then she is faced with having to do the same thing all over again.

RACHEL: Right. So, change over a long period of time. If it is genuine, it will happen over a long period of time. It will be consistent. My ex-husband was able to show some things that I had longed for in our relationship for a long time because he knew that was important to me. But underneath it there was still the toxic, manipulative, controlling behavior. I had to get honest about that because I really didn't want to see it, but it was there. It was really hard. I wanted him to change. I wanted him to be the person I thought that he could be, or I thought that he was.

NATALIE: Right. Here's a couple of key things to look for if you are looking for change. There are lots of articles out there on my website and other websites that talk about change, what specifically to look for. They go into great detail. But overall in general, to boil it down to the bare minimum of what to look for, you need to see that they really are impacted by the depth of the destruction that they have caused. They are impacted by it. That means that they think, "Whoa! I have really wreaked havoc on this relationship and I really have not seen you, known you, or understood what I have done to you." When they really see it, if they ever really saw it for real, they would be so devastated by the destruction they have caused in the relationship that they would be giving you all the space you needed. They would not be demanding that you forgive them right this minute. They would not be making any demands on you at all. All the demands and all the responsibility would be on them. They themselves would put it on them, not other people. They themselves. You wouldn't have to put it on them. You would not have to make a list of all the things that they did because they would be

personally convicted inside their own hearts for what they have done.

Secondly, they would begin to see you (and trust me, you would feel this) as a separate human being from them. Their respect for you as a separate human being would show up like your voice would actually matter to them in every aspect of it. Your opinion would matter to them, your perspective and the way you look at the world would matter to them, and they would have honor, respect, and care for that. So when you share your thoughts, your perspective, and your opinion, they would take that to heart rather than deflecting, blaming, or whatever.

One of the keys that I decided at the very end of my relationship that I would know that my husband had an inner transformation was when he would stop saying, "But Natalie, you are partly responsible." When he could stop mutualizing the abuse and start taking responsibility for it, that's when I would know. I had been taking 100% responsibility for everything in our marriage for our entire marriage. He hadn't taken any of it. What I was requiring was for him to take his part. He couldn't do that. He could only say "Well, I'll only take my part, but you have to take your part." I was trying to say, "Hey buddy, if you can't see that I've already taken my part and your part for twenty-five years, then you haven't seen anything. You refuse to see it. If you refuse to see it, you won't be able to really change or get help."

He was going to counseling, to a Christian counselor, unfortunately. Of course they were just coddling him, enabling him, and buying into his story rather than his being honest with the counselor and saying, "Here's how I've screwed up. I need you to help me to be better. I need you to help me see deep down inside of my attitudes and my heart that I've got a problem which is showing up in these behaviors and attitudes that I have towards my wife and my children." That counselor probably never even got a chance to go there because my ex-husband wasn't willing to go there himself.

So I would say to this particular woman (and then we will move on) is that... she asked specifically, "How long do I keep hoping he will change?" Well, that is up to you. You can keep hoping that he will change until you are old and gray. It's really kind of irrelevant how long you hope or how much you hope. You get to decide how long or how much you will hope that he will change.

RACHEL: You know what else, Natalie? It's not about "I love him" versus "I don't love him." Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is separate from someone permanently and allow them to face the consequences of their own behavior. That is in their best interest. You must keep that in mind when you are thinking through these things.

NATALIE: Yes. Did you talk about Al Anon at the beginning?

RACHEL: I did, yeah.

NATALIE: Okay, good. Did you have anything else to say, or should we move on?

RACHEL: No. I just want to share my heart for this woman. I hope that you get the guidance that you need from our Father and that you can make the decisions you need to make for the best interest of you and your kids and your husband.

NATALIE: Also, you need to know that this is the quintessential question that every woman who goes through this has. This is just part of the process. Everybody goes through it. What I tell people is that you will know when you know. You will just know. You will have to follow your inner heart when it says, "You know what, you can't do this anymore, honey. It's time to move on." We're going to listen to the next question.

CALLER 2: My ex is dating a Flying Free lady. He was verbally, emotionally, and spiritually abusive during our almost 23 years of marriage, and he is still emotionally abusive to my kids. Thankfully, they are old enough to recognize the behavior. My situation is a little different from most women in these situations as everyone surprisingly took my side during the divorce. Even his own family took my side, my in-laws and my sister-in-law, who I'm very close to, are still very connected with me and my kids. I saw on Facebook that this woman and I have some Flying Free friends in common and she likes the Flying Free page, which probably means she came from an abusive situation. I've struggled with whether or not to reach out to her because I know he can be very charming, and I'm not sure if she would believe me. At this point, my ex leaves me alone and I don't want him coming after me and the kids if he thinks I said anything to her. I'm not sure what to do. I would hate for another Flying Free lady to have to live what I've lived through for the past 22 years. Looking for advice on how to handle this situation.

RACHEL: What a crazy situation! The Flying Free community has gotten so big that now we've got people who know each other tangentially.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's weird.

RACHEL: It is weird. So this is a tough question. I think, for this woman who is asking, it is up to you. You are not obligated to share with her about your experience about your ex. But if you do choose to, I would make sure that you do it with good boundaries. So that looks like you don't even have to say it from your own perspective. You could say, "I

know someone who was married to him, and this was her experience.” You don’t have to admit that it was you. Or you could if you wanted to. It’s up to you. But if you do, I would just state the facts and let her decide what she wants to do. If she responds poorly, that’s not on you. That’s on her. That’s on your ex-husband. You are just doing this out of love for her well-being. I think it would be fine either way. It’s really up to you.

NATALIE: This woman who is dating your ex, she has no idea at this point. For those of you who are divorced and you are in the dating scene again, it is inevitable that you may date a “naughty” man. You’re not going to know. Obviously, we cannot mind read. We’re not soothsayers. We’re going to date this guy and hopefully, if we’ve done our work on the back end, we’ll eventually be able to figure out, “There is something off about this guy. I’m not going to date him anymore because I can tell things are probably not going to go well for me.” Then we release ourselves. So it’s a process. Maybe this person would figure it out on their own, eventually. Maybe you don’t even need to say anything and just let them go through the process. But if this was me, Rachel, I would probably do what you suggested. I’d probably send them a private message and say, “Hey, I know someone” (and I don’t think I’d reveal that it was me) “in the Flying Free group who was married to that man.” If she’s in the Flying Free group now, enough said.

RACHEL: Yeah. If she is part of the group, she should know what that means.

NATALIE: Exactly. And she gets to decide.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: I wouldn’t even say what she needs to do. I wouldn’t get dramatic and say, “Oh my gosh, you have to get rid of him! He’s bad news!” I would assume that other people have the wisdom and the discernment to figure things out for themselves, because here’s the thing: Even if she knew that he was a bad person, if she hasn’t done her work on the back end, she may not care. She might think, “I don’t care. I can fix him. Or maybe he will be great with me.” And that is her choice. She has every right to make that choice. None of us has the right to say you can or cannot do that.

That’s one of the things that we are learning in Flying Free. We respect the rights of other people, including our husbands, to make the choices that they want to make, even if those choices are crappy. They get to make those choices. But we also get to make our own choices. So we respect our husband’s right to behave the way he



behaves, but then we also respect our own right to say, "I'm not going to tolerate that. I'm going to leave this relationship. If you cannot change, I respect my right to leave." That's all wrapped up in boundaries.

RACHEL: Pray for wisdom, because God promises He will give us wisdom when we ask. So pray for wisdom, and you will do the right thing no matter what you choose.

NATALIE: Right. Now we're talking not to this woman but to anyone who is thinking about or wants to someday be in a relationship with someone else that you really do need to get to a healthy place yourself. That means that you need to be super good with you. You need to be comfortable in your own skin. Well, I shouldn't say that. I'm not talking about perfection by a long shot, because none of us are ever going to get to that place of total and perfect healing where we all know the exact way to respond in every circumstance. That is not what I am talking about. I'm talking about overall, in general, being comfortable in your own skin. Being comfortable saying "No, I don't want to do that" or "Yes, I do want to do that," and being comfortable with the fact that someone else isn't going to like that. So being comfortable tolerating their disapproval.

I'll give a simple example. Let's say you're dating someone, and they ask you where you want to go. Let's say that it's a movie. "I want to go to this movie." The other person says, "I don't want to go to that movie. I want to go to this movie." But you really do not want to go to that movie. Maybe it's a horror movie and you hate horror movies and you say, "I know you want to go, but you'll have to go by yourself because I don't do horror movies." Then they say, "Well, fine then. If you're going to be like that," and then they pout and have a cow. You need to be okay with their pouting and having a cow and also evaluate whether or not you want to stay with someone who pouts and has a cow when you don't go to a specific movie. If you can't find a compromise movie that you can both go to, then I don't know if that guy is for you.

Here's an example from my own life. I'm remarried, and just a couple of weeks ago my husband asked me if I wanted to go see the Star Wars movie. I am not into Star Wars. I don't do Star Wars. I just can't do it.

RACHEL: Natalie, I am currently wearing a Star Wars shirt, just so you know.

NATALIE: That is so funny!

RACHEL: That is hilarious!

NATALIE: Yes, that is hilarious. We've found out since we've been married that our taste

in movies is different. He loves documentaries. He loves Star Wars. He loves the Marvel movies. I won't say what I'm into, but I'm not into that stuff. So sometimes we compromise, but this time I was like, "I just don't want to go." He said, "That's cool." So you know what? He didn't pout. He didn't get mad. He went to the Star Wars movie by himself because that is his right to do that. That's called mutual respect. I respect his right to go to a movie by himself. He respects my right to say "No, I don't want to go to that movie." The next night, we both went to a movie that we both wanted to see. There was never any drama around any of that. We are both adults. But he's comfortable going to a movie by himself, and I am comfortable saying "No, I don't want to go to that movie." That's a good relationship. It's healthy.

RACHEL: Yes. That's the way it is supposed to work. I've talked about this before. It's the same situation in my former relationship where my husband was an extremely picky eater and he would make this big show of letting me pick where I wanted to go for a restaurant. If I genuinely picked where I wanted to go instead of anticipating where I thought he would want to go, he would find all sorts of reasons why that wasn't a good place to go. It ended up being this horrible mix of manipulation. I felt sad because I didn't get to go where I wanted to go but then happy because I was making him happy. It was so unhealthy.

NATALIE: Right. That's a great example of how it goes the wrong way. The last thing I want to say, then, is if you feel like you haven't done that hard work, or you are still working on it or need to work on it, that's one of the things that we do in the Flying Free Sisterhood group. We have courses. There are expert workshops. We have coaching through office hours, lots of group coaching opportunities. You get to hear other people be coached and you get to be coached. This is how we grow, and this is how we learn. I say "Let's go from crawling to flying," but another way of putting that is let's go from being children to being adults. That's important.

An adult is not going to tolerate crappy behavior. A kid will because a kid wants love and attention. They want love and acceptance. An adult wants love and acceptance too, but they're not going to take it at the expense of self-respect or of losing their autonomy, adulthood, and freedoms. They are not going to compromise in that way where a kid, a child, will do that. The problem is that many of us either grew up in homes where we weren't allowed to grow up, where our development was arrested as children because we weren't given the things we needed to become adults, or we were in healthy families but we married someone and got involved in religious environments that basically taught us that we are children, we are less than, we need to be taken care of and have someone tell us what to do, we aren't capable of making our own decisions, and all of that. I don't want to go down that rabbit trail now as our time is up,



but I wanted to put in a plug for the Flying Free Sisterhood.

RACHEL: Natalie, one final thing before we go. That growing up, for me, involved learning how to respect myself enough that my idea of attraction was no longer, "I like him because he is mean to me in a sort of joking way." That was my entire relationship with my ex-husband. I was attracted to him because he was mean to me.

NATALIE: Wow. That's like "The However Many Shades of Gray," that whole concept.

RACHEL: Yeah. Not the horrible, weird stuff.

NATALIE: I know. I just mean the concept of wanting to be...

RACHEL: Degraded?

NATALIE: Well, not degraded but ruled over or taken by force. Fortunately, I've never read those books, so I don't know anything about them. They tap into our base desire to be controlled. It's not a healthy desire, but it is inbred in us as human beings. As females, we struggle with wanting to be overpowered when God really wants to set us free from that and learn how to be empowered.

RACHEL: Yeah. It's the result of the curse. That's not God's original design for us, but that is what happens with sin in the world. The way it manifested itself for me was that I thought that his whole world that we lived in and his ideas about things and his mockery of me, I thought that was leadership. I thought it was him just having such a strong personality. Actually, it was the opposite of those things. I am so thankful that my husband now is kind and tender. It resonates so deeply within me and it makes me love him so much in ways that ten years ago I wouldn't have been able to experience. I'm just grateful for that.

NATALIE: Let me clarify for people, because it sounded like your other husband changed into this wonderful person.

RACHEL: No! There are two separate men here!

NATALIE: The other guy stayed the same. This is the new guy.

RACHEL: Yep.

NATALIE: Alright. That's it for today. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of

the Flying Free Podcast. Until next time, fly free!