

NOTHING I DO MAKES MY HUSBAND HAPPY

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 57 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we are going to have a case study testimony. The survivor we are featuring is Debby Seguin from Dallas. I've known Debby for almost three years. She has been a very active member in the Flying Free Sisterhood group. We've met each other in person twice in Texas at two different conferences. With her permission, I am letting you know that she is 57-years old. She made a good point and said it's helpful to know how old the speaker is so you know where they are in their life. So welcome, Debby, to the podcast.

DEBBY: Thank you. I'm very happy to be here.

NATALIE: We are going to go through our ten questions, and she said she's ready to go. So let's just dive in, okay? First, how did you meet your husband, and were there any red flags before you married him?

DEBBY: I met him at church in January 1986. I had no idea what a red flag even was back then. I was completely naive about anything. I can't say there was anything that really sticks out. However, now that I am more knowledgeable about a typical abuser characteristic, I can see that getting married that August... We met January of 1986 and we married in August of 1986. But if we married in August, we had to have been seriously talking about it and planning for it several months before, and that is fast. The other thing that sticks out is that he was very meticulous about everything, his dress, his truck, his apartment. But I was a free spirit and I thought that was a good thing. I thought that would be a good balance. It turned out he really wasn't interested in blending or sharing our traits. He was interested in forcing me into his shape and view of everything.

NATALIE: If he was kind of a perfectionist or had that idea that everything must be perfect, I'm sure he wanted you to also be perfect.

DEBBY: Yes, very much so. I've met a lot of perfectionists in my life. You can be a perfectionist and not try to force other people to do that. So there's a lot more going on under the surface.

NATALIE: Yes. Very good point. What were some of the ways that he emotionally or spiritually abused you throughout the course of your marriage?

DEBBY: I remember when I first saw the term “walking on eggshells.” I don’t remember where I saw it, in a book or something, but it was very much a lightbulb moment. The term was so perfect. My life was constant walking on eggshells. There wasn’t a day that went by when he didn’t find something, usually several somethings, that I had done “wrong” (I’m putting this in quotation marks) in his viewpoint. His way of expressing that I had done something wrong for the first twenty-two years was anger. It was like a personal affront to him that I didn’t figure out how to do something “correctly.” Along with the anger were the heavy sighs, the eye-rolling, the body language that said pretty much in every way, “You are incompetent and lacking.” His favorite question, and this is still very triggering for me, is “What were you thinking? Can’t you think?” I woke up every morning trying to please. I woke up every morning confused because I seemed to be incompetent and unable to please him. I thought that pleasing your husband was being a good Christian wife, so I just always felt like a failure.

NATALIE: You know what strikes me about that question is that it’s the kind of question that you might hear a parent asking a small child, but you wouldn’t... I don’t think it’s right even for a parent to talk to a child like that. But what strikes me is that he treated you like you were just a child and you were a grown woman and his partner. That blows me away! What were some of the coping strategies that you employed?

DEBBY: I had brought a lot of fear into my adult life. I didn’t realize it at the time. I grew up in a very abusive environment. I was in foster care and I grew up in a children’s home. Lots of rejection, lots of feeling very vulnerable all the time. I’m quite sure I was a master at coping strategies by that point. But growing up, if you didn’t please the adults in your life, bad things happened. That was the mantra running through my mind growing up, and I brought that into my adult life. So my main coping strategy was appeasement at any cost. I had to keep this person happy. That entailed constant analyzing of his moods, his tone, a lot of preemptive fawning, trying to keep him happy before he ever got to that point. I had to sense his tone. I did a lot of apologizing. It was so exhausting. I did a lot of trying hard to make everything perfect, and since I’m not at all a perfectionist, that was a real accomplishment.

But even with that, he still seemed to find the one thing that I had overlooked. I remember it was very confusing. I would do one hundred right things and do them well, but he would find that one thing and then dig into that. He would not let it go until I was in tears or he had gotten some kind of response from me. I was just very confused. It wasn’t until recently that I understood that it really wasn’t about him

wanting everything perfect. It was about him creating a scenario where I always lost, I always was at fault, or I always was lacking in some way. He created that. I'm over here with the premise that if I did everything right, there was an end goal in sight. But the end goal was never that. The goal was to make me feel incompetent, and he was going to get there no matter what it took.

NATALIE: Yes. I'm so glad that you shared that example, because I think so many women are dealing with that and they have no idea. They still think that if there is some way, that if they just make the right effort, then they can meet their goal of pleasing their spouse. That's not even the point at all. How many years were you married in total?

DEBBY: In total, thirty-three. I am still married, but I'm in the process of divorce. I'm getting to the end of the process. I remember that this was one of the hardest things to accept, that he was creating that. I also made a lot of excuses for his behaviors. I bought into his words: he's so tired, his job is so stressful, he had a bad childhood, blah, blah, blah. Something I realized is that I'm tired, my job is stressful, and I had a terrible childhood! Yet, I don't treat people like that. But I never compared myself because I was very busy blaming myself. The book "How He Gets Into Her Head" was a total game changer for me. It helped to start overcoming that brainwashing.

NATALIE: That was a really good book. For those of you listening, it is by Don Hennessy. So thirty-three years. When did you start realizing it was actually ...? When could you say to yourself, "I would use the word 'abuse' for what I am going through"? Then when did you realize that you needed to get out of the relationship?

DEBBY: Those were far apart, unfortunately. We had been married about twenty-two years and I would say there was a pivotal moment. I won't share that right now. It was very demeaning and one of those things that was very in your mind. But I had returned to work by then sometime in year twenty-two. So there were two things that were happening at once. The abuse, after twenty-two years, was really taking a huge toll on me physically, emotionally, and mentally. Although he wasn't physical, I was afraid of him. Our three kids were afraid of him. We all just avoided him, which is easy when you're a kid but not when you're the wife who is sleeping with him. Avoiding isn't a good long-term solution.

To me, it was a lot like being in a cage with a tiger. I would put the kids behind me, and I stroked the tiger as best as I could. But after twenty-two years I was really deteriorating, and that scared me. I knew that I couldn't continue, but I honestly had no idea what to do about it. The second thing that was happening was being back at work. I noticed that

I didn't have any problems in any other relationships. I was a teacher at that time. I was responsible for relationships with hundreds of kids, parents, and co-workers, and I was well-respected. I was successful. I had lots of long-term successful friendships. It started to make me realize, "Hmmm. Maybe this isn't just me?" That later morphed into, "It isn't me at all!"

NATALIE: Thank goodness.

DEBBY: It was also the time I went to my church counselors for help. I did that for years. It was gut wrenching. They were so incompetent. They weren't equipped to deal with domestic abuse, but instead of just admitting, "This is over my head," and referring me to someone who is competent, they just continued to feed me the party line. "Try harder! What are you doing to add to the problem? We're all sinners! Marriage is hard. Blah, blah, blah." Basically, what they did was echo all the crap I read in all of those "How to Have a Great Marriage" books over the years. The books don't do anything but reiterate what your abuser is already saying: that you are a failure because you can't seem to make this marriage work. I would say that part of it was the worst part of the whole journey. It really rocked my spiritual world. I read Henry Cloud and John Townsend's "Boundaries" book about that time. I remember thinking, "Hmm. This is different than what the counselors are telling me." That helped me to start overcoming some fears and making my first lame attempts at sticking up for myself.

NATALIE: What happened when you started sticking up for yourself? What was the response?

DEBBY: It was bad. He'd had pretty much unquestioned control for twenty-two years, so the least little bit of questioning... I was making sense because Henry Cloud and John Townsend's book gave me the verbiage to be able to put into words the ridiculousness of what he was doing, and that made him angry. I wasn't anywhere close to the point where I could just let him be wrong and walk away. For many more years to come I was still under the impression that I could get him to understand what he was doing and then he would stop doing it. So I at least got started doing that. But he would try every trick in the book. He, of course, started out with anger because that's his go-to. When anger started losing its power, he was forced to switch to other tactics. My theory is that they are going to use whatever tactic is the least amount of effort on their part and has their desired outcome.

Mine was a rager, but he had me and our kids so compliant that it was his go-to. He didn't have to spend a lot of energy. Sometimes it was just seeing his face mad and we would all scramble to do what we could. But once that tactic didn't work, then he had to

try to find other tactics to get that control back. It was bad during those years when I was trying all of that. I started moving into another room for a few days. So now we're depriving him of sex. That was a huge thing because he must always be bolstered as the hero, and me moving into another room was definitely not calling him a hero. I had to do that out of sheer survival. That was the best thing I could have done. It was incredibly healing.

NATALIE: What year was that?

DEBBY: It took me years of moving into another room several times. So this is all moving up to a bit more recently. Probably to year twenty-seven or twenty-eight where I was good by then. I was strong. I knew how to combat his craziness. But I still wasn't to the point where I was even contemplating divorce. That didn't enter the picture because I was still locked into all the lies that I had been taught about how God sees divorce. It would have been just another failure to add to all the other failures that I felt I had done. But his wanting sex an hour after he raged at me, that was a tipping point for me. It was taking such an emotional and spiritual toll, but I didn't realize it. So moving into the other room had a lot of benefits.

Now that sex wasn't in the picture, he couldn't let that happen so he would change his tactics. Changing tactics for a rager when they aren't raging nearly as much anymore looks like change. So I thought, "Wow! He's really changing." He also started apologizing, which I had not heard for twenty-five years. I had heard no apologies at all. I thought, "Wow! He's not yelling and he's apologizing." It looked so different to me and put such hope in my heart. But as I read more and as the behaviors would go right back to the demeaning and controlling behaviors after the apologizing... I call them "fauxpologies" now. It was a lot of love bombing. His fake apologies really sucked me in for several more years. He reads that big Bible and takes us to church and talks about Jesus all the time, so he must be sincerely sorry. Who am I to judge?

By that time I had sat down and typed "domestic abuse" into my computer. That's when all the information came out. I love to read. For pretty much two years I would come home and feed the kids. I would go to my separate room (if I was in a separate room at the time) and I would read for three or four hours straight every night. Every article was a piece of the puzzle. I started out with Leslie Vernick. I got a lot of great stuff from her. Eventually I outgrew her (that's the best way I can describe it) with where I was knowledge wise, and the deeper into the tactics I went there were other things. That's when you came along. I had found the website "Crying Out For Justice" and was getting a massive education on narcissism, abuse, and all those tactics. Each time I separated, I did it for a little bit longer and I became a little bit stronger each time. I always like to

say that I was a mouse, and now I am a lion. He should have been nicer when I was a mouse.

NATALIE: That's right! You are a lion, too, because when I met you, you are larger than life. You are colorful. You are vibrant. You are full of energy. At the conference I just did, you probably remember when I was talking about going from Dorothy's Kansas environment to Oz. You are like you have gone from Kansas to Oz, and you belong in Oz. You are a colorful character. You're amazing! And a powerhouse too, and you are extremely articulate and intelligent.

DEBBY: Thank you.

NATALIE: I wanted you and the listeners to know that as well, that I have seen that in you. For the sake of the listeners, notice how she was able to get stronger even in the relationship. So if you are someone listening and you're thinking, "Well, I can't just divorce my husband," nobody would expect you to ever do that. You can get stronger and go on your own journey. You don't have to get divorced. You may come to the end of your journey a few years down the road and decide that is what you want to do. But this is a process. It's a long process. It's extremely involved. But you absolutely can go to the roots of who God created you to be deep down inside, how God wired you, and you can become that person. Debby has become the person that she was all along. She has finally become that person and she is still married, although she is on her way out. Let's go into that a little bit.

DEBBY: I want to interrupt you, Natalie, because you brought up Oz. Something that was impactful for me is the fear aspect, because I totally get that there are women in truly dangerous situations. So this is not for them. But what I came to realize after talking to so many women over the years, I believe that the majority of us would fall into this category. If you remember in the movie, Dorothy went in and finally met the Wizard of Oz. He was huge, scary, creepy, and dangerous sounding and looking. They were all quaking in their shoes and they ran to do his bidding. Then when she came back and pulled the curtain back, she saw the tiny little man who was using the microphone and all the levers. The reality of him was this tiny little man behind the curtain, whereas the false was this really scary man. That had a huge impact on me.

I looked back and realized that even though he was a rager and was very scary, he was using that to control. It wasn't so much that he was a dangerous person, but you don't know that. So it was a slow process for me. I'm addressing people who have so much fear. I can tell you I had so much fear. I was afraid of him all the time. Looking back on it now, I see that a lot of my fear was unwarranted because he was just this little man

behind the curtain. I just wanted to share that with you.

NATALIE: I love that. For me, a lot of my fear was fear of what he thought about me.

DEBBY: Yeah. I agree.

NATALIE: When you finally think well of yourself and you know who you are (and you know they don't think well of you and they never will), you come to realize, "Who cares? You're just a little slimy man. Why do I care what you think about me?"

DEBBY: Right. 100%. That is the key: when you get to the point where you see value in yourself and you're not going to take this one person, even if you're married to them, you're not going to take this one person's viewpoint of you as gospel because it's false. It's all a lie anyway.

NATALIE: Right. Were there any really bad things that happened to you because you decided to divorce him or get out?

DEBBY: A couple of things. As you had mentioned, I did have a lot of growth while I was with him, but part of that growth was because I did separate outside of the house a couple of times. I'm blessed to have friends. I think my oldest was already out of the house and married and my boys could drive by that time, so they were autonomous and could come to me whenever they wanted. I didn't feel like I was abandoning them. They were able to hold their own at that point. So I did do a lot of growing. It was a long and slow road for me to get to that place where I knew that I needed to get completely out. I did have a lot of my ducks in a row. I had already gotten a secret account that he didn't know about. I wasn't putting much in it because we had a shared account, and my paycheck went into the shared account. But still, I was getting prepared for that. Any extra money I put into that. I did have a teaching job and I could support myself. So I do feel for a lot of our homeschool moms. My daughter is a homeschooler. That's just tough. That's part of the piece I didn't have to deal with because I was able to support myself. I mean, not well, but well enough.

So I did do a lot of healing and growing when I was actually with him. I did finally buy a fifth wheel in July of 2017 and moved into that. I lived there for a year. I was still close to my house and close to my work. I wasn't ready for my life to be disrupted. I also went home on the weekends. He was docile by then most of the time because he was trying to win me back. So I would do laundry there. I cooked for my boys. We would have an amicable relationship, but I didn't chat with him. I didn't pray with him. There was no communication like that. I wasn't rude. I was respectful to him as a person. I wasn't

there to fight with him, and he seemed okay with letting that happen. He was trying to suck me back in. So I went home on the weekends and to be honest, I was still hoping he would get the help and make the changes. I really didn't want to get a divorce. I'm in my late 50s. That's my home and everything I've ever known. I desperately wanted it to work. I just wasn't willing to kill myself to get there anymore. After that year, I had been getting some great counseling. My counselor had actually started out seeing my husband for several months. He found her and he was going to her for several months. After she met me, Natalie, get this: she saw that I was so totally different from what his narrative was that she refused to see him anymore and started seeing me. Isn't that crazy?

NATALIE: That is incredible!

DEBBY: She said she couldn't believe how good he was at manipulation and that she had experienced herself how these people operate. I think she went up a notch in her own professional life with our little case here. Anyway, I was diagnosed with CPTSD at the time, and I worked with her to alleviate some of those symptoms. I still have a few triggers, but I am doing very well. I feel very stable emotionally most of the time. I'd say my biggest challenge during that time of leaving was in my mind: the brainwashing, the struggle with believing he does this on purpose to control me and make me feel inferior.

I was mad at God. I was mad at all those crappy Christians that didn't know what the hell they were talking about. I was angry. I went through the ugly crying angry stage for two solid years. To be honest, Natalie, that is one of the reasons I moved into the trailer. I recognized that I had a lot of emotion that I needed to get out, and I really didn't think it was the right thing to just dump it on him. Some people might think, "Oh yeah! He deserves that." I'm not saying he doesn't, but that's not the way that I'm going to handle purging myself of those emotions. So the trailer was really a Godsend for me because I was able to feel what I was feeling. Really, I did that for two solid years. I was pissed for two solid years.

NATALIE: Yep. You did your work, Debby. You did your work. That's why you are where you are today.

DEBBY: Yes. I totally agree. I'm such an avid proponent that you have got to feel those emotions. They are there. They aren't going anywhere until you feel them. It is fear. What we are conditioned with in our society as women is that we aren't allowed to have these strong emotions, and if we do there is something wrong with us or we get called the "b" word or whatever. But those emotions were squelched in me for three decades,

so it was ugly when it came out. It's like barfing a volcano. It is ugly, and I didn't need to do that with someone else present or with him present. I was able to do that on my own.

Another thing that was happening at that time was that I was becoming re-educated about what God's Word really said about divorce, how He sees me, and His purpose for divorce being to protect me and give me an option so that I'm not an abused slave for the rest of my life. By the time I filed for divorce in June of 2018, I was ready. I had very few doubts. I knew what had to be done. Thirty-two years at that point was way beyond, "You need to just try harder." I think I'd been doing that for a while.

NATALIE: Exactly. So where are you at today? Do you have any regrets looking back? Do you wish you had done anything different, or do you feel like it had to go the way it did?

DEBBY: You know, I'm starting to rebuild my life here in Dallas. I've been here for eighteen months. That first year was really hard. I lost everything. I went from this beautiful home that I raised my kids in on six acres. I designed that house. I actually helped build it. I moved to a trailer on an asphalt postage stamp in a city that I'd never been to before, literally. But the only thing I regret is not doing it sooner. I know that sounds like a dichotomy, but it's true. I regret not realizing sooner the depth of the dysfunction. It was deep dysfunction. Something I like to say a lot is that the aggressor sets the rules. That's in anything: in war, in communication, or in relationships. The aggressor is the one who sets the rules. Whenever I see a bumper sticker that says, "Can't we all just get along?" Yeah, that would be great, except the aggressor sets the rules. So it doesn't matter that you want to get along, it's what the aggressor wants, and you must meet the aggressor where they are or you are going to get crushed every time. My husband was bringing a cannon, a bomb, to every communication, and I was bringing a feather and then wondering why I wasn't getting anywhere. But that's the best thing I can say about that. The dysfunction is very deep, and you must meet it where they are. Most of us are so beaten down by the time we recognize it that we only have feathers. That's all we have. But eventually, you move to knives and then you move to guns and then you move to a cannon, and you start establishing those boundaries.

For me, divorce was a boundary I was forced to do because all the other boundaries that I had used were not having the effect. If he had stopped being abusive anywhere along the line, we would still be married. But he didn't. He didn't even after I moved out. I finally thought, "I'm not gaining anything. If I were divorced, my life would be exactly like it is now. I'm living in a trailer. I'm supporting myself. But if I divorced, my finances would be a bit more equitable." When I finally realized that, there was no reason not to

file because I wasn't gaining anything by not filing.

NATALIE: Right. You are not legally protected. I hate it that churches will compromise and say it's okay if you are separated from your abuser for the rest of your life, but they will not support an abuse target if she gets legal protection through a divorce. That's what a divorce does. It protects you legally from being taken advantage of by an abusive person in a life-saving divorce, as Gretchen Baskerville would say.

DEBBY: Well, the church is only interested in their statistics. How many marriages have survived in our church? I'm sure a lot of them have, but are they quality relationships where one person isn't being systematically destroyed?

NATALIE: Exactly. I think I would also argue that there is a problem with our definition of what marriage is. Is marriage just a contract between two people? If that's the case, then why do we not have child brides? (There are some people who do.) If that's all that marriage is, "You've got a contract, you made a vow before God, so that is your marriage," that isn't marriage. The way God designed marriage is so much more than just a piece of paper between two people, and Christian marriage for sure. But I think our definition of marriage is completely skewed, and our understanding of what separation and divorce is according to the Bible is completely inaccurate and taught all wrong. Yet, people refuse to go back to the drawing board and learn what it really says about these things because we just believe what someone in our denomination taught us. They are only teaching us what they learned from someone in their seminary. It's mind blowing when you think of how we've all been manipulated and sold a bunch of lies.

DEBBY: There's a lot of great information out there now that will help women to combat those lies. Your talk in Hurst was one of the best. I'm hoping you're going to do a whole podcast just with that section you were talking about with spiritual renewal. I took notes furiously. It was amazing information.

NATALIE: Was that the very first talk?

DEBBY: No, this was on Saturday.

NATALIE: Well, I am leaking different things out from those talks through the podcast, so we'll see. I've thought about doing more in the faith area because people are really struggling in their faith and they are also really struggling in their parenting. I've decided to focus on parenting now, so you'll see some podcasts and articles on parenting. You're out of that stage now, but there are so many women... Because you

are traumatized and your kids are traumatized, how do you even begin to parent when you yourself may not have even been parented well and everything you've learned about parenting is bad? Plus, the way the abusive partner is parenting is not healthy. It's a mess. Let's close with one thing. What would be one piece of advice you would give to someone contemplating leaving for good?

DEBBY: From my own experience, this was helpful for me: When you make the decision to leave, understand that just because things seem ugly and difficult, that doesn't mean that you are making a wrong decision. We are so trained with the false idea that as long as we are following God everything will look, sound, and smell wonderful, and when things aren't that way, when they are in fact the opposite and are ugly and difficult, we have a tendency to think that God must not be pleased. But that is a lie. It is going to be difficult, and it is going to be ugly, but it doesn't mean that you are making the wrong decision.

I look at it like this. Digging out of a deep hole is way harder than standing in it and having dirt slowly thrown on you, which is basically what happened to me over the years. I was in a deep hole. I didn't realize it. Dirt was slowly being thrown on me until I was encapsulated in it. If I want to get out of that, it's going to be a lot of difficult, messy, dirty work. But getting out of it is the most important work you are ever going to do. It is an effort that will impact you for the rest of your life in a positive way. I say to be brave. Let us and let Natalie support you. You are not always going to feel this way, I promise. Natalie and our group are here to help you in any way we can.

NATALIE: That was a phenomenal analogy. I absolutely love that. I'm going to remember that and offer that to people in the future. Debby, I can't tell you how grateful I am for you coming on here. This is pure gold. I'm excited to get this out to people. I think it will be so encouraging, not just your story but the wisdom and insight that you have gleaned and have shared in this one episode is fantastic. Thank you so much.

DEBBY: Thank you. I'm happy to help in any way I can, Natalie. I really appreciate it.

NATALIE: And the rest of you, until next time, fly free!