

## SEVEN THINGS AN ABUSER DOES WHEN YOU SET BOUNDARIES

*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 62 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have a lesson for you from a blog post that I wrote a couple of years ago called "Seven Predictable Things Your Emotional Abuser Does When You Set Boundaries." I had originally written a couple of articles that focused on the abuse target, the stages of healing that she goes through, as well as the ten steps she must take to get out of the pit of abuse hell. But today we're going to focus on the emotional abuser and the predictable things he does when his target begins to wake up and set enforceable boundaries.

We must start with the abuse cycle. Think about a circle that goes around and around, and both partners are participating in the never-ending spin. One side of the circle is the good side (and by the way, it's not really good), which is when things seem to be going well. The abuse target is on her best behavior trying not to rock the boat. She is trying not to need him to come through in any way. She's trying to placate and manage his emotions. She is largely being successful in that particular moment.

The other side of the abuse circle is the bad side. That is when things are falling apart. The abuse target might need something. She may have had a bad day. She may have given her abuser some feedback that he didn't like, and the emotional abuser will attack her with shaming, blaming, denial, accusation, minimalizing, mutualizing, or diverting words and behaviors. Remember, if you have a healthy relationship, there is no abuse cycle going on, there is no good and bad side. It's not a circle. It actually looks more like a line with two people who are progressing forward, side-by-side, always able to work through conflict with respect and empathy for one another. That is a healthy relationship. If you have ever felt like, "Oh my word, we keep going in the same circle over and over again," you know that your relationship is not healthy.

That cycle is going to continue to spin in an abusive relationship until one partner makes a choice to do things differently. I can tell you that the partner who makes that choice is not going to be the abuser. The abuser is the one who keeps making it spin around in circles. That means the abuse target is going to have to make a breakout attempt. This is when she asserts the truth of who she is. She shows up in the relationship as who she is in her own separate self and what she believes. She defines herself rather than allowing her emotionally or spiritually abusive partner to define

who she is. Then she sets a healthy boundary that causes her to step outside of the abuse cycle.

A boundary violation is when someone comes into your space, the space of who you are. It's the sphere of what you are responsible for, which is basically yourself. They come into that space and they try to control you. That's a boundary violation. What you can do, then, is to set a boundary by stating what you will and will not tolerate and then also stating the consequence that you will enforce if your requested boundary is not respected. Setting boundaries, at first, especially with an abuser, is very difficult and challenging because you know instinctively that if you say no to them, set a boundary, or show up as yourself that there is going to be some kick back.

I'm going to give you an example here. Let's say he tells you that you can't spend the money that you are earning from your new job without asking his permission and that you have to put all of that money into an account that only he controls. That is a boundary violation because it is setting into your... You get to decide how you spend the money that you are earning. In a healthy relationship, you would both make those decisions together about how you spend that money and how you save that money. I'm in a healthy relationship right now. I am remarried, and I make a different income than my husband does. We have talked about those things together. I have my own separate account. I have my own separate savings account. We contribute mutually in a very respectful and honoring way to our needs that we have as a family. But we also have control over our own money.

This is one way that she could set a boundary. She could say, "I'm an adult woman earning money. So I'm going to make adult decisions on my own about how I spend that money. We can share it and discuss our budget together like two adults, but I will not be asking permission to spend my money on something that I need for myself, for the family, or for the household." Then she can walk away because she doesn't really need to listen to what comes out next.

Here's what the response will usually be. This is called predictable thing number one. The emotional abuser is going to growl, bark, and have a temper tantrum. How dare his little ding-dong wifey define her own self? That's his job as the "head of the home," the "king of the hill," the "grand poohbah." He is going to bark and growl, stomp his feet, and fling accusations and a few choice Bible verses at her back as she makes her exit. He's not a happy camper, and he's going to work hard to make sure that his target emotionally pays for stepping outside his definition of who she is.

The abuse target has one of two choices here. First, she could get back into her place in

the circle of abuse and bring equilibrium back into the equation by placating her partner. This is what often happens, and this is why the circle works so well for her emotional abuser. He knows the exact Bible verses that are going to make her feel guilty. He knows that his lack of affection will make her feel lonely. He knows that his well-selected accusations will make her feel shame. All these negative feelings are going to pull her back into the circle like strong magnets, and round and round they will continue to spin.

Or second, she can do this: implement an enforceable consequence. Here's an example. She tells him that if he continues to berate her or give her the silent treatment that she will take away from him something that he likes, something that she provides to make his life beautiful. This makes me think of the song by Taylor Swift, "This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things." You've got to listen to that song if you haven't heard that yet. It's fun. In this case, she opens her own checking account and has her paycheck direct-deposited into that account. She wanted to work together with her partner, but he wasn't interested in that. Now she must make the adult decision to take responsibility for her own income. She gets herself off his credit card accounts, opens her own credit card account, and begins to build her own credit rating.

Here's another example. She might decide not to sleep with him until he has some time to think about what it means to respect her as a separate person from him. She tells him if he is unwilling to be emotionally safe with her, she won't be able to give herself to him in that intimate way. She is learning how to adult!

Here is the predictable thing number two: the emotional abuser is going to pull a two-facer. This is a confusing stunt for the target, and here's how it goes down. He senses her pulling away and becoming more independent (plus he likes the free sex), so he may fain an apology. On the other hand, he also shames her for pulling away and not giving him his marital due. This may be in the form of texts or maybe a letter that contains both apologies and shaming. These communications are usually somewhat incoherent, so don't be surprised if you aren't quite sure exactly what they are attempting to say. He may verbalize an accusatory apology like, "Well, I'm sorry that you thought I was trying to control you."

But a few minutes later he may passive aggressively comment on how he never gets to buy a new shirt because he sacrifices so much for the good of the family or that he is now tempted to watch porn again because he's got needs that she isn't meeting. His abuse will get more covert and less obvious. It will be more passive aggressive. He is pig-biting mad, but he wants to make it appear that she is the naughty little selfish girl while he is the uber-nice victim. It will become much harder to pin down the abuse. But

thank goodness for books like “The Verbally Abusive Relationship.” That is going to help the real target spot all the subtle tactics.

The abuse target has one of two choices here. First, she could slink back into the circle of abuse with her tail between her legs, feeling horribly guilty and sad for her rebellious, selfish, and unloving ways. Or two, she could hold steady. She can sit with the uncomfortable feelings of false guilt and shame and instead be curious about why she feels guilty in the first place. I would recommend she talk with her therapist about what it is inside of her that requires her partner’s approval. She can learn to tolerate her partner’s covert disapproval. She can refuse to accept his half-assed apologies (which really aren’t apologies at all). He’s not going to like this. He thinks he’s Mr. Big-Humble-Mac with a side of perfect fries and awesome sauce. Who does his little woman think she is to question his authenticity, especially after all he’s done for her over the years? Hold it.

Hold steady because here is predictable thing number three. I call this the hoop jumper. Often at this point, the abuse target reaches out to her church or small group for some help. She needs some support. He’s making things at home even more uncomfortable as she ramps up the boundaries and the subsequent consequences. When she brings in some outside help, this is where the emotional abuser gets all wily and smiley. I call this the hoop jumper because he is going to grab this opportunity to demonstrate just how amazeballs he is while quietly throwing her under the bus in the process. It’s pretty ingenious. This is when he’ll tell you he’s going to get some counseling. He’d never go before on his own, but now that other folks are watching, he is up for the performance of his life. To everyone (including the abuse target), it appears that there is hope. He’s willing to get help. Hallelujah and praise the Lord: it’s a Christmas miracle!

The abuse target has one of two choices here. First, she can back off, believing that this is just a matter of time before he is a changed man. This is what she wants, so it’s easy to want to go to this place. She can even give a bunch of concessions out of her extreme relief and gratefulness that he is finally getting help. If they do marriage counseling together (which I don’t recommend), she can confess all her sins to her husband and counselor in hopes that he will follow her example and confess all his. This doesn’t usually work. Your vulnerability is going to be used against you in the very near future, I guarantee it.

Or two, she can do “www”: wait, watch, and wisdom. She doesn’t assume he’s going to change just because the outside pressure is on because she understands that real change comes from the inside as a result of the Holy Spirit indwelling a person and

convicting that person in a real, deep, and authentic way. She knows that going through hoops is just part of the abuser's game to get allies and break her down further. He wants revenge and he knows how he can get it, which is exactly what he does next.

This is predictable thing number four, and I call this the big sneak. His abuse becomes even more covert. Now he is putting on a show, so he becomes "Mr. Great Dad," "Mr. Giver," "Mr. Showing Up," "Mr. Bible Reader," "Mr. Prayer Warrior," and "Mr. Guy Smiley" in the eyes of everyone else except the target. Behind closed doors, he is still blaming her, shaming her, denying responsibility, mutualizing all the marriage problems, insisting on his innocence and goodness, and doing all he can to break her down spiritually and emotionally in the most covert ways possible.

If she tries to explain these subtle tactics to those on the outside, they look at her like she is crazy. Here he is appearing to be doing fabulous to them. What is her problem? Is she unforgiving? Is she bitter? She has high expectations. Is she ungrateful? Maybe she has Jezebel syndrome. Maybe she has borderline personality disorder. Whatever it is, she is the sinner now. His sneakiness pays off. He successfully pulls the wool over many eyes.

The abuse target has one of two choices here. First, she can go back to the abuse cycle, feeling that she has no strength to fight not only him now but everyone else as well. Or two, she can make this happen: the adult shows up. This is when the abuse target begins to show up as an adult in the situation. She senses everything slipping away, and she makes the decision to go for all or nothing. This empowers her to establish even more powerful consequences in a last attempt to demonstrate the seriousness of this issue. It's here that she will often choose to separate from him. She is now ready to take her last stand, finally accepting the fact that she cannot control her abusive partner and his flying monkeys. But she can control her own choices and what she will or will not put up with from here on out.

This causes predictable thing number five: the bully shows up. The emotional abuser now lets his anger rip. He no longer tries to make her believe that he has changed. He begins to experiment with a smear campaign, gathering as much ammo as possible from her journals, the intimate things she has shared with him, the sins that she has confessed in the counseling office, and all her emotional triggers he has historically used to manipulate her. He starts to spread made-up stories of all these different parts. They are sort of true, but definitely twisted out of context. These stories are crafted to make her appear to be emotionally unstable, unspiritual, unforgiving, and bitchy. He flings sandbox sand and toys every which way in his all-out attempt to wreak havoc on her for daring to separate from him and humiliate him. The abuse target almost never

goes back at this point. Instead, she instigates the explosion. She files for divorce. Now the you-know-what really hits the fan.

The emotional abuser has been prepping for this moment, and he launches predictable thing number six: the smear campaign. This is more than just saying a few bad things about her to the folks at church. This is his all-out attempt to turn her children, her family, her friends, her counselor, her pastors, and everyone she ever knew against her. If she goes to a conservative church that preaches men are amazeballs authorities and heads over women (twisting scripture to suit them), this is where she gets to be church-disciplined for not keeping quiet and submissive under oppression. By the way, I recommend the book "Fraudulent Authority" by Wade Burleson if you are going through this.

Now that she is escaping his controlling clutch, he's got one goal: destroy her. Ruin her financially, ruin her reputation, ruin her children's emotional health, ruin her health with his fear mongering during this divorce process. Fire, fire, fire. This is the crucible during which this woman will die and then be reborn. This is the worst part. This is the climax or the final battle, but this is also where the really good stuff happens. This is the great transformation.

She does get help at this point, often not from her Christian community but from the secular community. There is also a wonderful community of Christian women in the Flying Free Sisterhood group. You can find out more information about this group by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com). She begins to get some counseling and heal. Now she recognizes dysfunctional people more easily. She begins to navigate her new relationships as a healthy woman. She grieves, and then she gets to the place where she accepts the losses she has endured and becomes a stronger and wiser woman. Her relationship with God heals. She learns that He is not abusive like her pastors or her former husband. She discovers the true God, Jesus Christ, Who is her true shepherd. As time goes by, she gets healthier and healthier. She finds joy and meaning in a new career. Her children often get counseling, recover, and learn relationship skills that will serve them well into adulthood. The abuse target is no longer a target. She has moved forward into her new life.

But the abuser? This is predictable thing number seven, and we call this the switcheroo. He moves on as well: to his next target. He hasn't learned anything new about himself or about relationships. He's perfect just the way he is, and now he's going to show his next target just how amazeballs he is.

Those are the seven predictable things your abuser will do if you decide to make a

break from the cycle of abuse. These might not happen in this exact order. Everyone's situation is different. But this is the pattern that I've seen over and over and over again in the lives of the women I've talked to. It happened to me as well. There is life after emotional and spiritual abuse, I promise. John 10:10 says, "The thief comes only in order to steal and kill and destroy; but I came that they may have and enjoy life and have it in abundance." Do you know what abundance means? It means to the full until it overflows.

I'd love for you to check out the Flying Free Sisterhood Community. You can apply at [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com) anytime. You can read all about it and find out how joining will benefit your spiritual and emotional health. That's all I have for you today. Thanks for listening and fly free!