

HOW TO RESPOND TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE TACTICS

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 64 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Rachel and Rebecca, and we're going to have a conversation that is going to be super practical and helpful for you. We're going to talk about tactics that emotional abusers typically use to wreak havoc on their abuser target's life. We're going to talk about specific tactics and practical ways that you can handle some of these tactics that will leave you feeling like you have some autonomy and power. So often they apply these tactics in our life and we are just decimated by them. We want to figure out ways we can set boundaries and feel strong even when these guys are spinning in their little tornado worlds and applying tactics to us. We don't want to get involved in their little tornados anymore. We want to get out of the tornado and watch them from a third-party perspective. We want to let them spin around, but we want to be able to walk away and feel good about our response.

First, I want to recommend a book called "The Verbally Abusive Relationship" by Patricia Evans. On the Flying Free Sisterhood Membership Site... which, by the way, if you want to be part of that group, you need to apply. You can learn more about it at joinflyingfree.com. In this membership site, the first lesson is called "14 Emotional Abuse Tactics." We talk about those tactics, and then the next lesson is about strategies for dealing with those tactics. But I'm going to have Rebecca and Rachel share their real-life experiences of dealing with some of these tactics with their actual partners, who are their exes now. Both Rebecca and Rachel, and myself for that matter, we have all divorced and remarried. So, we have experienced living with emotional abusers as well as living with guys who are amazing and awesome and don't treat us like that. We want to share some of our experiences with you and how we dealt with their tactics and eventually got out. Rebecca, why don't you start with a tactic?

REBECCA: I think mine would fall into the withholding category. We were married for twenty-one years. I would say it started out that any time there was an issue, a problem, or something to overcome or figure out, I would come into the conversation and try to fix it. Here's the problem. Perhaps it's logistics with kids, paying bills, or a church thing. He would just not even respond. He never engaged. What I realized later was that his tactic of not engaging was for the purpose of trying to get me angry. I realized that we had two objectives going into the conversation: mine was to fix it and

his was that it was an opportunity for him to feel better about himself if he could make me the bad guy.

I know therapists have this idea that the narcissist's problem is that the narcissist themselves are damaged people, but that's not my experience. He was just a very cruel person who felt powerful and happy with himself when he could make me or anybody else feel worthless. It took a long time because of the way I was taught to respond by the church and the southern culture: forgive, do your best, love, turn the other cheek. So when you've got a problem and someone is not responding, then when they do respond finally with something so absurd, it frustrates you even more.

Fifteen years into the marriage I finally figured out, after I had failed so miserably at holding my tongue... I think I spent fifteen years reading the Bible, praying, and asking God to help me not lose my temper instead of analyzing the situation for its logic and saying, "At the end of the day, we have two different objectives here." That is when I started making changes.

I have an analogy because you know me: I'm a schoolteacher at heart, so I have an analogy. This is what I began thinking. It's practical. I would imagine the two of us walking into the kitchen after agreeing to bake brownies together. (Just take that as "we got married.") We come into the kitchen and I get out the mixing bowl and pour in the flour. Any of you bakers know that you do the dry ingredients first. But he puts in an egg. Well, that's no big deal. We can still fix this and come out with a pan of brownies. So I add in the chocolate, the cocoa powder. Then he adds in tomato sauce.

RACHEL: Eww!

REBECCA: I'm thinking, "Wait a second! That's not going to come out as brownies because he's making lasagna. I'm making brownies, but he's making lasagna." When I was able to stop and recognize we were on two different planes and had two different objectives... My objective is to have a happy, loving, peaceful marriage, raise kids and enjoy our time together, work through problems and grow closer... and that is "brownies," by the way. His objective is "lasagna," which is that he needs to be self-gratified and the cost doesn't matter, but he feels he gets the best self-gratification when he can put me down, confuse me, make me the bad guy, and make my life miserable.

When I was able to recognize the two, I would say in my head, "We're about to talk and he's going to be making lasagna and I'm going to be making brownies. What do I need to do here?" Sadly, it took years before I divorced. But there was never a relationship

between us. I truly don't believe there is a relationship between abusers and victims because there is no intimacy. I ended up just fixing the problems myself until I realized that wasn't how you were to go through life in a marriage. Then I got out.

NATALIE: Did you say anything to him when he would do stuff? How did you change the way you responded to him?

REBECCA: First, I knew that his lasagna always made me lose my temper. So once he put in that tomato sauce, I was revved up and ready to go. I realized I needed to avoid that, so instead of even engaging I would bring up the problem and then tell him, "This is the solution I am going to proceed with." Then I walked away. I did not engage with him. I did this for about six years before I got out. But I recognized if I allowed him in, it would make everything ten times worse.

This was at a point where we had been going to church... We went to church all 21 years. But before this, I had talked to a pastor's wife and some other male deacons in the church trying to get help. They always turned it back around to, "You need to submit to him, whatever he says goes, just have more sex with him, yada yada yada." I was almost to the point where I cocooned myself, and the only way I was going to raise five kids and survive was to make the decisions and do what I needed to do. The only thing that backfired was that I was immediately labeled the rebellious woman because I was making the decisions. But he wouldn't work, so I had to make the decision to work and put food on the table. I was in a catch 22. I would say even in the process of really coming to understand after reading a lot of books on narcissism and things like that, I realized not just losing my temper, but that that was not a good response, either. It took me a few years to just change how I responded, but basically, I just didn't interact with him.

RACHEL: You don't have much of a choice.

REBECCA: Right. That's why you just can't say you have to stay in a marriage where you can't... Honestly, before this podcast, I took a great deal of time thinking about "Had I ever had an intimate conversation with this man?" In 21 years I never had an intimate conversation. I know I had a really bad, abusive husband, but I was always trying to put that nice Christian foot forward and do what the church told me to do, do what I thought the Bible was telling me to do. But I found that walking away and not engaging. He would also try to make a fight, and I would walk away. I just didn't engage.

NATALIE: This also means that you must give up something. We get angry, at least I get angry, because something is not going my way, I am trying to control something.

Someone is not cooperating, and they have to do what I want them to do. These guys are never going to do anything you want them to do. They want to control you and not the other way around. But we must give up our control, too. It's important that this goes both ways. They can do what they want to do.

Let's say, for example, that they want to control the finances and not let you spend money. That was one of the things that I had dealt with, but I was making my own money. Rather than getting mad about that, I just became an adult. I opened my own account and started putting my paycheck into my account. When he had a cow about it, I just said, "Okay. I'm sorry you don't like that, but that's what I'm doing now."

REBECCA: That is exactly what I mean by taking control of the situation. I looked at it and thought, whether it was putting food on the table or logistically taking care of our kids... In so many ways the church uses the whole submission myth and the whole headship thing and turns it around into a debilitation of women. In some ways, we are no more than a little bit older than our oldest child. That is the functionality. We are like the oldest child in the group with the most responsibilities, but we have absolutely no power to say or do or control the situation, which is not marriage.

For me, it was just taking that control. It took me years to realize I could take the ultimate control and divorce, not because I'm just a mean person but because it was so unhealthy. I felt very conflicted. I remember feeling it was the only way I could protect my kids, the only way I could put food on the table, the only way I could deal with this person. But that also means I can't be the Christian I believe in, if that makes sense. I can't be that submissive wife. I can't be that one that just follows the "spiritual leader" of our home.

NATALIE: But that whole idea, again, it comes back to the whole control thing: you can't control other people. You shouldn't. By the way, if anyone is listening and they think, "Oh my gosh. Heretics," we've talked about this in the past. My website has articles. There are tons of books written about this. The whole submission idea is not biblical. If you think it is biblical, it is definitely not biblical. It is the exact opposite of what Jesus Christ came to bring. I think the New Testament is clearer on that than people think. It is just that we have been brainwashed to read verses in a certain way. I don't want to get into that whole thing.

But my point is that we must control ourselves. So when you decide to get divorced, what you are doing is not to say, "I'm going to power over you, husband, and I'm going to divorce you." That's not what divorce is. Divorce is saying (a life-saving divorce, not one where I'm just going to go have a fling with someone and then divorce my partner)

that, "You have controlled me, treated me dishonorably and like I'm a child. You've done your own thing. You have not worked as a partner with me. You've refused to do that for several decades. I am responsible for myself and I need to get away from a person who is not allowing me to be responsible for myself as God requires of me." You are taking back control of yourself when you get a divorce.

I wanted to point that out because we are talking about control. I want to make sure everyone understands we are talking about controlling only yourself. When you let someone else control you, you are not taking control of yourself. You are not taking responsibility for yourself. You are giving your responsibility for yourself to somebody else. That's not appropriate and that's not going to serve you well in your life.

REBECCA: I'll give you a more specific example so what I'm trying to convey is a little clearer. My ex refused to work. I know that's very uncommon. When I say that, people say, "What do you mean?" like it is unbelievable. I would answer, "You tell me how you get somebody to work. You can't make someone else work, right?" The problem in our marriage is that there was \$3 in the bank, the lights were going to be cut off, we were going to be evicted, and when I asked him to help me figure it out, he would stonewall, say nothing, and look at me like I was insane.

Instead of going to the one who was causing the problem to figure it out, I had to take control and save my home (just like Abigail, I was married to a fool) and save my kids lives by getting a job and paying the bills and making the decisions without consulting him. I have an amazing husband today. We talk about everything. In fact, it is enjoyable to talk about everything. He knows more about me than any human being on this earth, and I love that. We take three walks every day walking the dog. We just talk. That is a healthy marriage. The other guy I tried to avoid like the plague because I knew even to be in the same room he would pick a fight, he might physically hit me, or he might start something up with the kids. We avoided him until we had the courage to take control of our own responsibilities and get out.

NATALIE: Right. Rachel, you've been so quietly listening to us blab on and on. Why don't you hop in here? What is your experience with this?

RACHEL: You were talking about control. To bring it back to those biblical principles, sometimes you don't make a connection until you start seeing things differently. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit. If you have the Holy Spirit and you are surrendered to the Holy Spirit's work in your life, self-control is something that is going to be very evident in your life. Self-control does not mean control of other people. If your husband is trying to control you, what does that say to you? Just a thought there.

But taking it back to “The Verbally Abusive Relationship,” which is a fantastic book by Patricia Evans, another tactic is countering. I know this one so well because I was always, always, always wrong. I don’t remember a lot of the conflicts in my marriage until I started to wake up because my thought was, “My husband is this amazing, smart, brilliant man, and everything he says is right. So that means when he tells me I’m wrong, he is right and I just have to get over that,” even though all my instincts were telling me something was going wrong. There was a lot of cognitive dissonance.

But there is one example towards the end when I started really seeing what was going on. You guys know that in dining rooms the chandelier is usually lower because it is designed to have a table underneath. Well, our dining room table had become misaligned with the chandelier. It was pushed over too far, so he bumped his head on the chandelier. He said, “Why did that happen?” I said, “We just need to move the dining room table.” But he said, “No, that’s not it. That can’t be it. That’s dumb.”

I said, “No, look. It’s just right under there.” By that time I was able to distance myself from his reaction because I knew I was right, and I knew there was a possibility that he might be wrong. That had finally entered the realm of my thoughts. Then he said, “Oh,” and he sort of laughed and smiled to himself. I would never dream of throwing that in his face, but he was afraid that I was about to because that’s how he was. I remember pointing it out to him. “Do you see how I am always wrong?” He didn’t really acknowledge that, but he knew that he had been exposed. That was just one example. But there were thousands of times over fourteen years where there was no doubt that he had to be right. He had to be right all the time, and I went along with it until I didn’t.

NATALIE: For those of you listening, notice that Rachel had to decide. Rachel had to start seeing herself as a separate person from him. She had to start seeing herself as being just as smart, just as wise, and just as able to see and understand things and make choices as he was instead of this whole idea that women aren’t as smart. I think in abusive relationships, that gets twisted out of control.

One of the things Patricia Evans advises you can say if your partner is arguing with you about something, has a different opinion about something, or wants to make you wrong about something is to acknowledge that it is their opinion. You can say something simple like, “So you say,” and then walk away. She recommends (and so do we) don’t get into an argument with them. You are never going to win an argument with them. There is no point in trying. You know what is true and you need to tell yourself, “Self, I know what’s true. He has a different opinion.” Tell him, “So you say,” and walk away. That drives them crazy because they want you to get mad. But they need to start seeing that you aren’t going to put up with their asshole behavior anymore.

REBECCA: Mine would do this thing repeatedly where he would walk in (granted, he never lifted a finger to work in the home or outside the home) when I was loading the dishwasher. He would start berating me on how stupid I was that I didn't know how to load a dishwasher correctly. Of course, at the beginning of the marriage I would start shaking because I would be nervous and scared. Then I would start rearranging it, but no matter how I did it, it was never the right way. Years later I would say, "Well, then I will leave it for you to do since you know how to do it," and walk away.

NATALIE: Perfect!

REBECCA: What was he going to say? That's what I started doing for everything he criticized me on. I would look at him and say, "Oh, since you know the better way to do it, I will leave it in your hands," and walk away.

NATALIE: Perfect. I love that. The other thing Patricia Evans says (which I love because I love a little bit of snark) to do when they say something, their opinion, and yours is different from theirs, is to say, "Ah-ha! So that's what you believe." If he says, "Yes, that's what I believe," you can reply mysteriously, "I see."

RACHEL: That is so good.

NATALIE: You can start having fun with this, you guys.

RACHEL: But it does take some distance. I think a key factor here is... I mean, the ability to walk away is so huge. But you must leave the game. You can't keep engaging and think that you're going to have the bandwidth in your brain to be able to implement these things because you get so caught up in their little world, their drama, and their tornado that you don't have the distance and wherewithal to be able to think of these things and to see what their behavior is because you are so caught in their game.

NATALIE: Yeah. You really do have to disengage inside your own self. This is the kind of work that we do in the Sisterhood. We re-train our minds so we can start seeing ourselves as intelligent, separate human beings from them. By the way, some people will say, "Is your group man-bashing?" No, actually. We don't focus on the guys at all. Why would we do that? Gross! We focus on ourselves. We focus on seeing who we are and what our strengths are and what we can handle ourselves in bad situations.

RACHEL: Yep.

NATALIE: One thing my ex would do is to crack a lot of jokes that he thought were

funny, and they weren't necessarily funny. Sometimes they were funny. He could be funny. But sometimes they weren't funny. They were little jabs at the kids or at me. One of Patricia Evans's recommendations is to not try to explain why you don't think it is funny because they don't care. They don't care and they aren't going to say, "I'm so sorry." Are they ever going to say, "I'm so sorry, I didn't realize that wasn't funny to you"? They aren't ever going to say that, so don't try to explain it to them. Instead, say to them, "Now that you've said that, do you feel more important?"

REBECCA: That's good!

NATALIE: And walk away. This is like playing tennis. You hit the ball back into their court and you walk off the tennis court.

RACHEL: It is difficult, though. For me, I felt so mean when I stopped engaging because I felt like it was my job. Whatever he said I needed to respond, and if I walked away then I was the problem.

NATALIE: How did you get over that?

RACHEL: It took a lot of information about what was going on. I had to start waking up and seeing this was the only option to what was really going on. This is what allowed him to control me, this need to keep engaging and try harder and try to see it his way. It wasn't until I finally got some information that I was able to say, "No, there is something really wrong going on here." Otherwise, I was just in his world.

But I remember that I had stopped sleeping in the same bed as him. I was in the guest room, and I remember going downstairs to get something from the bedroom just as he was going to bed. He was begging me to come to bed with him, I think probably to have sex. I knew I couldn't do that. I had resolved that I was not going to do that. But as I walked away, he was crying and on the floor. This is not an emotional man. He hates emotions, except for when it is anger, and that is okay. He had never displayed what could be perceived as strong emotion or love or desperation. I remember walking away and holding firm. I was proud of myself but also devastated. I walked upstairs and cried because I felt like the meanest person in the world. But I knew that was the only response that was going to work. I couldn't give in to him because I had done that over and over and over again, and it never made a difference.

NATALIE: So what difference did it make that time? After that happened, what was the result of that?

RACHEL: We were in-home separated that summer and he continued to use different tactics to try to rope me back in. But at that point I was firmly resolved that I couldn't do things on his terms anymore. But I had to be watchful because I was trying to gauge his behavior. It seemed that whatever new thing he was doing I was hopeful, but it was just a new tactic cloaked in him trying to work for our marriage. So our going out of town for a little date night made me feel hopeful and happy, but then I had to be realistic and honest with myself that his words and his heart were still evidence that he didn't understand what was going on. I had to be honest with myself and not delude myself that he was capable because the change wasn't there even though it was dressed up differently.

REBECCA: Right. I would say that my biggest change came when, as Rachel said, you stop being hopeful and believing things will be different but also by not letting other people continually push that, "You need to be hopeful, you need to give him more time" (because 21 years is not enough time). When I cut those voices out, I said I would only listen to reasonableness. "You guys have been saying this for fifteen years. Why don't you all come live with him then?"

NATALIE: Exactly! Take him in then if you love him so much. This has been good. Do either of you have anything else you want to add?

REBECCA: I'm going to add one quick thing. One of Evans's other tactics is undermining. I was going to tell the women that for me, the undermining came when he would go to people in our church, our family, and people in our neighborhood. I didn't know this until years later. He was laying the groundwork for me being crazy. He would say things like, "Would you please pray for me? My wife is so verbally abusive. She is physically abusive sometimes. The kids are in so much danger. But please don't tell her I told you. She would be mortified. I continue to pray for her every day."

So there was this whole background he was setting up so that no matter what decision I made, it was the wrong decision because everyone around me had this idea. Of course, I was busy raising five kids and working to pay the mortgage while this bum did nothing but had all this free time to go set a trap. So be careful of the undermining. I had no idea until after I was out of the marriage and his true colors came out and he ended up going to jail that all these other people started contacting me saying, "No, he was saying this about you." So there is always more going on than you think.

NATALIE: Yes. Rachel, do you have anything else you want to add?"

RACHEL: Undermining. Our son played basketball, which is from my ex-husband's

family, and there was a lot of pressure on our son to do really well in basketball. He was like seven years old or something. I remember he could never do what my ex wanted him to do in a game. In the car after a game one time I said, "Coulter, it just needs to be like this." I was trying to be really kind about encouraging him. This was countering, but it was also undermining because it was in front of our son. But my ex said, "No, it's not like that at all. Don't listen to your mom at all. She doesn't know anything about basketball." It was like that all the time, especially when he was upset about something.

When he was upset about something, just get out of the way because there was no reasoning with him. You were about to get mowed over and made to feel worthless and stupid. In "The Verbally Abusive Relationship" there are fourteen different tactics, and I have to say there was every single one of them demonstrated in my marriage at one time or another. I would encourage women to get this book and be honest about what's going on with you in your marriage and whether or not this is happening.

NATALIE: Yes.

REBECCA: What's interesting with a lot of these, and we didn't cover all fourteen, but there seems to be this thread of distancing yourself in different ways, but you have to distance (either physically, emotionally, or verbally) yourself to be able to handle someone like that. My question is, why do you want to be in a relationship like that?

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: I think Jan Silvious calls it, "Feeding them with a long-handled spoon."

REBECCA: I like that.

NATALIE: Let's close with this. It is important that you see that these kinds of tactics are cruel, abusive, and controlling. They are an invasion of your rights and your dignity as a human being. They are not worth responding to more than saying, "Stop it," and then disengaging. They are done by an emotionally immature and destructive person who does not have empathy or desire for intimacy and connection. If they desire it, they are certainly going about it the wrong way. So why would you pursue intimacy and connection with someone who is not interested in reciprocating? Finally, they are a blatant breaking of the wedding vows. I hope you can see as Rebecca pointed out now that the key to dealing with an abuser is disengagement.

REBECCA: That's the key.

NATALIE: You may or may not be able to disengage entirely if you are still living with your abuser, but that's one of the reasons women will try a separation. That's what I did. That's what Rachel did. Rebecca, did you separate before you finally filed for divorce?

REBECCA: Seven times in twenty-one years.

NATALIE: So when you separated, did you not feel the ability to think a little more clearly about things?

REBECCA: I did. The separation worked best towards the end when I stopped allowing the separation to be the time when the church took control instead of my husband being in control.

NATALIE: Yes. I'm so glad you said that. I agree. The first year of my separation, the church was controlling everything I did. The second year, I was alone: me and the Lord. That's when I grew up. I grew up and I got the strength that second year to file for divorce.

REBECCA: And now we are all making brownies.

NATALIE: That's why we're all making brownies. That's a great way to end this.

REBECCA: I feel guilty for craving pasta.

NATALIE: Well, listeners, this episode of the Flying Free Podcast is made possible by the private Flying Free Sisterhood Education and Support Community, which offers courses, expert workshops, live coaching, and more for women of faith seeking hope and healing from emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships and communities. You can find out more at joinflyingfree.com. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!