

SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH A HUSBAND WHO BLAMES YOU FOR EVERYTHING

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 69 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have Rachel and Becky here with me, and we're going to be answering a listener question that has many questions in it. There are so many things to talk about. This could be triggering for some of you, though, so brace yourselves. This triggered me because I could relate to so many things that she asked. The woman who wrote in has been in and out of therapy for several years, both by herself as well as co-therapy with her husband. She is coming at this from the perspective of being a person who wants things to work. She believes that her husband is trying and she believes that her husband is changing, but she said he still blames her and tries to control her. She said she feels the counseling has helped him to temper his rage. She says she's been practicing healthy boundaries, but she has been accused of pulling away from her husband. The counselor is telling her that it is her fault because she has childhood triggers.

In other words, she is interpreting his abuse incorrectly due to her own issues, and the way that she is presenting her boundaries is triggering her husband. I have so many things I want to say right now, but I'm going to hold back. Then the counselor tells her to have boundaries in place so that she won't feel the shame and the blame, because her pain is caused by her past and it's not being caused by what's happening in her present. The counselor has further told her that both her husband and she are right in their perspectives: nobody is wrong here. They both have their own perspectives and they are both right, and she needs to stop expecting that only her husband must work on his stuff, because she obviously has things she needs to work on as well.

Then she writes that she is confused. I wonder why?! She doesn't know where her responsibility begins and ends. She is losing sleep and has anxiety and depression. Again, there are so many layers that we can talk about here. I think we need to talk about whether her husband is actually changing, and what does change actually look like? I think there is confusion surrounding what boundaries are. I think she has been placed in the quintessential catch-22 where she is told to have boundaries, but when she does have boundaries she is being scolded for pulling away. She is also being scolded for not presenting her boundaries properly. So have boundaries, but make sure that you are presenting them properly. She is told that nobody is right or wrong in the situation, yet she is being scolded and told that she is wrong in a lot of things. This

is creating all kinds of cognitive dissonance in her mind, and I believe that is what is causing her anxiety and depression. Where do we even want to start?

BECKY: Then there is the whole counselor thing.

RACHEL: Yeah, the counselor says that she is being abused if I remember correctly. He acknowledged that, right?

NATALIE: Yeah.

RACHEL: And yet, he obviously doesn't know what that really means.

NATALIE: Or that it is wrong, apparently.

RACHEL: Right. It's okay to acknowledge that you are abused and then just continue.

BECKY: So the counselor looks like he has cognitive dissonance. "You're abused, but you're both equally responsible for this problem." I've experienced that. I'm sure you girls have, too.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's just crazy.

RACHEL: I can feel the anxiety rising in my chest as you read that. I feel so badly for this woman and others who are in situations like this. No wonder she is confused. There is a reason for that.

BECKY: I will jump on the boundaries for a second because it took me years to really grasp what boundaries were. I'll tell you what I used to think of boundaries. I've thought many things. But one thing I realized even in the last year that I was doing was saying... My boundary would look like, "If you, then I." I realized in the last year that I don't even need to condition it because that is, again, trying to control their response. So instead my boundary is, "I will." Not "if you," but "I will." So I will not accept somebody doing such-and-such to me. Let's say berating or shaming. Let's say in a conversation your husband is shaming you: "I'm sorry. I will not proceed in this conversation while you are shaming me." Not "If you shame me, I will..." I don't know if you get the distinction. In the first, I was still in that mindset that I had to be responsible for his behavior. In the second mindset of "I will not put up with this," it's more like "No, I am not taking responsibility for your behavior. I am taking full responsibility for my behavior."

RACHEL: An important distinction there.

NATALIE: Like you are saying, you don't have to communicate all your boundaries. They are just there. It would be like if you use the idea of someone coming into your yard or walking into your home. That's a boundary. You can't just come walking into my home. I'm going to tell you to leave, and if you don't leave I am going to call the police because you just walked into my home. You don't have a right to do that. I'm not going to go around to all of my neighbors and say, "By the way, I'm just going to let you know what my boundary is. You can't come into my home without knocking first." I'm not going to do that.

BECKY: Right.

RACHEL: Exactly.

BECKY: That's part of the abuse both by the counselor and the husband. It's not allowing her to be an individual who has the same rights as they have. When someone starts telling you that you don't have a right to certain boundaries, they are telling you that you don't have a right to be human. You have a right to whatever boundaries you want to put in your life. That's your decision. If they are trying to tell you different, they are trying to control you. That's not their business. There is God in heaven and that is His business, not theirs.

RACHEL: Another part of this that is so confusing is the fact that they brought up her childhood trauma and how that is the lens that she is apparently looking at things through. What a confusing circle of doubt that places her in, because if her entire perception of events is being questioned because of things she went through in the past, what is she even supposed to do? What is real and what is not? I have childhood trauma and you guys do as well. I think I can speak for all of us in our relationships now that are with healthy men, we are able to see what is from the childhood trauma versus what is real. That's because we've done the work, but it is only when we were able to get out that we were able to do the work.

BECKY: The very last counselor that I saw with my ex was a woman. It was very terrible. I think counselors immediately want to latch on to something that they in their education or experience know how to work with. When our problems come up like this emotional, covert abuse, I don't think a lot of therapists or counselors know how to handle that. So when they hear childhood trauma, "Oh, latch. I can work with that."

I was sitting there, and my ex convinced... I had a terrible childhood with a lot of abuse, but I had also worked through all of that on my own between me and God. I realized that can't define who I am and it can't define my actions. But here we are in therapy

years later, and she pulls out this big whiteboard. "What's the name of your father? What's the name of your mother? What's the name of your grandfather? What's the name of your grandmother?" She wants to connect the dysfunction in the family and how I got it. Finally after about twenty minutes I said, "Ma'am, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but this is not the problem. I have worked through those issues. Those are not the problem. I am not the problem. I am doing my part. I am being responsible for myself and my behavior. I am not 100% wonderful at responding, but I apologize when needed. I ask forgiveness. That's not what we are here for."

I remember as clear as day that she just... And she was not a good therapist because she really wanted to take his side. I think when a therapist latches onto childhood trauma (and I am not discounting that at all)... But at some point we have to say, "Yes, that is childhood trauma, but that does not define me and it does not define my responses. If it does, I will deal with that, but that has nothing to do with the way he is treating me."

NATALIE: Right. It sounds like he's got issues with rage. Again, his rage is not because of her childhood trauma. What I noticed throughout the whole thing is that she is being blamed not only by her husband but the responsibility for everything is being put on her. Here is what she is responsible for according to them: She is responsible for triggering her husband's rage. He is not responsible for his rage. He is not responsible for how he blames her and shames her, she is. She is responsible for not putting boundaries in place, but when she does put boundaries in place, she is responsible for pulling away and having boundaries. She gets scolded either way for that. She is also responsible for incorrectly talking about her boundaries. I remember feeling like this in my relationship and when I was dealing with other people, too. I was on a high wire. If I moved even the slightest centimeter to the right, I would fall off. If I moved the slightest centimeter to the left, I would fall off. Either way I would fall off. Trying to walk that wire while also parenting, while also working, while also homeschooling, while also trying to volunteer at church, I couldn't do it! Nobody can do that! Nobody!

BECKY: She is in a no-win situation.

NATALIE: You are. It's a no-win situation.

BECKY: She must make that decision to leave that game and start a new game, a new path. I think that's the bottom line, and it's the hardest thing in the world to do, to become everything that we were taught we were not allowed to be: to be brave, stand up for yourself, and draw the lines. You know what it is, it is being in charge. She must be in charge of herself and her situation. We are taught our whole lives in the Christian

world, “No, no, no. You are not in charge. You just do what the man says. You just do what the authorities say.” I don’t know about you girls, but I had to... You know they talk about women breaking glass ceilings? I had to break all these glass ceilings in my life and get past thinking I had no rights or that it was sinful for me to stand up for myself. It doesn’t happen overnight. I really want her to know that this is a long pathway, but it is a wonderful pathway.

NATALIE: Piggybacking off that, if you are listening to this, or anyone else that this might apply to, I know that you wrote that you want to make this work, but if making this work means that you have to lose yourself, that you have to give up all control of your own life, this is renegeing on your own responsibility to yourself, who God actually put you in charge of. He didn’t put you in charge of your husband. He didn’t put you in charge of your counselor. He didn’t put you in charge of your church. He put you in charge of you. So this would be saying, “Okay, I’m not going to be in charge of me anymore. I’m going to let the counselor decide for me. I’m going to let my husband decide if he’s changed or not. If he says he’s changed, he must have changed. I’m going to let everybody else control my life because that’s what I’m used to doing. That’s how I feel safe. I can feel loved. I can feel like people are involved in my life as long as I do what they want me to do.”

If that’s what you want, you can keep doing your coping mechanisms. But it sounds to me like you are saying that you are anxious, riddled with anxiety and depression. It sounds to me like it is not working for you. If that’s the case and you want something different, the key is that you need to start taking control of your own life. You need to tell the counselor, “No, you don’t get to decide for me what is real and what isn’t. I do. I decide what I have experienced. I decide if I’m going to feel good about what my husband is doing to me or how he is treating me or if I’m going to feel not good about that. If I don’t feel good about that, I get to say I’m not going to be around that kind of treatment anymore. I choose to say ‘No!’ You, counselor, can decide for yourself that both my husband and I are right and that we just have different perspectives, and that’s great for you. That’s a great decision for you to make for you. Maybe my husband likes that too. Maybe he likes to make that decision for himself. But for me, I’m choosing something different. I’m going to choose to believe that when I am treated like crap that I get to feel that and acknowledge that it’s a crappy way of being treated, and I’m not going to put up with that behavior. If someone is going to treat me like that, I will remove myself from the situation. I’m going to hang out with people who treat me with respect because I have self-respect because I can, because I don’t have to be controlled by everybody else in my life. I actually get to control my own life.” If you think that feels rebellious, then that maybe won’t feel good to you. But then I would challenge you with changing your paradigm about what rebellion actually is and what it isn’t.

BECKY: This is a side note, and it's a funny one I will share with your audience. My daughter is in college and she takes a lot of Bible classes. She said to me last night, "Do you know what the definition of heresy really is, mom?" I said, "What's that, honey?" She said, "It's just thinking for yourself sometimes." It's funny, because to really stand up for yourself you must start recognizing that some belief systems that you have might not be right or are belief systems that actually harm you. It takes a lot of courage.

NATALIE: I think her main question here was that she wasn't sure where her responsibility began and where it ended. This is a person who is very conscientious, and she wants to know. I don't know if this person has read the article I wrote recently on the superpowers that most survivors have, but I would encourage you to go back and read that article. One of the superpowers is this conscientiousness. It's not a concept I came up with. It is Sandra Brown who did a study with Purdue University. Conscientiousness is one of the superpowers that survivors have. So this person is conscientious. She wants to take responsibility for her stuff.

BECKY: Absolutely.

NATALIE: What I see this woman doing is taking responsibility not just for her stuff. She is taking responsibility for her husband's reactions. The counselor is putting all the responsibility on her. The counselor is putting the man's responsibility on her and her responsibility on her. She is taking it, and that's why there is so much anxiety and depression. When you really know what is yours and what is someone else's, there is so much freedom. Most people in the world have had problematic childhoods. Some of those people go on to become abusers, and some go on to become abuse targets. But the ones that become abuse targets... We are not going to trace all abuse and all abuse-targetedness down to childhood problems.

BECKY: No, because you are not a child anymore. You're an adult, and you're making decisions about where you want your life to go.

NATALIE: Exactly. So if your husband is saying, "You triggered me and that's why I raged at you and blamed and shamed you because you triggered me. You triggered me because it is all of your childhood stuff coming up," he can say that. He can say anything. It's just words into the universe. But if you take that and make that mean that it's now your responsibility that he just raged at you, that is your choice. You get to choose whether or not you are going to make his raging your responsibility.

My advice to you is to not make that your responsibility even if everyone in your world wants to point their finger at you and say, "It's your fault, it's your fault." You have to

learn how to stand up for yourself and say, "I am going to be my own best advocate, and his raging is his choice. He gets to make that choice. He's free to rage all he wants to. I'm going to give him the freedom to rage. But I am also going to give myself the freedom to say, 'So long, rager. I'm not going to sit here in the same room with you while you are having your little snit fit.'"

RACHEL: Another thing that is so frustrating about this situation is that it exemplifies why we don't ever recommend going to marriage counseling with your abuser. If the counselor knew what he was doing he would say, "We should meet individually." It's really frustrating to see the malpractice that happens so often in these cases. She is one of thousands of women who suffer needlessly because the counselor does not know what he is doing.

NATALIE: Yeah, this counselor is a very bad counselor, wouldn't you guys say?

BECKY: Oh yeah!

RACHEL: It's confusing for her. I'm sure she feels like, "He's a nice guy. He's knows some things. He has helped me in some ways." It's never black and white.

BECKY: They don't show up in a costume saying they are a bad person.

RACHEL: Exactly. And you want to be able to trust them. You want to think that they have solutions and hope for you. So it's hard to cut yourself off and say, "Actually, this is not the best advice. He does not know what he is doing. This is not what is best for me."

NATALIE: I want to go back. When I say that counselor is a bad counselor, I'm not saying that they are a bad person. I'm just saying that they are ignorant. They don't understand the dynamic that is going on here, and they really don't understand how to set a survivor free and empower her while also putting the proper responsibility back onto the husband. So this counselor is just coming alongside of the husband in a very backwards sort of way and doing exactly what he is doing in placing the responsibility back on her.

There could be many different reasons why a counselor would do that. One would just be ignorance, lack of experience. One could be that counselor is bringing their own stuff to the table. One could be that this counselor hasn't worked through their own stuff and they are seeing things through a specific kind of lens and are not able to understand the dynamic because they have some blind spots there as well. So, not a bad person, probably, but a bad counselor for this particular kind of dynamic.

RACHEL: He just needs to learn, to educate himself. It's out there if he wants to learn it.

BECKY: This is what I have learned. Anytime a counselor says you are both wrong, that is such a huge red flag to me. Not that I think one person is always perfect. But first, that tends to go along with nouthetic counseling: no matter what, both people are wrong. If he just beat her to near death, she did something wrong in that situation. But what I do is to think of myself as... I played tennis when I was younger. So this is the visual of how I think of responsibility. Somebody hits a ball to me: the issue, the situation. Maybe it's the raging. I have to decide, "Is that mine? Do I need to catch that ball and keep it, or do I need to use my tennis racquet and send it back over the net?" How I answer that question is, "Is that something that I have in my control to change or do something with?" If not, then it is not my responsibility.

If he's raging, that's not my responsibility. I can't stop him from raging. We cannot control another person. So I use my tennis racquet and I hit that ball straight back over. I'm like a U.S. Open champion these days with sending that ball back over. I do that even with healthy relationships, because it's just human nature that wants to avoid responsibility. It takes maturity and it takes a love for somebody else more than yourself to take responsibility for your own things. So I would tell her, "When he throws something at you or when the counselor throws something at you, ask yourself the question, 'Do I have the power within myself to change the situation, the person, the whatever?'" Let's say he's raging and you're screaming at him. Well, you have the control to stop screaming. That is the responsibility you take. But you don't take the responsibility for how he is acting. It doesn't matter what you are doing. He needs to take care of his own self.

NATALIE: Right.

RACHEL: Yeah. Is there anything else from the email that we didn't get to?

NATALIE: I don't think so. I think we've covered everything.

BECKY: I thought of one more thing. In my own life I have had a relationship that I have had to put some firm boundaries around, and it has been very painful in the whole process. I've taken time to really think through it. First, it is somebody that I love dearly, so for the first time... I didn't particularly love my first husband. I had to marry him because my parents made me. So I've never fully understood the difficulty in divorcing an abuser. But breaking a relationship where you love somebody very much, I am getting.

But in the process of the whole thing, all I kept hearing is “You must choose your pain.” If you want the pain of being in the relationship, then you must acknowledge that you are going to have that pain. Or you can have the pain of not being in the relationship. Yes, that will be very painful, but it will also be so free of the abuse that you are able to deal with that pain. This is what I came to. I’m not answering for anybody else. What I came to is if I am in the pain of the relationship, I don’t have the emotional strength to deal with what is being placed on me. But the pain of being outside the relationship, although painful, allows me the wherewithal, the assets, the time, and the energy to deal with the emotions and the sorrow. Sorrow is a lot easier to deal with than the complete confusion of control and abuse.

NATALIE: I love that. That is beautiful. The other thing is that when you are out, you have the capacity to deal with it, but it is also like grief. Grief is very strong and painful at the beginning, but as you walk through it, it eases and gets better. A few years down the road that pain is very minimal or it is gone and you can look back on it with wisdom and insight, but you no longer experience that acute sense of pain.

BECKY: I think it also helps you realize when new relationships come into your life. I’m not talking about a new husband, necessarily. I’m talking any relationship: friend, co-worker, love interest, whatever. I think you get a lot more clarity the more you can choose your pain wisely, so to speak, choose your boundaries wisely, and understand your responsibility more. Five years out I really have a much better group of friends in my life. I have a much better culture around me because I don’t have... Unfortunately, I was choosing friends that were very similar to my ex-husband. I think there are some extra bonuses there when you choose the pain of not having the relationship.

NATALIE: This has been a great episode. I hope people got a lot out of it. This episode and most of the episodes of the Flying Free Podcast are sponsored by the funds that come in from the private Flying Free Sisterhood Education and Support Community. You can apply to join the group if you go to joinflyingfree.com. This group offers courses, expert workshops every month, live events, and weekly coaching opportunities all for a very small, nominal fee. It’s been an incredible tool for so many women. After a year of being in it, so many women say they feel like a completely different person. So if you feel like you are ready for something that is more, if you feel like you are ready to do your transformation, let’s get into that cocoon, turn into a pile of goo, and let’s come out a butterfly. I encourage you to check it out. You can get all the details at joinflyingfree.com. Otherwise, we’re done. Until next time, fly free!