

CAN EMOTIONAL ABUSE SURVIVORS EVER LEARN TO COMPLETELY TRUST AGAIN?

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 73 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I'm with Becky and Rachel, and we're going to answer a couple of questions that I answered in the Flying Free program in one of our monthly live Q&As a couple of years ago. Every month in the Flying Free program we have a two-hour live Q&A. We get together and the women can ask any question they want to, and then I help them with those issues. This is just one of the many ways that they get education and support within that program. If you would like to learn more and apply, you can do so at joinflyingfree.com. So welcome, Becky and Rachel. Are you guys ready to get started?

BECKY: I am.

RACHEL: Let's get started.

NATALIE: Here's the first question: "After successfully escaping abuse, how do you determine that the respect or positive treatment that you receive from any new relationships are not just another wave of wolves in sheep's clothing, waiting for their opportunity to show their teeth? It doesn't feel fair or trusting to look at every person that comes through your new life now that you are healing as just another predator waiting to jump on you. Can emotional abuse survivors ever learn to completely trust again? When someone offers to help you with a task, is it possible to realize they are just genuinely wanting to help and not actually taking inventory of how many times they've offered help and now you owe them help in return? Going through life presuming that the world is always out to get you is exhausting and feels fearful and sad." What do you guys think?

RACHEL: Well, yeah. It is. It is fearful and sad that we were conditioned to think like this: "You scratch my back and I scratch your back, and I'm always going to call those accounts due. I'm always going to send you the invoice for what I've done for you," essentially. That's what emotionally abusive marriage is. It's never about unconditional love. It's about one person taking advantage of all the gifts and beauty that the other person has to offer and never allowing them to be the person they are or loving them for who they are.

I think the path that needs to be explored here is first learning to trust yourself that you aren't going to allow yourself to be put in that situation again. The way to do that is to give yourself the tools and skills to be able to evaluate people's fruit, their behavior and what they do, instead of... For myself, I listened to what my ex-husband said instead of what he did. It was always so confusing because they didn't match up. He said he was a Christian, but he had no fruits of the Spirit. He said he loved me, yet he acted with such destruction toward me every day. So learning how to trust yourself by giving yourself those abilities to read people.

This is where books like "Boundaries" come in. Understanding what your responsibility is or what is other people's responsibility, learning what is healthy behavior or what is unhealthy behavior, as well as how to respond and get people to come in or not come in. I think the other book we've recommended on here as well by Dr. Henry Cloud is "Safe People." Learning how to evaluate whether someone is safe or whether they are worthy of trust.

BECKY: That's good, Rachel. I remember thinking, especially when I met my new husband, that I was so distrustful of everyone. It's been years, so some of that time takes care of if you are healing and you have a new way of thinking. But one thing I realized early on is that my distrust was tied to this disproportionate amount of trust I thought I had to give. In my abusive situation, over the years I was hammered down to believe that I had to trust even the most egregious lies. Does that make sense? You know that old saying, "Trust, but verify?" If you're a manager, it's the best slogan ever.

RACHEL: Or with a teenager.

BECKY: We were not allowed to do that in our marriages. That is telling us, then, that we have no value, we have no place. If we come at it with, "It is okay not to trust..." It's like in a court of law where they say you are innocent until proven guilty. Why can't you do that with trust? You need to earn my trust. Instead, we have this disproportionate amount of trust we think we owe people before we even know them well enough.

My new husband was in law enforcement. I think that's an interesting lifestyle, because imagine how many people you encounter that you cannot trust? But early on he gave me some good advice. A lot of it was, "Trust, but verify," and "Don't share too much." Those two things have been key to stepping back, giving it time, and watching what happens. It's taken five years, but I've slowly (not completely), but slowly deleted most of the toxic people out of my life simply by going back and saying, "Trust, but verify." Don't feel this weight of needing to trust someone who is not trustworthy. I don't even know if that is a Christian ideal that was passed down, but "Think the best."

NATALIE: Right! I think Christians are taught to believe when we love someone, we trust them, that those two things just go hand-in-hand, which is really odd because there is a verse in the New Testament (John 2:24) that says Jesus didn't trust people because (and I believe this is an exact quote) "He knew what was in man" or "He knew what was in the heart of man." So He didn't entrust Himself to people, that's what it says. And Jesus is love. He was God and He is the essence of love. So if He didn't entrust Himself to people because He knew what was in the heart of man, then why would we just blindly do that?

BECKY: Right.

NATALIE: I'm remarried, but I don't always trust my husband to always know what is in my best interest. How could he possibly know that? He's him, and he's responsible for himself. I'm responsible for me. I'm the one who knows all the ins and outs and nuances of what I need or don't need. Like you said, Rachel, I do think we need to learn how to be responsible to ourselves, how to trust ourselves, and how to do what's best for ourselves. It's a process to do that. That's what we do in the Flying Free group. It's a process to learn and grow in having your own back.

But at the same time, when we talk about relationships with other people, we can still love people that we don't trust. I know because I love a lot of people who I do not trust. I'm not going to disclose personal information to them because I know what they would do with that information. I know that because I've learned that the hard way. We've all done that. We've all had our trust betrayed. It's not that we don't love them or spend time with them. (Sometimes we don't spend time with them because they are being very abusive.) But someone could be just a very untrustworthy person, like maybe a gossip or something like that, and we love them but we don't necessarily share information that we know they will just go out and tell everybody about.

BECKY: Or even trust them to be part of your life in certain areas. Like, there are certain people I wouldn't ask to come over and help me with something at my house because I know, for whatever reason (and there are different reasons for everybody...) But there are some people I won't allow. I don't trust them yet. It's not that I dislike them. Also, I think there is not this absolute black-and-white. There is gray. We can have lots of gray relationships. It doesn't have to be full-throttle or nothing.

RACHEL: Yes.

NATALIE: Yeah. That's so true.

RACHEL: I think it's important to remember that love means acting in someone else's best interest. We sort of have a misunderstanding of that, of what love looks like sometimes. It's important to remember, and I think that supports what you were saying, Natalie, about how you can love someone and still not trust them. But there's one more thing I think I've experienced in my own healing process. I realized that I used to project my own intentions and motivations onto other people, trying to understand them. I think that's something we do a lot. Maybe that's normal for people in general, or maybe just people who are more susceptible to being abuse victims. I don't know. It takes practice not to do that.

I must remember that other people don't have the same values that I have. They don't necessarily want to follow Jesus. They want to follow themselves or they want to serve themselves. I'm not saying that I'm all pure. But it is this naïve way of looking at the world that everyone else always has good intentions all the time. They just don't. There is evil in the world. People are evil sometimes.

BECKY: Right. We were hiring a contractor one time and I was watching how my husband was interacting with him. I thought, "Wow! I used to always assume that the contractor had my best interest in mind. My husband does not assume that. My husband assumes he has his best interest in mind, and we have to come to a middle ground so that both of our interests are served." This was just recently. I don't know if the disproportionate amount of trust I was giving people was based on the mix of the toxic Christianity rules and laws coupled with the abuse and how many years it went on and some really bad habits I formed through that. But I will tell you it has taken me... I'm five years out and I'm still learning. I don't think it is like one and done or there is a concrete answer and we all arrive at that at five years, three months, and three days. I think it's a new skill set we must learn.

RACHEL: Yeah. I agree.

NATALIE: So good. Are you guys ready for the second question?

BECKY: Sure.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: Here we go: "I saw my husband's relatives whom I thought were strong Christians turn a blind eye to the abuse. Do they have the Holy Spirit in them? Are they ignoring His voice? How can I have heard so strongly from the Holy Spirit to get out, and yet these Christians are telling me I need to stay? Are they evil or just naively in denial?"

How do I reconcile this hurt?"

BECKY: Always a good question. I've got to brag on Natalie for a second. I am taking the Flying Higher course right now, and I'm loving it because as soon as I read this question I thought, "Wait, wait, wait! She's got her facts and her feelings wrong!" I would say the first thing I would look at is that she says, "Turn a blind eye." Are these people really turning a blind eye, or are they always believing what they have always believed? Now that you believe something different, now that you recognize something different, something they may not have recognized yet nor may never recognize because our abusers are really good at hiding it, can you actually put on them the action of turning a blind eye? I don't think so.

I think you have to say, "No, they are actually just living exactly as they have always lived." They are living according to a set of rules, a set of ideals, a philosophy that you were once living in. As you are changing you see it is wrong. They haven't seen that yet. That was helpful for me. I remember a couple of people saying some very painful things when I divorced. That was some of the hardest stuff to get over. I remember that once I realized they are no different than they were the day before I decided to divorce... I was the one changing, not them.

The other thing is when she talks about the Holy Spirit's voice. I think we can all agree that the Holy Spirit is 100% correct all the time, but the problem is that we are interpreting what He is saying. If I say to Natalie, "Susie in Texas passed away yesterday," how is she going to interpret that? She doesn't know who Susie is. So her response to that is going to be completely different than mine since Susie was my best friend in this scenario. You need to think if the Holy Spirit is saying one thing to them, they are processing it through the lens of never having seen abuse. They don't even attach abuse to the word of your ex-husband's name. You can't look at someone and say, "Do they actually hear from the Holy Spirit?" They could be hearing the same exact words verbatim and have a completely different thought process to interpret that.

NATALIE: That is so good! I love that.

RACHEL: Exactly, yeah.

BECKY: So I would never say (this has been hard for me to say), but I would never say "evil" because... I do think there are evil people. Let me just tell you, my ex was evil. There were certain pastors that were evil. But people who do not understand or who are sideliners, they are in the stands watching, they have never experienced anything like it and it's not even in their vocabulary, you cannot attribute evil. You must attribute

that they are living their truth. They have a truth they believe in and they are walking in it. It just might not be completely true. You found that it wasn't true and you acted on it. You must wait for them to find it isn't true and act upon it.

RACHEL: Can I build upon that, Becky? Because I think you are exactly right, and I had an experience this week. I've been studying Revelation of all things. I was listening to a podcast about it, and the word "apocalypse..." We all have a very westernized view of that term. But it simply means an unveiling. An unveiling of Jesus Christ happens when He begins His ministry and He begins to reveal who He is. He is "apocalypsing" Himself to His followers. It is interesting if you go study it.

But Paul had an apocalypse on the road to Damascus, a personal one where God revealed Himself to Paul. Then Paul spent the rest of his life on earth trying to preach the gospel to his fellow Jews. He was ministering to the Gentiles but he had a heart for his brothers, the Jews, who rejected Christ as he once had. He was desperate to get them to understand what he knew, and they wouldn't. He knows this kind of grief. We've all sort of had an apocalypse in our lives where we've understood something that we didn't understand before. There was an unveiling of what was truly going on in our world. So trying to get people to see what they aren't ready to see and they can't see, or maybe God hasn't chosen, or they haven't chosen to open their eyes and they don't see. As Becky said, they just don't have that framework yet, and maybe they never will.

BECKY: Because the need might not ever show up in their life. The only reason we had this (I love that word, apocalypse), this unveiling of what is happening is because we had a need. We had this abuse. The abuse might have been the revealing. But beyond that, all of us have gone back and questioned. The circumstances caused us to go back and question even more. "Why did this happen? So then why did that happen?" I think being in this group there is a benefit that we, even though it is painful, have this opportunity to go further and deeper into what is really going on here. It's liberating and freeing, but a lot of people never have the cause to go deeper. Their life is working well for them, so why do they need to ask any more questions?

RACHEL: And maybe they can't handle it. Maybe that's just where they are in their journey of faith. They don't have the ability to see this, and that's okay. To build on what you said, it is a little bit of a burden to see the depths of how Satan is working in this world and how it is right in front of us. It's in the way of how people choose to align their values with his values instead of God's values. It's heartbreaking. It's alarming because it is in the church. It's in people who proclaim to be Christians, who profess.

NATALIE: This question, she was asking about relatives of her ex, which... I don't know.

My ex had relatives, one family in particular, whom I would have described and still do describe as strong Christians, but definitely grounded in a theology that I believe is problematic. Their response to our divorce was informed by that theology. So while they love Jesus, they are living their lives for Him... They are some of the nicest... I have huge respect for them. Their rejection of me, it wasn't really a rejection when I look back at it. At the time I felt like they were rejecting me personally. But when I look back on it, what they were trying to do was to get me to do what they thought I should do.

BECKY: Right, because that is the truth they live in and they feel like they need to bring you to truth the same way that you feel like you need to bring them to truth. As one wise woman said, "On this, we just need to agree to disagree."

NATALIE: Yes, and that's the thing that is difficult for survivors, especially when they are in the thick of getting out and are experiencing rejection and criticism from every angle. They've already been very much criticized and shut down in their relationship for so long. That's really a hard pill for them to swallow and it's very traumatizing for them, which is sad.

At least in the work that I do with women, I am trying to get them to the place where they can come into a place of strength on their own so that they can eventually get to the place, as we have been able to, where we can look back and say, "You know what, that wasn't about us. It was about them and where they are at. It's okay." It really hurts and everything and yet, so many good things came out of that rejection. For me, I learned how to walk on my own two feet instead of always needing the approval and acceptance and permission of everybody else. That was a hard lesson that I had never learned in my entire life. At age fifty, I had to learn that.

BECKY: It's just like when a child starts learning to walk. It's the same pain.

NATALIE: Exactly. It doesn't feel like it's even possible at first. The other thing I wanted to say is that it really isn't our responsibility to figure out where someone stands with God, where their relationship is with God. That's where I think the Christian world is a little bit messed up. Everyone is in everyone else's business. Everyone is judging everyone else and evaluating everyone else when what we should be doing is taking responsibility for our own selves. If we know that we have an intimate relationship with God and it's going well, then that's all that matters. Our job and our duty in the Christian community is simply to love and accept just as God loves and accepts us the way we are, the way they are, and to understand that their story isn't over yet.

Even for those Christians who are disparaging divorcees (people who are divorced),

they need to step back and say, "That is their journey. I don't have the right or the wisdom to understand where God is bringing them on their journey. Maybe if I focused on myself and my own journey and where God has me, I would be less concerned about judging them." The other thing is when we are constantly judging ourselves, disparaging ourselves, and shaming ourselves we are absolutely going to do that to other people.

RACHEL: Amen.

NATALIE: We are. So if you want to be more Christlike, loving, generous, holding space for people right where they are at, you must learn to do that for yourself. I see this with survivors. A lot of survivors become beautiful advocates, and they are holding safe spaces for other survivors. It would be beautiful if we could get the whole church of Jesus Christ to be like that. But again, everyone is on their journey. We think of the whole church of Jesus Christ as being this big unit, but within that unit are individuals in their own stuff and in their own mess learning at their own pace. We must give grace to them as much as we give grace to our own selves. If we're not giving grace to our own selves, we will never be able to give grace to other people.

BECKY: For sure.

RACHEL: The answer to that is Jesus. You've got to understand how Jesus sees you so that you can apply that for yourselves. If you have a bad, old perception of Jesus as someone up there judging you and wagging His finger at you, you aren't going to be able to give that to yourself or others. So learning who Jesus really is is the key here. Becky, you were going to say something?

BECKY: Last night I had a conversation with one of my daughters and she was talking about how she gets very frustrated sometimes at the church and Christianity that it doesn't teach responsibility well. I had this lightbulb moment when Natalie was talking about those people who are focused on tearing down divorcees. You know what they are not doing? They are not taking responsibility for themselves. When you are focused on judging others, you don't have the space to take responsibility for your own actions if that makes sense. That literally puts you at a grinding halt for growth because only at looking at our responsibilities can we grow.

Also, to go back to that gal's question about the relative. I apologize, but I missed the "relative" word. I want to give an example of a relative in my life. She was my ex's sister, and I really loved her. It's probably the only relationship I grieve through divorce on his side of the family. I loved her so much that I never thought, "What are you doing? Why

aren't you listening to me?" I never even reached out to her. I sent a couple of texts saying I loved her and I wished we could have a relationship, but I understood if we couldn't. On the holidays she or I would send each other a text saying we miss each other.

But what I knew was if she were to ever agree with me, it would cause so many problems in her own life because now she would have to deal with an abusive brother. If she could stay out of it... It's a denial. It's a way for her to live in this terrible truth, to just deny that it is there and brush it off as irreconcilable differences, because her responsibility would change. I think it's too much. I know it's too much for her. I think you must give the siblings, the parents, the in-laws and out-laws, the aunts and uncles a lot of grace about what agreeing with you really does to their life. They probably don't need that, because guess what? Look how much we got to change our exes: not much!

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: Exactly. You know what I think is funny is that we are all divorcees, and we have no idea how to pronounce that word.

RACHEL: Yeah. But I don't think of myself as a divorcee. I don't think of myself as that. That's not my identity.

NATALIE: I know. I don't either. In fact (this must be a childhood image in my mind), but I'm picturing in my mind this woman with very hard lines, kind of a scowl on her face, her hair up in a tight bun, and she just hates the world. That is literally the picture in my mind, a childhood picture. I'm sure that's what people have in the back of their head thinking, "Oh my gosh! You are divorced. You are that woman."

BECKY: That would be a funny question to ask, what women have in their mind. Mine is more of this ultra-feminist, bra-burning, Bible-hating woman who is so self-centered she will do anything to get what she wants.

NATALIE: Or the other one is that actress who has been divorced a million times. What is her name? Elizabeth Taylor.

BECKY: Yeah, the Shrew.

NATALIE: The Shrew, exactly. Okay, I think we're done. Before we close, I want to thank everyone who is listening. I don't think I do that very often, maybe because I'm a flea brain. I want to thank all of you for listening to this podcast. You guys have contributed

to making this podcast grow exponentially since it started. It's been exciting to watch that and to be part of that. I want to thank you and want to invite you to share any of the thoughts you have about the podcast on Apple iTunes. You can either link to it through the show notes on my website, flyingfreenow.com, or if you are listening on your app you can just go to Apple iTunes or Apple Podcasts and look up Flying Free. You'll have the opportunity to leave a rating where you can rate it from one to five. I recommend the five. In fact, if you're going to rate it a one, don't do any of this. Just turn it off right now! If you go, you can leave a rating and leave a review and give a few of your own thoughts about how this podcast has helped you.

Here's the thing. When you do that, iTunes (or whoever they are now) will comb through it. If they see that a show is getting a lot of ratings and reviews, they will show it to more people. They will show it in people's feeds. That exposes more people to the opportunity to find out this even exists. You'd be helping the show that way. Just an invitation. You don't have to do it. It can be anonymous. Some of you are concerned and don't want anyone to know that you are listening to this "renegade, rebellious podcast..."

RACHEL: The divorcee podcast.

NATALIE: Exactly. But you can leave funny, weird names if you want to and pretend to be someone else. If you've ever had a fantasy of doing that, now is your chance. Pick whatever name you want and leave a review, and that would be awesome. That's all we have for this week. Until next time, fly free!