

WAKING UP TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE SO YOU CAN FOCUS ON HEALING

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 8 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I actually did a Facebook Live video, and we are going to share that with you on today's podcast. Our topic today was strategies for dealing with or living with emotional abuse. Let's get started.

So Rachel is going to start us off by telling us some of the strategies that she used. And by the way, she's currently divorced. Maybe you could give just a little bit of a history, just very slightly. You don't have to go into too many details. And then tell us some of the things that you did to survive.

RACHEL: So I was married for fourteen years. And for most of that time, being married was what I wanted. I wanted to have a family. I had dreamed of it. I come from an unhealthy, unstable background, so I'd always just dreamed of having a partner in life and being one big family unit. So I was living in a state of denial for most of the period of my marriage. Although I knew that there was something very wrong, it was always that I came back to "I have to do better." It was coming back on me. Honestly, it was like a state of denial, a state of numbness. I would go from hope to hope, different ideas about ways to make things better. So I was subsisting on hope a lot. "Maybe after our son is grown, things will be better. We can do the traveling I've always dreamed of. Things will be more stable and he won't be so stressed out. It'll be better in the future." Just always thinking that it would be better in the future.

And another component was always thinking that I would be more acceptable to him, like he would love me the way I needed to be loved in the future if I could fix myself enough to deserve that. So like, you know, losing weight, or becoming so successful in my career so that he would have no choice but to acknowledge what a wonderful person I am. So I did a lot of coping mechanism strategies that revolved around that. So living a lot of life in fantasies. That's what that is, is fantasizing and hoping in the future that it's going to be better, that you're finally going to get what you really want if you put enough love in, if you just have enough sex, if you just do enough in order to get that love, right?

So some of those specific coping mechanisms I had: I was always looking to make

myself healthier, like physically healthy. I am a runner. I love to run. I didn't always run for the right reasons. I'm just now starting to learn, "Because I'm a runner, because I love running," not because I'm looking to get into a certain type of clothing or anything like that. It's sort of revolutionary to me. I've always been a runner, but it's always been "I've never been good enough at it, fast enough," etc. It was never just for the pure joy of running.

NATALIE: The pure joy of running. I'm not a runner, and "joy" and "running," putting those two things together, my brain is going, "What?" Okay, sorry.

RACHEL: Well, you know, there's the endorphins. And actually, that was a great stress reliever. It fulfilled a number of functions in my life: some healthy and some unhealthy. And I'm really grateful, because it was also a chance to get out of the house. He was supportive of me doing that because he had his own motivations as well, I think. I would get out of the house and I would go spend time in nature and run on trails and exercise our dog. That was a definite way that I survived, because things were so hard. So the other thing that I struggle with, personally, is eating, emotional eating. So that was always a big thing. I would go through cycles where I was eating unhealthily. I've always had an issue with sugar. So wanting to think "Oh, if I could just overcome this, I would be the kind of person that deserves to have the kind of healthy and happy marriage that I long for." But then I could never attain that.

There was a lot of compulsion because of emotional pain. It's not something that you can control from outside influences like a new eating plan. It has to come from being healthy within yourself, fixing the issues that are causing that instead of addressing the symptoms, right? So there was that and again, just dreaming of a better future. I definitely was looking for validation from work, wanting to be successful at my job. And I would even get personal affirmation from the people at work because they were sort of my community, and that left me definitely vulnerable for sure to people who maybe didn't have the best of intentions, either. But I was such a people pleaser, and I'm definitely working on that, but it is a tough cookie to crack when you have spent your life living in fear that someone is going to be mad at you, because your entire existence is based on that person's acceptance in the moment.

So those are just a few of them. And I couldn't deny that there was pain in my marriage. For example, one of the painful things was that we were never able to take family pictures. We didn't have nice wedding photos. He really didn't ever want to take nice family photos. That was something I longed for. So I would be over at a friend's house or something and see their beautiful photos of their family and I would think to myself, "Well, I guess I just don't deserve that kind of thing. Those other people, those other

types of women, that's what they get. But this is my choice. I chose to marry him and this is just my life." It was more like I was thinking it was my fault, that had I made a better choice... or I wasn't good enough, and I didn't deserve to be the kind of family that took nice family photos. So living in either denial or blaming myself. And that's just my personal experience. I think that there's probably a wide variety of different ways that women cope in these situations in unhealthy ways, or maybe not bad, but just neutral, and they're just trying to get by because there's this ongoing problem in their life that they can't fix. Because it's not actually them: it's these other issues.

NATALIE: Right. Well, and they're trying to make sense of it in their heads...

RACHEL: Yeah, and you can't ever.

NATALIE: ...so they use these different explanations to try to figure it out.

RACHEL: Yep. And even if it really isn't rational, if it brings you a little bit of comfort in that moment, you're going to cling to that.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's an explanation.

RACHEL: If it makes sense in your mind... you know, because our brains are always trying to put these pieces together. And I think that's what so devastating when we come to the realization of what's been actually going on: you've been building these lies in your life for so long, and then you have to go back and untangle them one by one and realize the truth and bring truth and let God shed His light on it. So that's really an important exercise.

NATALIE: Okay, so some women are wired more like you, Rachel, where they... I think some of it has to do with nurture, you know, your upbringing, and some of it has to do with just personality. But all kinds of different personalities can end up in relationships with dysfunctional people, right? It doesn't matter how strong you are or how intelligent you are or if you're a type A or if you're more laid back. Those kinds of things don't determine whether or not you're going to be more susceptible to getting into a relationship with someone who's got a personality disorder or someone who's emotionally abusive.

So Rachel and I, for those of you who are listening, we're different personalities. And I handled my relationship differently, and I was probably more confrontative and more like, "Wait a minute, this isn't right. You can't do that. That's wrong. You can't treat people like that." And so I was more (Not all the time. I did learn how to pick my

battles)... but I would go into battle if I felt like an issue was big enough. And whenever I did that, then, I always got a lot of the proverbial s-h-i-t that would hit the fan. And it would be a bad situation. So I was more of a fighter, okay? I would fight for what I thought was the truth and I would try to reason, and I kept trying to come at it like "If I just come at it at the right angle. Maybe if I had a different tone of voice. Maybe if I had different words. Maybe if I picked the right place to say something." And nothing ever worked. It was the same exact response every single time.

So one of the strategies that I recommend to people who are in this situation regardless of your personality type, and especially for those of you who are more fighters... and here's the trouble that us fighters get into too: because we're fighters, we get caught up in this game that these people play where they poke the bear, okay? So they poke you and poke you and poke you to get you to get riled up, and if you do, then they sit back and they say, "Wow. You've really got an anger problem and you're really bitter and you're unforgiving and what's your problem?" Especially if you're in Christian circles, you'll get a lot of Bible verses thrown at you, that kind of thing. And then that's really easy for us to feel really guilty, then, because we did react poorly, and we didn't want to. That's not who we are. That's not how we want to live our lives. That's not how we want to have relationships that are always reactive. So it's really important to learn how to... in the healing community we call it "grey rock," where you stop engaging with that person. And it's an important strategy. When they try to poke you, you don't take the bait. Just don't take the bait. Try to keep your conversations very transactional so that you can keep the emotion at a minimum and let them have their wins, because they're going to "win" anyway, so let them have their win. Was I able to do this very well? No, I wasn't. I'll just be honest. I was not very good at this, but you were probably better at it. I don't know, Rachel. Do you feel like you had a chance to practice this at all?

RACHEL: No, I was not always the laid-back type of person. The problem is, I would get so confused. And I was so focused on being fair and also listening to him, and he would take advantage of that and come in and he is very smart. He would always have some sort of explanation or rationale for why things were his way, and I was very susceptible to that because I wanted to listen to him. I wanted to respect what he had to say. So even if I knew, like, "Maybe that's not quite right," I could make my mind fit around it. But also if I couldn't quite make it work, I just had to let it go, because I was never, ever, ever going to get to the point where he would admit anything from my side. That was really tough, because I so wanted to work things out. I wanted both of us to come to reconciliation.

And I'm not even talking about the end. Throughout the course of our marriage, I always wanted to resolve these issues, but nothing ever got resolved, and as we know,

that's one of the classic signs of this type of situation. You know, you may apologize, but he's not going to do the same thing for his role. Or maybe it'll be really minimal, some of the obvious things, but he won't take deeper responsibility. And also, it's not going to produce any lasting change. So I would just get to the point where I stopped bringing things up every day on a daily basis, but when I did, I would really pour my heart into it, like write him a letter or something like that, but it was just the same thing. I would get ignored, or there would be a very convenient explanation for why things were not my way.

NATALIE: Right. Well, I think one of the reasons why we keep trying to get that closure or trying to have a meeting of the minds with this person is because, at a fundamental level, we truly believe deep down inside that it's a possibility. And the fact is, it's not a possibility. So to come to that place of acceptance where you finally (it really wasn't until towards the end for me) accept the fact that there will never be a meeting of the minds. There will never be closure to all of those hurts that took place or all of those things that were left undone. There will never be closure. It's very, very difficult to let that go. But that's really important to do.

Another strategy for coping, then, is because their reality is so completely different from your reality, it's really important that your reality is validated somewhere else. Otherwise, you start to feel like you're going insane. So what I suggest to people is to have at least one person... and can it be a counselor? It can be, but you have to pay money for a counselor, and you only have access to that person once a week or maybe once every other week or once a month in some cases, and what you really need is an ongoing place where you can actually download what's going on in your relationship. And no, this is not called gossip. So for those of you who are thinking "Oh, gossip! I can't do that!" No. Some of the Christian rules and regs that people hem you in with actually make it almost impossible... they put you into a corner where you can't get out. You can't get help, you can't get healing because of all these rules and regulations. Those are from the devil. I'm sorry, but they are not from Jesus. So Jesus wants us to be able to have fellowship with somebody who understands.

RACHEL: In truth. Live in truth.

NATALIE: Exactly. He wants us to live in truth, and if we can't live in truth with our partner, then we need to live in truth with someone else. And so for me, I had a sister who was actually coming into my home and working with me on a daily basis, and she became my sounding board for three solid years. She listened to my reality and she was just a really, really good listener. So if there's anyone watching this who maybe isn't in a situation like this but you'd like to help, this is a great way to help. Just listen and

don't judge. Don't judge and don't try to fix. Just listen and acknowledge and validate the other person's reality because women who are living in a situation like this, they really do start to feel like they are losing their marbles because they're gaslit all the time, they're lied to on a regular basis, and the lies that they're told are not always outright lies. A lot of them are just that they have information that's withheld from them so they don't have all the pieces, and they're trying to figure it out. And then if they get it wrong, they're told that they're making assumptions and they're stupid and they don't know anything. It's just absolutely insane, the games that get played with a woman's mind. So that woman needs a sane place to land on a regular basis where she can download.

So that was one of my strategies that God really used to help me to get better. And think about the grief process, too. When you lose someone that you love, what do people who are grieving do? Their biggest thing that they like to do is talk about it. They want to talk about it, and they need to process it. That's how you come to a place of accepting the reality of your situation. Same thing. You're actually grieving. When you're trying to process the fact that this person loves you so little that they don't want to connect with you on an intimate basis, they don't want to understand where you're coming from, they have no empathy for your situation, they have no care for the ways that they've hurt you, they don't acknowledge or take responsibility for anything in the relationship and everything is put squarely on your shoulders, there's a lot of grief and loss involved in that, and you need to grieve. And it takes a long time. This is not something that happens... "Well, I'm going to talk to a counselor for a few months and I'll be better." No, it doesn't work like that. It takes years of healing. I'm out of my relationship and remarried and I'm still healing. And I think I'll be healing for the rest of my life!

RACHEL: Probably. I agree, and I just want to emphasize what you said. Sit and listen and don't judge and don't try to fix it. I just can't even tell you the power of someone validating by listening and empathizing. It is a balm on a burn. It is such a soothing mechanism for healing. And it is something that women like us have not experienced from the people that really should have been the ones doing it all along.

NATALIE: Yes. Okay, another thing that I recommend is taking care of yourself. So here's the thing: a lot of us took care of this person and they had lots of emotional needs, and we were responsible for taking care of them. And as Christian women, we felt like that was our number one priority, to take care of the emotional needs of this person. Plus, if you are a parent, you also had the emotional needs and responsibility of parenting your children, and a lot of times you didn't get a lot of help from your partner. Maybe you got some practical help when you asked for it, but you didn't get a lot of initiative

taking or a lot of help on the emotional burden of parenting. So maybe they were good at helping the child get dressed in the morning or whatever if you asked them to help you out, but maybe not so good at getting down on that child's level and really emotionally connecting with that child and building a relationship with that child, so all of that emotional connection/burden fell on you to do that. And the reason is because if this person is not able to connect with you emotionally and not able to empathize with you, that's because there's something broken inside of them, and of course they can't do that with anybody.

RACHEL: Yeah, it's like a handicap.

NATALIE: Right, it's a handicap. You don't see that in their relationships with other people on the outside because you don't have to have intimate relationships with everyone in your life, right? It's just your family members. So family members are the ones that see if there's a lack of that. It's going to be the family members who experience that.

RACHEL: And who suffer from it.

NATALIE: Yes, exactly. So what you need to do is start disconnecting or detaching from that person, because your whole life has been revolving around that person. And you need to start revolving your life... the Christian answer would be "revolve your life around Jesus." Well, that's kind of a "duh." We can revolve our life around Jesus regardless of what human being's life we're revolving around. But what we need to do is we need to start taking responsibility not for that person but for ourselves and for our own health. And this is called self-care. And I know that in Christian circles that that is like... "Self-care? Oh my word. That is so selfish." No, it's not selfish, it's normal, alright?

To not take care of yourself is abnormal, dysfunctional human behavior. It goes against the way God wired all creatures on the face of the earth including animals, okay? But certainly human beings. We are wired to take care of ourselves. It's survival. And we are to take care of our spiritual health, our emotional health, and our physical health. So let's talk, Rachel, about some of the ways that you and I and others have found that we can actually take care of these things and get our focus off of... because I remember a time when that's all I could think of, was managing this relationship. And then I started focusing on other interesting things, because you know what? There are five billion bazillion interesting things in this world to focus on. That human being that you're living with is just one of them. The church that you're going to is just one of them. There are all kinds of other things you can focus on. So let's talk about what some of those things

are, because some of those things are actually really interesting and they might distract you from all of the dysfunction that's going on in that part of your life. So Rachel?

RACHEL: That's interesting, because I think one of the things that I've actually been working on in the past couple of weeks is really forming my identity as a person. So not filtered through my role as a wife or a mother: it's filtered through what's inside of me at the core of my personhood. My priorities are aligned with my identity and maybe the person that I want to be and the person I'm becoming. So, for example, I want to be someone who has a deep and intimate relationship with the Lord. So what's that going to look like in my life? That's going to look like Bible reading, that's going to look like listening to sermons, etc. So that's part of self-care for me, is putting a priority on those things. And my time is so stretched thin that it's easy to let that slip by the wayside. But that's part of who I am, so I can't let that slip. And it actually is a discipline. Self-care is a discipline. It's easy when you think of it like "I need sleep so I'm going to go to bed at 10:00, because I care about these things in my life that need me to be active and present and my mind not drifting off into la la land because I only got five hours of sleep." So that is self-care. It could look like taking a bubble bath or something like that, that's perfectly legitimate, but it's also formed around your values and your identity.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so you mentioned bubble bath and I just have to say, when I moved into our new home we had a bath that was big enough to actually hold me and I thought, you know, you see movies where the girl is in the bubble bath with a glass of wine and candlelight and stuff, so I thought "I am going to do that. I'm going to experience what that is like." And I did. I've actually done that twice in the last year that I've been here. Because I don't have time to do it. But you know what, it was really fun! But once I was in there I was like, "So now what?"

RACHEL: Yeah. I like to bring a book or watch a show or something.

NATALIE: Right. So some things that I did: one thing that I discovered when I was still living with my ex and just trying to... actually, no, it was when I was separated from him. We were separated for a few years. And I was just really grieving and in tons of distress. Anyway, I discovered Audible because I was driving my kids all over the place, folding laundry, I was single parenting, and I found that I could distract myself with fiction books. And I had been this Christian woman who for the last twenty years had only been reading non-fiction. You know, books about how to be a better wife, for example. Books about how to be a better Christian. And I'm an avid reader, so I read dozens of books. I mean, every year I read tons of books. But I started thinking, you know. I used to, prior to getting into these really uber-conservative religious circles that I was in, I was an English major and I loved literature. The classics... I loved literature. I read avidly

as a child as well. And I thought, "I'm going to do Audible and listen to books. I don't have a lot of time to read them, but..." I started listening to some great fiction, and I was learning so much from fiction. And not Christian fiction, okay? I was listening to really good fiction stuff. And so I was learning about the characters that were teaching me about... I was recognizing, now that I'm older, I've seen a little bit of life, and I was watching how people reacted and it was just very, very eye-opening, just listening to these stories. Plus, they were super interesting and it distracted me from my own life, and I got to be involved in the lives of other people. I highly recommend Audible.

And the other lifesaver for me was music. I had, prior to being separated, only listened to Christian music. I never listened to secular music. But I discovered that so many secular artists, female artists, were singing songs that were really strong, powerful songs about some of the same things that I had been through, and I could relate to them. At first I felt really guilty, like "Oh my word, am I a bad Christian because I'm listening to secular music?" But when I listened to that music, the songs were talking about truths about relationships, and I had started realizing that all truth in this world belongs to God. It does not belong to the devil, it belongs to God. And that includes truth about relationships, about human nature. The Bible is only one book. It's God's Word, but you cannot put the scope of all of the experience of all of history and all of everyone's life into one book, right? So there's some wisdom and there is the wisdom of the universe in that book, but also the wisdom of the universe is in nature. "Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise." The Bible talks about the ant, but guess what? We can learn about principles in God's truth not just from the ant. There are other animals. If the Bible was to draw analogies between all of the animals in the universe, not just the ant, then the Bible alone would be books and books and books long with analogies all about... do you see what I'm trying to say here?

RACHEL: Absolutely!

NATALIE: Yeah. So back to the secular music. There are songs that these secular artists are writing that have a lot of wisdom and insight. Maybe they're not of Christian tradition, but there are definitely things that we can learn. So I would listen to these songs and be like "Yes! This song is articulating everything inside of me that I didn't know how to articulate, but it's saying it in such a powerful way!" So that was very validating, and I would sing at the top of my lungs in the car. And I would work out on my elliptical and listen to that music in my headphones. I was starting to have good hormones flowing through my body instead of all this negative, critical, shaming, bad stuff that I was constantly inundated with. And that was also very healing.

RACHEL: I think there's a lot of validity in that people have been singing to God as a

form of worship for the span of the Bible, right? It's all throughout the Bible. It's part of the Christian tradition. Why did God use that mechanism in order to have people connect with Him? I think there's probably truth to the fact that there's a physical component to that. There's some physical truth to that. That's really powerful.

NATALIE: Definitely. Okay, the other thing, and then we should probably wrap this up because we're already over, but the other thing I was going to mention is the validation of education. And if you're already watching this, it's because you're already out there looking for help and you're educating yourself and doing exactly what is going to be most helpful for you. Even in watching this, that's self-care. There are so many great resources on Youtube. I, for the very first time... I don't know why I haven't discovered him before, but is it Les Carter? What is his name on Youtube? Hold on. Oh shoot.

RACHEL: Is he that really nice man?

NATALIE: He's a really nice man! I think his first name is Les. Hold on, I'm going to look it up on my phone and see if I can... oh yeah, here it is. Oh, why can't I see his name? I can see his face. He's kind of bald in the front. I can't see it. Okay, just look this one up on Youtube. I was just watching this one today and it's so good: "Imaginary Confessions of a Narcissist." It's Les Somebody. Les. Anyway, if somebody here on the Facebook Live knows his name, you can post it.

RACHEL: He's fantastic.

NATALIE: Oh, do you know who I'm talking about?

RACHEL: I've watched that video and it was really, really good.

NATALIE: There are so many people out there. I don't even know who they all are, but I keep finding new ones all the time. I love it.

RACHEL: Yeah, the information is coming out.

NATALIE: Yeah, and it's free!

RACHEL: Yeah, it's awesome.

NATALIE: So there's Youtube. All you have to do is Google your problem and twenty-five hundred Youtube videos... there are people talking about it. It's awesome. There are tons of books. There is my book "Is It Me? Making Sense of My Confusing Marriage." I

don't really toot my own horn too much, but.

RACHEL: It's a really good book.

NATALIE: There are tons of blogs and websites out there. There's podcasts. This is a podcast. I have a podcast called the "Flying Free Podcast" if you look on iTunes. So there's so many different resources out there. And I really think it's important not to just clamp down on one resource. This is why I share other people's stuff all the time on Facebook, because I think it's important that you are hearing from lots of different advocates because they all have a different angle and a different perspective. And I think if you're just going to listen to one person all the time... I'm sure those of you who have listened to me for a long time like you, Rachel, you already know what's going to come out of my mouth before it comes out, right?

RACHEL: You always teach me something new.

NATALIE: But, "Who knows what's going to come out of this new guy's mouth that I've never heard before, because I've never heard him before!" So keep availing yourself of all the resources that are out there. I think we're going to stop there. Do you have anything you want to add before we quit?

RACHEL: So the only thing I wanted to add is this takes courage to educate yourself. And give yourself credit for that. That's something I've been really terrible about, because one of the dynamics that... I was never enough. I just felt like whatever I did, it was never enough. So give yourself credit for educating yourself and having the courage to dive into these things. Pat yourself on the back. I think that's really important. Even if it's just a little thing.

NATALIE: That's an important thing, though. I told my Flying Free members, "Look in the mirror and say 'I've got your back.'" Just do that. You are courageous. You are doing everything you can. And you're going to get through this. Okay. I am going to turn off the live Facebook now. Thank you so much for joining us, and we'll do this again if it worked. I think it worked. So if it worked, we'll do it again sometime.