

I'M ALWAYS WALKING ON EGGSHELLS IN MY CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE!

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 82 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we're going to hear from a survivor. Her name is Robin. Welcome to the podcast, Robin.

ROBIN: Thanks, Natalie. I'm so excited to be here with you. You totally have saved my life!

NATALIE: I don't think I have that much power, but thank you.

ROBIN: When I first came upon your stuff on the internet, your website, it was like, "Holy cow! There are other people out there like me." Your story is so similar, like all of ours are. But it was the first person I read that was like, "Wow, this is a real thing."

NATALIE: How long ago was that?

ROBIN: It was almost two years ago.

NATALIE: Okay.

ROBIN: It was two years ago because I was in the second group of Flying Free when we were on Facebook.

NATALIE: The second wave, yes.

ROBIN: It was the first thing I ever did for myself. I mean, I'd buy things, but that invested in me.

NATALIE: Like self-development, self-growth.

ROBIN: Yes.

NATALIE: That's awesome. That's super exciting. We want to hear about your story. Why don't you start by telling us how you met your husband, and I always like to ask if you saw any red flags. (For people who might be starting over again, or maybe there are

single women who are thinking, "I really want to make sure I don't get into a relationship like that.) Did you notice anything?

ROBIN: I had no idea what a red flag was. I was twenty-one years old. I was working in a casino dealing Blackjack and going to college. A guy friend of mine who would come into the casino all the time and talk to me wanted to date me, but he was fourteen years older than me and shorter than me. I just brushed him off. He was just a friend. Then he brought in this guy, and we eventually started dating and what not. But I had no idea what a red flag was, and yes, there were some.

We started dating. Three weeks after we started dating he told me he loved me. It came in a conversation like, "I was talking to an ex-girlfriend of mine. She called and wanted to get me back. I told her that if I went back to her and stopped dating Robin, it would be the biggest mistake of my life." At that time I was like, "Wow. This guy really likes me." I mean, it was three weeks, and he told me he loved me. The other thing he would say to me, and he was about twenty-six at the time, "I've been on my own for twenty-six years. I like to be by myself and I don't want to be smothered." I thought, "Okay, fine." Then every night he would call me. We lived about twenty minutes apart. He would call and say, "So are you going to come over? Do you want to go out for dinner?" I was like, "You told me yesterday you wanted your space." But in my twenty-one year old mind I thought, "This guy really likes me." So there was that.

Anger had come out. He would shoe horses for friends. I don't like horses because I've had some bad experiences with them. There was a day where he had just finished shoeing a horse, and he got back to his apartment before we went out for dinner. He had a message on his answering machine that the horse threw a shoe. He threw his keys on the floor and a whole line of cuss words, swear words, came out. I just looked at him like, "Are you okay?" But I didn't realize that the guy had an anger problem because don't we all get mad at things? I'd be mad because I just worked my butt off.

But then it happened... Not so much the first year we were dating. We got engaged after six months. We got married after a year. So yes, there were red flags. One of them was that he was disrespectful to his mom. But I had only met her one time. It was after we had gotten engaged. She came up for a week. He just wasn't that nice to her. But I was always making excuses for his behavior. The whole sex before marriage... I was a virgin when I met him. We did have sex before we were married because it was that we were getting married anyway. So the sexual coercion, I had no idea what that even was until two years ago. So yes, there were lots of red flags. I should have run but I stuck with him because, "I can change him, right? I can heal his wounds."

NATALIE: Right. So after you got married was it pretty much the same stuff? Or were there any new things that were introduced into your relationship as far as abuse?

ROBIN: There were. Right away we had agreed... I wanted a lot of kids. I wanted six kids and he only wanted two. So we made this agreement that we'd have four kids and we would raise them in my church because he wasn't churched. We used to call him a heathen. That was okay because my sister, two years before that, had married a Catholic. We're Lutheran. She married a Catholic and that was like World War 3 in our family. So he came in and he wasn't anything. So everybody was so excited because "Of course we can bring him over to our side, right?"

Anyway, we made this agreement on four kids and I would get to raise them in my church. I agreed to move anywhere in the world with his job. He works in an industry that is very small. You go to very remote places. It's not missionary work. That was our agreement. Right after we got married... People always ask you at the wedding, "Are you going to have any kids?" He started saying, "Yeah, we're going to have a couple of kids, but Robin's going to finish college first. Then we'll have some kids like five years down the road." I thought, "That's not what we agreed to." But we were newly married so I thought it was something we had to work out as a newly married couple.

Then we made a trip south to his parents about a month after we got married and they threw a party for us. The same thing was happening. I said, "We agreed to four kids." He said, "Well, you need to get done with school and you need to do this and you need to do that." I kind of brushed it off again as married problems and thought, "I can change his mind." A couple months later he came back from a weekend at my parents. He saw how my family interacted, all the kids together, the nieces and nephews. I had to stay and work that weekend. He came back and said, "Robin, let's have kids." I was like, "What? For the last three months you were saying we're not having kids for five years, and now suddenly it is important to have kids?"

A few months later I got pregnant. Our first baby was born a little after the first year. Then the second baby came shortly after this. I was still going to school full time. That was an argument that we had. Then baby number two came and he was absolutely done. We moved again. We moved a lot. We moved for another job. I ended up getting pregnant with the third child and he was not happy. I will probably never forget that night because I thought I was dying. I took five home pregnancy tests. They were all negative. We had just moved to a new place again. I went to the doctor, took a blood test, found out I was pregnant, told him that night, and his answer to that was... I don't want to say this out loud because it's swearing. "G—d--- Robin, I told you I didn't want any more kids." That was his answer to that.

Later that night, I asked him why he didn't want any more kids. He looked at me and said, "Well look at you. You haven't lost the weight from the first two." I had known even before that in the first couple years of marriage that he started in on my weight. We used to go out and eat junk food and pizza and all that, and then suddenly it became, "We have to get healthy. You have to look good." The emotional abuse that comes with not being good enough, keeping your house cleaned... There's so much.

NATALIE: So how did you cope? Did you have any strategies that were helpful to you?

ROBIN: I pretty much just shut down. I did what I was told to do. I made sure I had the house cleaned, especially when the kids were younger when he came home from work. You know the abuse cycle. When he was getting bad I would gain weight because I used food to cope. So I would gain weight and then we'd have this blow up. My weight would be talked about. Then I'd start losing weight again, and then suddenly life was good because I was looking good again. But if there was anything I needed to bring up emotionally with him I had to make sure it was worth it, the emotional amount to put into it, to bring it up because if it wasn't worth it, it wasn't worth me getting yelled at, chewed out, or just being ignored.

NATALIE: Did anything ever get resolved anyway when you brought things up? Even if you did risk all of that, were you ever able to solve any problems with him?

ROBIN: No, because it would always get turned around as being my fault or he would always say I would bury the hatchet but leave the handle sticking out. Again, I never knew that this was abusive. I would bring up whatever it was and then maybe a year later I'd bring up the same thing, but nothing ever was resolved. So then I just stopped talking about it. That's how I resolved it. "Okay, I'll just do what he tells me to do. If he wants my shoes away from the front door, I'll put my shoes away from the front door." I would usually make my bed in the morning. There would be days where I would run upstairs two minutes before he walked in the door to go make the bed just so he would not get mad.

NATALIE: Wow! So he was like your daddy and you were like the kid.

ROBIN: Yep. Always walking on eggshells. I didn't even know what walking on eggshells was. I was very naive.

NATALIE: Yeah, most of us were. We didn't have any training in any of this kind of stuff. Kids don't have any training these days either, but they are getting more of it than we certainly did. There's certainly lots of information online that people can look up. I'm

wondering when did you start to realize, or did it just dawn on you one day? Was it a slow wake up call? Or how did you realize, “Wait a minute. There’s something seriously wrong with this relationship, and I have to figure out a way to either solve the problem or get out”?

ROBIN: Almost four years ago we were in a hotel. We lived overseas and we were in a hotel with our youngest. He raged at me because we were going out with friends, and I suggested we go to a different restaurant than where he wanted. After that I still didn’t know what was going on, but I had prayed that God would harden my heart. It was the worst thing I’ve ever done in my life, but I did because I was so tired of being hurt. We had been married about nineteen years.

When we got back home, I told him that he had six years left and then I was done after our youngest graduated from high school. He started talking to our pastor back in the U.S. and got his act together for a little bit. But then everything started getting worse. Since we had moved overseas, I had always been accused of sleeping with other men when that was never the case. In his industry, there’s a high percentage of men who work there. So when you are living in these remote villages, that’s who you talk to. You just become friends. A small expat community, you become friends with everybody. But I would be accused of that. I would be accused of not being respectful enough, not being loving enough.

Over the next year and a half it just got worse. Then I got to where I believed that God didn’t love me, but I knew God hated divorce. I still never wanted to disappoint Him even though I didn’t think He loved me. I knew my kids. I didn’t want to hurt my kids and I didn’t want to hurt my dad. I was always afraid of disappointing my dad. Then it got to where I started thinking about having an affair with another guy because something had to change. I know this is so backwards thinking, but I figured if I had the affair he could divorce me, and that way God could hate him and not me.

NATALIE: Isn’t that fascinating. Oh my goodness.

ROBIN: I can laugh at that now because honestly, I knew better. But I got that desperate. I didn’t know what to do. I was living far away from my family. I would never tell them because they absolutely loved him. Nobody knew.

NATALIE: I need to interrupt here. Do you know what’s so fascinating about this? In our Christian culture it’s okay to have an affair. You can be forgiven for an affair. You could be forgiven for killing yourself. That’s totally fine. But never, ever get divorced. That is the unpardonable sin. So you’ve got all these women thinking about killing themselves,

killing their husbands, or having an affair but not thinking about the most logical solution which is just get a divorce. Divorce the jerk!

ROBIN: That was worse than being an alcoholic and abusing your wife. That was the worst sin you could... Like you said, having an affair, smoking, hiding your alcohol... The other thing in my church was a divorce or living with someone out of wedlock. Those two were the unpardonable sins. Everything else... You could be a porn user and be okay with that, right?

NATALIE: Yeah, because a lot of pastors are. I really think the leaders are just projecting rules for themselves and subtly, unconsciously (or subconsciously) projecting all of that onto the rules that they make for their churches. That's my little theory.

ROBIN: Well, I forget the numbers. I believe it's seventy percent of men in churches are porn users (I don't know if that's the addiction number) and fifty percent of pastors use porn.

NATALIE: Yep, I believe it.

ROBIN: I unfortunately had to study porn a lot in the last couple of years.

NATALIE: Here's the other thing about that. When you are a person who is watching porn on a regular basis, you are dehumanizing human beings. When you start dehumanizing human beings, that gets woven into your psyche and you start treating human beings in the way that you view them, which is dehumanized.

ROBIN: Yeah, it's an awful thing. This will play out later in my story in a little bit, but I had no idea. So during this time that I was thinking about having an affair, I was praying so hard that God would give me a way out, because that's what He says. If there's temptation in your life, there will always be a way out. What happened is that there was a mini war around the village that we were living in, and all the women and children had to leave. Honestly, that saved my life. That saved me from doing a thing I knew was totally wrong, but I had to figure something else out.

Three weeks after that I left. At that time my kids were in boarding school. I know I said I wasn't going to get too detailed, but this has to be part of the story. They were in boarding school and I went to stay with them. I then met my husband three weeks later, and in the hotel I just knew that it was time to do something because I could no longer have sex with this man, mostly because he suggested we use a condom during the middle of sex. We had never used a condom before in our married life. He had a

vasectomy after the last child was born. Again, I had no idea what was going on, but I just couldn't take it anymore.

A couple weeks later I told him that, and that's when the accusation was, "I know you are f'ing one of them." I also heard, "We need to do counseling." I got, "If we end this marriage then the next one will have just as many problems as this one." At this point I was not listening to him. Just to get out of the conversation I agreed to counseling, which was probably one of the best choices of my life because I did get the help that I needed eventually. I also agreed to meet with our pastor.

A month later, because there was some travel time in there, I talked to my pastor for the first time and I told him all the stories. We were on the phone for hours. He's the one who told me, "Robin, you know you've been in an abusive and destructive marriage." I honestly said to him, "No I haven't. He's never hit me." I had no idea. It still baffles me that I had no idea. We started meeting separately with a counselor that my soon-to-be-ex and our pastor picked out. Like it says in all the books, he used the counselor and pastor to try to get me back in line, saying all the right Bible passages, saying everything. I knew that it wasn't sincere. I fought the establishment on that.

A couple of months later my father passed away suddenly. No one knew that I had said I wanted out. This is now six months later. We go home for the summer like always, and I finally figure out that this counselor is not working for me. I asked the pastor that we were talking to, "What is going on? I hadn't told my dad or my family, and now God took my father." I never had to tell my dad. I never had to disappoint him. To this day I do believe that he would have disowned me.

NATALIE: Oh, that's awful.

ROBIN: Yeah. All of that would have been spiritual abuse: "You can't do this because God hates divorce," and whatever. I then found a counselor that I used for a year because she lived in a different state and we were still doing it all online. I was still going back and forth overseas. I did stay home for the fall, and this was when we had kind of separated, but I knew I was going to go back overseas because my kids were still in boarding school halfway around the world. I knew the minute I went back it wasn't going to work. About six months after that, my kids decided they would stay in the U.S. and not go back to boarding school. I filed for divorce a week later. Now we're here and still waiting. I just had no idea. I find that baffling.

NATALIE: Yes. That's very common, though. How can we know? If that's all you know, especially if you get married at age twenty-one, how can you know that anything is

different?

ROBIN: Right. You grow up in church and the whole “submit to your husband” and “your body is not your own...” I even had my parents tell me, “Don’t ever talk about your marriage problems to anybody.” So I never did, not even the pastor, up until I was pretty much forced to. So you sit there and try to be a better wife and you pray, and you pray, and you pray. It just didn’t work.

NATALIE: When you separated from him, did anything get better for you? Did you notice things getting notched down as far as your emotional health?

ROBIN: The thing that got better for me, I used to have horrible hand pain. I had to stop golfing because I could barely hold a club. I could barely carry in a bag of groceries without my hands hurting from the time I woke up until the time I went to bed. I went to doctor after doctor thinking it was lupus or rheumatoid arthritis. When I told my first counselor she said, “Robin, that’s actually your body trying to get rid of all the stress you have been living under.” She gave me some exercises to do to relax, and that did help. But it wasn’t until I filed for divorce that the pain went totally away.

NATALIE: Very interesting.

ROBIN: I considered separating, then going back, and then filing for divorce... What else got better is that I can walk into my house and not be afraid, not be afraid of something not being done. I don’t have to run home from a friend’s house in case I left the dishes in the sink. But the best thing for me is that I can walk into my bedroom at night and I am not afraid.

NATALIE: That’s huge. Wow. So basically you get to be like a grown-up adult now?

ROBIN: Yeah. I can make decisions for myself. Sometimes it’s hard because I think, “Oh my gosh, what should I do? I don’t have anyone to ask.” But then I think, “Just calm down, Robin. It’s going to be okay. Whichever way you decide, it is still going to be okay.”

NATALIE: Yep. You grow into that skill and you become more and more confident as you get more time under your belt after getting out. I’m wondering, are there any regrets looking back on the whole thing? Maybe we could combine this with the next question which is what is something you have learned through this whole process that you wish you could go back and tell your younger self?

ROBIN: Overall, I don't regret any of it because I think all my experiences from the time I was born until now has made me into the person that I am. I truly like myself. It took me a long time, but I am okay with the person I am. I like that I love people. I like that I am friendly to people. I like that I do things for others without expecting anything in return. So I wouldn't change it. I also think if you regret what you have been through then you regret your children, and I absolutely do not regret having children with him. I love my kids.

The only regret that I have in getting out is that I wish I had been more prepared. I think just because of the circumstances of where we were living at that time because we were so isolated, I needed to leave. But with other things, I wish I would have acquired more evidence, watched his phone usage, watched his computer usage, and then documented things before I left. But it was such a year of turmoil that first year. I do wish that. What was the last thing you asked?

NATALIE: If you could go back and tell your younger self something, what would you tell her?

ROBIN: God does love you. He always loved you. He loved you through all your prayers when you didn't think He was listening to you. And that I am a stronger, more intelligent, and more beautiful person than I have ever given myself credit for. Just because someone tells you that you're not doesn't mean that it is true.

NATALIE: I love that. That's so important. It's something that so many of us have struggled with our whole lives. Really, this is the process. It's an ugly process, but it yields that result of finally knowing that for ourselves for real.

ROBIN: There was a plaque I got at Hobby Lobby a long time ago, probably early 2000, that says, "He makes all things beautiful in its time." I got that and hung it in my bathroom because I thought if God would make me more beautiful my husband would love me more and treat me better. But that is not what that passage means at all. I used to pray for these things. God says He answers your prayers. I just didn't know He was answering them in a different way.

When we lived overseas my heart became more beautiful in the people that I loved, not the outside of me, and more thankful. I used to pray every night, "I'm thankful for my husband. I'm thankful for the life I live." I learned how to be respectful. I didn't say anything bad about him. I think when you get to that point, your younger self, don't do that for someone else: do it for yourself. You are beautiful just because God made you. That's it. Period. That is, I guess, what I would tell my younger self.

NATALIE: That's beautiful. Do you have any advice for someone who is listening who is thinking about leaving and may be scared to death?

ROBIN: First, God is not going to hate you. He hates the abuse. Divorce is not always a sin. Just trust Him with everything. I remember when the kids were younger, we lived at this place that had a stream behind the house. My boys loved to be outside. At that point I said, "Okay, God. You've got them because I can't have my eyes everywhere all the time. I have to trust that You are going to take care of these kids." I remember saying that a month or so after the divorce and even before that. "God, You've got to take care of these kids of mine because I don't know how this is all going to work out. But I trust that You're going to do whatever the kids need to have done." It's kind of like Hannah and Samuel. I remember that story from the Bible. "I give my kids back to You. You are in charge of their life. I'm here to take care of them." I started doing that with everything: finances, my family. I have lost my sister in all of this.

NATALIE: I'm sorry.

ROBIN: She is totally against me getting a divorce. But my brothers have stepped up. My mom has come around. I've lost friends. But give that all to God. God will show you who your real friends are and who your fake friends are also. It's okay to give them up. It truly sucks getting out. It's probably the worst thing I've ever had to go through, but it is so worth it. Life is so much better on this side. You will eventually find peace and hope again. It may not be exactly how you want it to be or picture it, but it will be so much better. God has this all worked out. He sees around the corners that we can't.

NATALIE: Yes. I want to thank you for being here and giving us some of your time. I know you are still in the middle of your divorce process. I hope and pray that it ends soon. Right before this podcast you said you were... What was the word you used? It wasn't insane, but you basically...

ROBIN: I was going to have a coronary.

NATALIE: Yeah, you were going to have a coronary. I don't want that to happen to you, Robin. So I'm really hoping that your divorce is finalized soon. So thank you.

ROBIN: Yeah, thank you for everything. You are a blessing to so many women.

NATALIE: Well, good. For the rest of you who are listening, thanks for tuning in. Until next time, fly free.