

WHY DO I FEEL LIKE I'M GOING CRAZY IN MY 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 89 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have with me Daphne and Rachel, and we're going to have a conversation about something that takes place a lot in the separation stage of people's journey when they are trying to get out of an emotionally or spiritually abusive relationship. When I say "separation stage," I mean not necessarily that you are physically separated where someone is living in a separate home, but it could also mean where you are starting to set some boundaries and separating yourself emotionally.

Or perhaps you are starting to separate yourself from his imaginary world of what he says you are and how he defines you. Sometimes in that stage you will get communications from him that are confusing. On one hand he will be saying things like, "I'm so sorry. I'm ready to cooperate. I shouldn't have done that. What can I do to change myself?" Then when you say what changes you are interested in seeing, then he'll turn it back on you and accuse you of all the things he's always accused you of. He'll blame you, he'll define you, and do all those things.

It's really confusing because you don't know which message to believe. Does he want to work on things? Is it really your fault? Are you just making a big deal out of nothing and need to be more forgiving and more understanding and give him lots more chances? So welcome, Rachel and Daphne. Are you ready for this discussion?

RACHEL: Yes. Looking forward to it.

DAPHNE: Yeah. Let's do it.

NATALIE: First, I'm curious to know if either of you experienced anything like this when you were going through your getting out journey?

RACHEL: Yes. This has been a few years now, so it's good to be able to look back. There was a situation where we were separated. I think I had served him divorce papers. He sent me a text message. I had sent a boundary where he was to communicate with me via writing because I was done with the circular conversations that always sucked me back in. I recommend that, because it's so easy to get pulled in, but when you have

some space and can see it in plain text, it's powerful to be able to get clarity.

Anyway, he sent me this text message that was a little mushy and was using one of the pet names he had for me when we were dating, yet he hardly ever used it after we got married. He was basically proclaiming his love for me. I didn't answer it at the time, but the next day I found out in a really embarrassing fashion that he was running a smear campaign with my workplace because my boss came in and talked to me about it. Thankfully, my boss is really understanding, but it was so mortifying. I texted him back and said, "If I really mean this much to you, why would you do this?"

He then, of course, came back with all these excuses and reasons why it was my fault. That was the clearest I could have ever been that I hated the fact we were having to get divorced, but that was unfortunately what it had come to. There were all sorts of mixed messages even before that, but that was really the final one. I do believe, but I can't believe this is what was really happening. I was right all along when I started waking up.

NATALIE: What a horrible feeling to realize that he's blatantly lying to you in a text. The mortifying thing is that we fall for it in some ways. There's a part of us that is holding back because of our past experiences with them, but there's a part of us that leans into it and wants to believe it and buy into it. It's kind of a gross experience. I'm glad you had that experience so you could see it real clearly.

RACHEL: Yes. And writing – I can't recommend it enough to keep those boundaries strong. If they are wanting to talk to you, they can put it in writing.

NATALIE: Yeah, I totally agree! I was talking to someone recently who said she had put that boundary up, and he was pig-biting mad! He said, "I should not have to write to you. We should be able to talk. We're husband and wife."

RACHEL: "Okay, well unfortunately, this is where we are."

NATALIE: Exactly. What about you, Daphne?

DAPHNE: I had a similar situation towards the end. Part of this happened when we were at the retreat. I don't know if you remember, Natalie. We had a retreat a couple of years ago. I was having y'all read some text messages that I was getting. But yes, I had a similar boundary in place that we weren't going to be communicating over the phone because those conversations weren't going anywhere. The retreat was in Charlotte. I went to North Carolina early and went to the Raleigh/Durham area and was visiting friends there. When I was married, that's where we lived for the first little bit.

So I was talking to some friends and telling them what was going on. I hadn't told my ex that I was going out there. I got some texts from him. He was desperate at this point, I guess. I got some texts saying, "Please call out all my sin. I know I've wronged you. I want to do better. Regardless of whether you stay married to me, I know I need to do better. Call my sin out."

A few days later, some of the friends (or who I thought were friends) who were biblical counselors told him I was there, what I was there for, and who I was talking to. So he found out and texted me, "I heard that you're talking to people about me and saying the word 'abusive' in connection with my name. You need to stop doing that, or I'm going to file charges against you." That was the last communication. I blocked him after that. That was our last communication, but it was crazy to see that side by side. First he said, "Call my sin out. Tell everybody." Then he says, "You're telling people. I'm going to file charges." It's like, "What?"

NATALIE: Those are two perfect examples of what is going on behind the scenes. I mean, "Call my sin out"? That's what I'm doing over here. I'm over here learning what your sin is so I can call it out. But he didn't really want that. That leads into my next question: what are they really communicating? When they are going back and forth, what are they really saying? And can we know what they are really saying?

RACHEL: I think, obviously, there is the abuse cycle. It goes around and around. But the way I think about it is that they are using whatever means necessary, whether it is charm or giving you what you've always wanted, to gain power back over you. They want to get you back under their control. Unfortunately, it's so tricky because if they do start to act in ways that you've always wanted – you've always dreamed of having a husband who did these certain things – then it's easy to want to believe that. But you must be honest with yourself and look at what is truly going on. If your instinct says something is not right, you are probably correct.

DAPHNE: Yeah. That's great, Rachel. Ultimately it is about power and control. I was trying to think, "Why is it that those are things we want to hear? What are these scripts that are playing in our head that when we hear certain things we start to believe?" I was thinking that a lot of us are raised in conservative, Protestant, evangelical environments. I feel like it starts there.

We are taught from an early age that we need to hear certain things. There's a lot of emphasis on saying the right thing and having the appearance of doing certain things, but we're not taught a lot about "What does this look like?" practically. "What do these actions look like?" "What does this life need to look like?" Either we're not taught about

it or we see that the people who are supposed to be leading us have lives that are contradictory to what they are teaching us. It starts from this early age of grooming that you should be trusting what this person is saying. "What are you looking for?" I think we don't get great relationship education in the church.

RACHEL: No, we don't.

DAPHNE: I feel like the extent of it is that, "You should want a godly person. You shouldn't be unequally yoked, so they should be a Christian. You should want a godly person to be married to because obviously being married is better than being single. You also shouldn't have sex before you get married, and then once you get married you can't get divorced." So that is the extent of the relationship education.

We're not taught what this looks like in someone's life. We're definitely not told to trust our gut if our gut is telling us, "They might be saying that, but this isn't the truth." We are not told that. If they are quoting scriptures, if they know all the right words to say in the right situation... That's why I feel like they say these biblical things like, "Call my sin out. I want to repent." Those words are supposed to trigger in us, "Oh, that means they are godly, so we should listen to them."

RACHEL: Yes, that is so true, Daphne. You're right. There is no education on what godly character looks like. There is this impression that we just trust the words. I know I did. My ex-husband told me he was a Christian. His family was Christian. They all went to church. His mom worked at a church. I knew that was an important thing, and I had no way to discern that some things were not adding up.

NATALIE: I've recently been learning about how our brains are programmed from the time that we're a baby. It takes in all this objective information, all this data that comes in through our senses, and then it turns it into a program that tells us how we need to live our life. It dictates to us what is real and what isn't and what we need to believe.

If you've been raised in a Christian environment and steeped in it as an adult for many years, your brain is taking in all that kind of teaching. Some of it is good and some of it is not, but your brain doesn't know the difference. It just takes it in objectively and records it. Then that programming turns into thoughts that are in your head. When you get a text like that which says, "Call my sin out," or some other Bible verse, "The heart is desperately wicked and who can know it," you immediately go back to, as you said, Daphne, "That must be true." That's your thought. You don't even know this is a subconscious thought you're having because your brain's programming is running on automatic. You're thinking, "They must be telling the truth," "I need to listen to them,"

or, "This is a Bible thing, a God thing, so I need to perk up my ears and pay attention."

Your brain will look for evidence of what it believes, and it will overlook or ignore evidence of things it doesn't want to believe. That's why, when our husbands or exes or whoever, is showing us who they are with their actions, if our programming doesn't want to believe that, if our brain believes, "They're a Christian. They're a good person. They're my husband. They're my authority. I need to submit. I need to be open to reproof. I need to be humble. I need to be willing to suffer," if those messages are going through our brain, we're going to look for evidence for all of that.

The evidence for that is plainly in front of us. All these negative things are happening so we will think, "This is my life. This is good. This is my Christian life." But it really lies in changing our own thinking about... Take that text for example. He sends a text. What are you going to think about that text? Are you going to think all the religious thoughts you have always thought, or are you going to think, "Wait a minute! Is this really true? Are these thoughts true? Do I really want to hang onto these thoughts, or do I want to think something different about this?"

DAPHNE: That's good.

RACHEL: Is that confirmation bias? I think that's what you just described.

NATALIE: Yes. I didn't know that's what it was called, but yes.

RACHEL: We look for things that confirm our view or what we want to be our view, what we think we must believe. But then there is always some cognitive dissonance because there are two separate things we are seeing, and it is so confusing. That's where the confusion always comes in.

NATALIE: Right. That cognitive dissonance can be resolved in time, but it does require you to feed the new thought that you want to have and ignore or discount the thought that you are used to thinking. The thought you're used to thinking is big. It feels real to your brain. Your new thought feels like, "Is this really true? I don't know. I feel insecure about this thought." So you want to feed that new thought and not feed that old thought.

One of the best ways to do that is as soon as the old thought comes up such as, "He's my authority - I need to listen to him," your new thought could be... You'd want to connect the synapses in your brain that whenever you think that thought, you are going to think this new thought, which might be... I don't know. Do you guys have an idea of

what could be a replacement thought for, "He's my authority and I need to listen to him and obey him in all things"?

DAPHNE: A new thought could be, "I have as much authority over myself, and I can decide what I want to believe and act accordingly."

NATALIE: Yeah, exactly. I believe that. I believe that our first authority is Jesus Christ, but then our earthly authority is ourself. He gives us responsibility, authority, and autonomy over our own selves. That's called responsibility, the ability to respond. If we renege on that and give it away to other people, we will be controlled. We might not even think it's a problem if the person who is controlling us is very benevolent, kind, nice, fatherly, and nurturing.

I think most people probably aren't that way. Most people aren't going to take on that responsibility and be entirely 100% in your court. Most people are 100% in their own court. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't say "most" people. But a lot of people are going to use other people to get what they want. We all do that in some ways. We want to feel happy and we want to feel good. Even we who are living with men like that, we'll try to control their behavior, try to get them to change, or stop something so that we can feel better about our own lives. We don't have any authority over their own behavior, only they do. But we do have authority over our own behavior, and they don't!

DAPHNE: Right. I love how you brought up the idea of shifting your thoughts and how that can help you get out of some of these confusing interactions. You brought up the Jeremiah 17:9 scripture, "The heart is deceitful above all things and is desperately wicked. Who can know it?" That scripture was used so much to teach us to discount our emotions and our feelings, which I think goes a long way in perpetuating the system of spiritual abuse.

I know, Rachel, you mentioned that you didn't have a way to discern what things were true and what things were not because of what we were taught. What I found is that I always had this gut feeling that things were not right, but I was always told that you shouldn't trust your feelings. You should say "faith over feelings" or "facts over feelings" as if those things aren't important, as if feelings don't matter, as if God didn't give us those feelings, or as if God can't work through that to tell us what is going on.

One thing I've observed is that that part is less able to be molded than the intellect or the mind. A lot of this is an intellectual exercise, and you need to think the right thing. But in all of that being groomed intellectually, that feeling or spirit never wavered in telling me what was wrong and what was right. I feel another way to get out of this

dynamic is leaning into that space and trusting... Think about a situation where you knew something wasn't right but you decided to go along with it anyway. What happened? Lean into that. I think there's a lot that can be said for that gut feeling, trusting that feeling and leaning into that.

RACHEL: Daphne, that's such a good point, because that was a big part of my waking up. I was reading the Bible, really trying to plug into the truth of what God would say about my situation. I came to the realization that I had been living my life by formulas and trying to have a good marriage by inputting submission or sex. That's what a lot of the Christian advice is. "If you do these things, you're going to get this out." It's the prosperity gospel. I had to switch my thinking from that to what God actually commands us to do, which is walk by the Spirit.

That is hard to do when... You must stay plugged in to God. You must be truly humble and actually seek after Him instead of just saying, "Well, this is what God wants. This is what God says, and there's no flexibility here. There is always going to be this same answer for these really complicated and difficult situations, etc." Walking by the Spirit requires us to chase after God and ask Him to be with us all the time. Sometimes I think Christians say the right things, like Daphne was saying, like it is an intellectual exercise, but they are far removed from the heart of God. I've lived like that in the past, and I had to stop that.

NATALIE: Yeah. Which is love. When you think about it, the heart of God is love. I think whenever you see a movement of people who are seeking to listen to other people, really hear them, understand them, not try to define them but let them define their own selves, not put their responsibility onto other people but let other people take responsibility for themselves, and to just care about people and love them where they are at in their own journey, that's where I think you see the Holy Spirit of God.

Here's the message you get from these texts. If you get messages that are condemning or that are using the Bible to shame you, you know that is not the heart of God because only God, only the Holy Spirit, can convict a person of sin. That comes usually from inside that person. (That's how true transformation takes place anyway.) Whenever we go around and say, "You're doing that wrong. You really need to change that," that is not the Holy Spirit working through us. That is our own flesh wanting to control somebody else, and that is not love at all. That's us being selfish, and it's also us not trusting God, that God is fully capable of convicting someone else of their sin.

Now, I'm not saying that we don't give feedback to people. I'm not saying that if someone is hurting you that you don't say, "Stop kicking me in the shin." What I am

saying is that we don't go up to someone who is doing their own thing in their own life and say, "You need to..." Or let's say that someone is doing the dishes (I'm just giving weird examples) and you don't like the way they are doing the dishes. "You're not supposed to do the dishes that way. That's not how my mother taught me to do the dishes. You need to do the dishes the way I say. If you don't, you are stupid, ignorant, and you are unsubmitive." That's wrong. That's not trusting God that if they're doing the dishes wrong, then the Holy Spirit can convict them.

If the Holy Spirit never convicts them of the way they are doing the dishes..." Let's just take this. We won't get into politics, but I'll just say this. "You're not voting for the person I'm voting for, so therefore, you're not a Christian." That's not the Spirit of God at all. Everybody gets to vote for whoever they want to vote for, and that's not our job to say who everyone needs to vote for. I don't care if you believe morality is on your side or whatever is on your side. Love is letting people be who they are, unless they are coming at you, attacking you, and hurting you. Then, of course, you can put up a boundary. Love is also putting up a boundary and saying, "No, you can't. I love you, but no. You can't do that anymore to me."

DAPHNE: Yeah. There's two sides to that same coin: letting someone be who they are and acknowledging that they have the autonomy to do that, but also defining who you are and not letting someone else define who you are. I think a lot of times in this dynamic what happens is that we get caught up in trying to argue about what our thoughts, intentions, and beliefs are because what is coming at us are mischaracterizations of that. They are trying to tell us that we are wrong or whatever. I feel one of the lightbulb moments I had was, "I just don't agree, and that's okay," and I can leave it there.

We don't have to agree on that. We don't have to agree that your way is the best way to do the dishes. My way has worked fine. What makes you more important than me, more of an expert than me in this thing, to decide how I want to do it? We are the only people who walk in our shoes. We're the only people who have the thoughts and beliefs that we hold and can change and mold those. I think a practical take away in terms of how you think about these conversations is knowing that you get to decide what you want to believe, what you think, and how you define how you are feeling. It's okay if someone doesn't agree with you. You don't have to bend to that perception.

NATALIE: Yes. I was just thinking about parenting as you were talking. I was thinking that there are dysfunctional people who will try to raise little Lego characters, the characters that they want their kids to be. People who will do the dishes exactly the way that they did them. What inevitably happens is that kids begin to grow up, and it turns

out that they have their own universe between their ears. They may or may not believe all the same things that you believe.

In the homeschooling community, I think this is kind of a shocker for most people because they were told that if they raise their kids... We're kind of going down a different rabbit trail, but I think this is a good topic, though. They were told that if they raised their kids doing A, B, C, D, and E, that their kids would grow up and be these perfect Christians. They come to find out that kids grow up and they have their own ideas, their own universe, their own perceptions. They end up having their own experiences outside of the home, which is another reason I think some homeschooling communities try to keep the kids inside the home to try and control the narrative and control the life that they end up living.

It's just so wrong. That's not love. Love is sitting down with your kids and teaching them the way that you would like them to go, teaching them what you believe, and listening to what they are learning and what they believe and having conversations. That's love. You'd be surprised at how much, for me as a mom, anyway, how much I learn from my older kids.

RACHEL: I'm looking forward to that. My son is fifteen, and I can already see the little seeds of adulthood that are sprouting up in him. It's a good season. But that is so off-topic.

DAPHNE: I don't think so. I feel like I can tie it together.

NATALIE: Awesome! Do it.

DAPHNE: When you are talking about what a healthy dynamic looks like, it is people trying to understand one another. So if you haven't seen that in the dynamic, in your relationship dynamic, and you are trying to figure out what is going on with these conflicting messages, we talked about looking at what the person is showing you versus what they are telling you. Look at the history of the relationship and what is going on. Have they really been trying to understand your point of view? What things hurt you? What things would you like to see in a relationship? Or is it always a manipulative thing?

It's funny because with my ex, there were a few moments where he was honest about what his motives were. I think it is when I just started asking those questions and drilling down to see what his goal was. I was starting to see we don't have the same goals in these conversations. There was a time before we were separated for a couple weeks where he was really hard to live with. Everything was a conflict. It was a lot. He

wasn't willing to resolve anything. It was just bad.

I was planning to spend some time with my godparents. I had packed up and was ready to leave. He had this whole heart-filled speech about how he understood the things I was telling him about how what he was doing was hurtful. He said he understood how things from his childhood were causing him to act that way, so he wanted to change and do better. So I decided not to leave at that point. This was earlier on in our marriage. Things were okay for a little while, but of course they fell apart. I asked him specifically about that moment. I said, "You said all of these things. What happened to that?" He admitted, "I just said what I needed to say."

NATALIE: Wow!

RACHEL: Oh my gosh!

DAPHNE: Yeah. Crazy, right?

NATALIE: He just admitted it.

DAPHNE: Crazy. So I was like, "Oh, okay. I see what's going on here. You're just trying to manipulate me to get what you want, which was for me to stay so that you can continue having these crazy conversations and this dysfunctional arrangement." That's what he was wanting. That's what I'd think back on when he would say these conflicting things. I thought, "No! He's already told me that he's just saying what he needs to say. He's not really trying to understand me. He's not really trying to care for me. He's just trying to manipulate the situation." That was something I could always think back on and say, "That's what his motive is."

NATALIE: Yep. I was just talking to Patrick Doyle yesterday. He did a session for the Flying Free Sisterhood. He said that the salesman's job starts when the customer says, "No." So you said, "I'm going to set a boundary," and then his job kicked in. He tried to sell you on a seat next to him so you could have more of what he had already been dishing out to you.

RACHEL: Yeah. My ex-husband would always talk about how he tricked people. I didn't really know what to say to that. I would just always project who I thought he was onto him and say, "No, you don't do that. You're such a good person. You're so smart," all these things. He would say, "I just trick people into thinking that." I wish I would have believed him. He was telling me who he was.

NATALIE: But your brain was so wanting to believe something different. You were having all the thoughts saying he was a good guy, he's just doing his best, and he's smart. All those things you were telling him, your brain wanted to believe those things. It wasn't until you were willing to say something different and say the truth.

DAPHNE: I was going to say, it's because... That's another grooming thing. We're supposed to assume the best and believe the best about a person, right? Not necessarily what they are showing us. So we do start to develop this. We're projecting our good motives onto them because we wouldn't try to trick people, so why would they do that? That wouldn't be assuming the best about them.

RACHEL: Right! It's scary or unsettling when you wake up and realize, "People don't always have good motives. I can't trust all these people." I look back and see how naïve I was. That's a whole other story. But we must be smart and understand that some people really do try to take advantage of other people. All three of us were married to people like that. Yes, crazy.

DAPHNE: And they were honest! That's how crazy it is. They were honest about it, but we just didn't believe it!

NATALIE: That's what I was going to say. I don't think mine was ever honest. I don't think mine ever said anything like that. But yours, woah! That's interesting. There are people who do have that level of psychopathology where they purposefully do things on purpose, and they admit it. That's absolutely crazy! Well, I think we're going to wrap it up here. This was a really good conversation. Thank you for joining me for it. Thanks to those of you listening. Until next time, fly free!