

YOU ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR HUSBAND'S BEHAVIOR

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 96 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we were going to have Patrick Doyle, but he ended up not coming to his interview. So I pivoted because I can do that. This is my podcast. I can do whatever I want to, right? So I invited my friend Sara. She's not just my friend, but she is helping me out inside the Flying Free Sisterhood and doing some work. You know what she does? Sara, tell them what your main job is.

SARA: I'm a copywriter and an editor. I also write for myself.

NATALIE: And what do you do for Flying Free?

SARA: Sometimes I send out an email too early, and then I have to send a follow-up email and tell everybody, "Just kidding!"

NATALIE: Okay, that just happened today. When they hear this podcast, it's going to be two months from now. They will have long forgotten that. But you know what? Maybe you'll have made that mistake a few more times before this podcast comes out. You can be known as... They are going to be best friends with you by the time this comes out.

SARA: Don't put that evil on me.

NATALIE: Really, what Sara's main job so far (we will throw more work her way) is to do the whole podcast. Well, she doesn't do the whole thing. I record the podcast. Then I send it to my son who edits the podcast, and I also send a copy to a friend of mine, Jennifer, who makes the transcripts for the podcast. Everything else is in Sara's lap. She takes it and runs with the rest of it. She makes sure that you get it in your email inbox. She makes sure it gets posted on social media and posted on the blog. So really, Sara, this podcast is kind of your baby right now. And here you are! You are actually on the podcast, which seems only fitting.

SARA: The circle of life or something.

NATALIE: Totally! It's the circle of life. I'm glad that this happened. I thought it would be fun to interview you and let people get a chance to know who you are. So let's do this. We're totally flying by the seat of our pants.

SARA: I love it!

NATALIE: Me too. What could be more fun than literally flying by the seat of your pants?

SARA: It's an incredible feeling.

NATALIE: We are having way too much fun. I must write a thank you note to Patrick. I will reschedule with him, and he'll be on another time. If you were really looking forward to Patrick, which you weren't because I wouldn't have advertised it, but he has another podcast episode with us. I can't remember what number it is, but it was from 2019. If you go over to the blog at flyingfreenow.com/podcast, you can dig around the archives. You'll find him – he's in there.

He also has two expert workshops inside the private, locked Flying Free Sisterhood Membership Site. If you're interested in becoming part of that group, you can apply at joinflyingfree.com. We have lots of expert workshops, but Patrick has two of them. They are both amazing. He's an amazing guy, and we'll get him in here. We are going to drag his butt in here and interview him one of these days. In the meantime, I've got the lovely Sara. We talked earlier about how she is related to Patrick Doyle through Adam and Eve and how she has just as much wisdom and experience as Patrick Doyle. So we're good to go today.

SARA: I think we need a legal disclaimer at this point.

NATALIE: Oh my gosh! I hope Patrick is not listening. Sara, tell us a bit... You are divorced, correct?

SARA: Yes, ma'am. Woo hoo!

NATALIE: You have two daughters.

SARA: I do, yes.

NATALIE: It's all their fault that the email got sent out, right?

SARA: I was pretty distracted by my younger daughter. It was a bit of a mess.

NATALIE: So what's going on in your home right now?

SARA: They are doing distance learning, but we had multiple doctor's appointments, so they have missed some of their Zoom calls. They are making up multiple Zoom calls and homework assignments. Also, I think when everything is going one-hundred percent, it is still a gigantic mess with distance learning. It's just a dumpster fire.

NATALIE: It is totally a dumpster fire! I've got three kids at home distance learning. The two older ones do fine, but the younger one, not so much. So we spent the morning... I've lost count of how many meltdowns we had. Not me. (Well, I might have had a couple.) But for sure he did. He had quite a few. And now our internet is down.

SARA: Oh my gosh!

NATALIE: I'm plugged into... You know how you can plug into your whatever?

SARA: Hotspot?

NATALIE: Well, it's not a hotspot. The wi-fi is down.

SARA: The wi-fi is down, but not your hardline. Got it.

NATALIE: Yeah. I'm hardwired in, so I'm able to do this podcast because of that. But everybody else is kind of on hold now. I suppose we'll be playing catch up over the weekend. But fun times. I'm sure many people can relate. Then your two daughters have health issues as well. It's like a hurricane in your life at all times.

SARA: To some extent. I think it's similar to an abusive marriage in that your normal is just your normal – not that it should be in the case of an abusive marriage. But you are so used to it that you become inured to what could be better. I don't mean that in a resignation way. I just mean that our normal is our normal, so what is crazy to us is just what we have to do.

NATALIE: That reminds me: Marie Forleo has this podcast called "The Marie Forleo Podcast." She had an Auschwitz survivor on there who has written a book. (Now I'm not going to remember the survivor's name or the book's title. The book has something to do with a gift.)

Anyway, I was listening to the podcast, and this woman who survived Auschwitz is in her nineties. She talked about how she got separated from her mom and her sister.

Her mom ended up going to the gas chambers. She went through that, but one of the things she learned through it is to find the gifts in each day. Even though your day may be full of hell, there are beautiful things in each day. If you start to look for them, you will find them, and it will change your perspective on things. This interview is brand new. She is talking to those of us who are living through COVID. There's a lot of stress and a lot of things going on. I thought, "If you can survive Auschwitz and have that attitude, I think we can survive COVID."

SARA: Honestly, that's one of the most beautiful things that I've gained through this, but it also relates to my personality inherently that no matter what, I was always trying to find something to laugh about, but naturally. It would just come out of me. Because of what I've been through, I will look around sometimes (and not in this hoity-toity, "Why can't you be awesome like me?" way), but I will see people who are complaining about things and I think, "Really? I think everything is fantastic." Even with distance learning, it is not ideal. There's a lot about it that stinks. But I say that with the backdrop of "It's okay, and this is not a big deal." I'm just going to do what I can to make it work as much as I can. Otherwise, I'm just going to let it go.

NATALIE: Yes. That is all rooted in what we choose to think – what we choose to make something mean for us.

SARA: Yeah.

NATALIE: So you are very funny. I want everyone to know that Sara is a very funny person. She makes me laugh every day. So how do you find humor? This is something I've noticed about survivors. They are a little bit edgy and maybe somewhat sarcastic. (Not all survivors, but a lot of survivors are.) I feel that living in an emotionally abusive relationship or spiritually twisted relationship brings out the sarcasm in you eventually, because you either go crazy or you get a little bit sarcastic, right? I prefer the sarcasm route. But we do tend to have a good sense of humor. So how do you explain that? How did you find humor in your relationship or your situation? There is so much funny about the relationship, right? (I'm just kidding.)

SARA: I can tell you it was hilarious. It was like a merry-go-round – in hell!

NATALIE: Exactly.

SARA: I think that was part of the light I brought to that relationship. I think that's just part of who I am, so I don't know if I can answer it. But I will say that... Yeah, what you said about if things are really dark and you're... Even if you are resigned... Maybe it's

part of a defense mechanism, because if I make the joke before you do, then how can you hurt me deeply?

NATALIE: Yes!

SARA: There's a sad aspect to that. For example, I am writing a book. One chapter is on intimacy, and it relates to embarrassment. In one chapter I write as if it is a different person, but it is about me and about sexual rejection. I call out some things my ex-husband did that were really painful but in a casual, mocking way towards me. It's not because I actually believe these things, but I feel it created a distance between what he did. It clarified for me that I am to a point where you can't hurt me anymore. If I own the negative, what else can you say to hurt me? I believe there's a dark aspect to that. I don't mean to paint with a broad brush because I think a lot of my joy and my humor come from pure and delightful places, but I know that is a part of it.

NATALIE: Yeah. That is so fascinating. I remember I would sometimes say self-deprecating things in order to beat him to the punch.

SARA: Yes, because "I am so ridiculous."

NATALIE: Later on when I got out of that relationship and I got into another relationship, I had no desire to put myself down anymore. I was trying to figure out why I always did that before. It was almost like I couldn't help myself.

SARA: It is sobering, though, because you realize... I remember in the past at one point you talked about how we have to recognize and accept but also move forward from the fact that being in these marriages, these relationships, really changed us. There are beautiful things to be gained, but they did bring a lot of harm to who we are and how we acted.

NATALIE: It did. Tell us how you got out of your relationship. Were you in a religious environment? Did that make it difficult? Tell me a little about that.

SARA: I feel like for me, spiritual abuse was front-loaded in that I was in a church plant when I was about eighteen. I ended up living with the pastors for the first year of college. Long story short, they ended up with complete control of my life. I didn't realize how desperate and dark I felt until I started having suicidal ideation and attempted suicide a few times. I got married not long after, which I don't recommend. Not marriage, but getting married young. I think I thought I was getting out of a bad situation from my family and maybe getting away from those people directly.

It didn't really work because I was so tied into wanting to honor the Lord. I was in ministry at the time. I was a worship leader for twelve years. So I just thought I had to stick it out. I would get physically ill on the way to church. That's how stressful and horrible it was. I acted really poorly to my husband's behavior during the first year of my marriage. Because no one around me really understood what was going on, they went to saying, "You're crazy. This is all your fault. Here are seventeen things you need to do to be a better wife." They set me up pretty well to believe that it was all my fault. There are a lot of ways they reinforced that, which were so damaging to me. I think when I got out of the church for about four years I was floundering wondering, "Who am I? What does God think of me? How do I deal with this self-loathing?"

Fast-forward because it would take me too long. I was told by a really respected and wise counselor, who is the only one who pegged my husband for who he is, to get out. He said, "I'm not an advocate of divorce, but get out!" This is when my second daughter was one year old. He took my ex to task, and my ex was so pissed. He wouldn't do any of the homework. I remember at one point (this is a sad part of the story) the counselor said, "Listen. Do you want Sara to have a good life? Do you want anything good for her? Because she can't have it with you. You don't want her, but you won't let her go. Fish or cut bait. Say something right now in this session. Do something to show that you want this marriage." My husband sat on that couch across from me and shook the entire couch with his angry leg. Do you know what I mean?

NATALIE: Yes!

SARA: That was one of his intimidation tactics that became really pronounced toward the end – that constant, seething anger. I remember just sitting there. I was somewhat horrified, but not exactly surprised. I remember the Holy Spirit welling up within me and saying, "You are a good woman and you are worth fighting for." I held my peace. I think the counselor was astounded as well. That wasn't the end of our marriage. I felt like, "What else can I do?" I exhausted all my efforts, and here was the breaking point. I was getting healthier and learning more about boundaries. I was on the phone with my sister who I talk to about everything. I would marry her if I could, as weird as that sounds.

NATALIE: I totally get it.

SARA: I broken-heartedly told her, "I don't know what to do. I want to live at peace with him. My expectations are so low. Could he just not make every waking moment a nightmare?" She said, "I don't know." I said, "I haven't fasted for like, thirty days straight." She then said, "This is insane!" I think she swore – like "This is BS," but

probably more forcefully. She said, "You are not responsible for his behavior."

When she said that, it was like a dam broke inside my heart and the avalanche came forth and I knew. The truth of that hit home. As soon as she said that... We hadn't even been talking about separation or divorce. I said, "I have to separate." So I started making a move toward that. I don't care how it sounds, but I am so freaking proud of myself because it was so scary. There seemed to be so much against me. None of it made sense. I had no plan. Everything was crazy. It was terrifying, and I freaking did it!

NATALIE: That is amazing. I celebrate every woman who is able to get out because it's like... I was watching "The Stranger" on Netflix. I might not have the best taste, but I love British drama. I love British murder mysteries and stuff. At the beginning, there is a scene where this boy is running away from something. (He is high on drugs, so the analogy breaks down a bit.) But in the scene, he is running and shedding his clothes. By the time he gets to the end of his running journey, which ends badly, he is completely naked. He ends up laying there in the grass after a long fall, but he gets away... I think he gets away. I'm still watching it, so I'm not really sure why he was running.

The point is that's how I picture women who are trying to get out of their abusive relationships. They are running, and everything that they love, that keeps them covered, and that keeps them safe they have to shed one-by-one until all they have left is their bare, naked self laying on the ground flat on their face. That is the place where they start their new life, but it is only from that place. It's very difficult to be fully clothed on one side of those woods and understand, "In order to get out, I'm going to have to shed everything and run to the other side." It's kind of like "Survivor" – a "Survivor" challenge or something. Who wants to do that? That is not appealing.

SARA: No, it's not. I really resonate with what you just said. I'm saying this from the other side in a large sense, so I don't say this without compassion for the people who are so scared. I don't want to come off as "I've arrived. Why haven't you?" I haven't arrived. I'm out, but I haven't arrived. There is no arrival point.

NATALIE: Yeah, we're all still running.

SARA: But I know that, staring down, as much as I could, losing everything – it brought so much freedom. And I think that's actually key. Oh, here we go! Back to what we said earlier. If you lose a ton, or what you consider everything, then anything you have, even just a small joy – a caterpillar or being able to eat Ramen for lunch – it brings you happiness in ways that it wouldn't have before. We don't take for granted all the beautiful, small, tiny things – all the peace, all the smiles, all the quiet in our homes –

after this. I think that's a big part of it.

NATALIE: Yes. I totally agree. It makes me think of the verse that says, "You lose your life, but you gain your soul."

SARA: Yeah. That was compelling to me when I was getting out because when I was told to get out by the counselor, I remember thinking... First, I said to him, "How is this not manipulation? It's like an ultimatum." He said, "No. You are just accepting that you don't have a marriage and acting based on that." But I was so scared. I remember thinking, "I don't make any money right now and I haven't been in the workforce for a while." Also, physically, I couldn't handle getting out. I don't hate myself for not doing it. I just needed to recover from giving birth to my second child and all my health problems related to that. I think the freedom that I found within that was... I think in the end I got to the point where I didn't care what I needed to lose. I just knew what I had to do.

NATALIE: Right. You found that you gain so much more, and I think that's important too. We put a premium on comfort, but there is something to be said for freedom. Anyone who has experienced not being free and then being free understands exactly what I am saying.

SARA: I wasn't joking when we started this and I said "Woo hoo!" about being divorced. I'm still on a high, and it's been a while.

NATALIE: For everyone listening who isn't feeling like that... I've talked to people who are newly divorced or even out for a few years, and they are not feeling high. That is something that we do... I'll just put this in there. If you are a divorced woman of faith and you are still feeling stuck, I have a program that is opening up in January 2021 called Flying Higher. It is for divorced women of faith, and that's what we do.

We work on... There are things you can do with your brain. Your brain is an organ in your body that is the most profound, highly functional, amazing, incredible thing that you have – a gift that God has given to you. We can make our brains work for us. The Bible talks a lot about this. We spin it in a spiritual way rather than looking at it from a scientific perspective. But we can take our brains and do things with our brains that will help us create a completely different future for our lives.

Our brains will always look for evidence of what our brain believes. We get to tell our brain what to believe. That's what faith is. We tell our brain what we choose, what we decide we want to put our faith in – whether it is ourselves, God, somebody else, a program, a church, our husband – we decide what we are going to put our faith in by

the thoughts we think. We go into great depth on this in the Flying Higher program. I think it would be very helpful for people who are struggling with... I started off with a Beta group. Actually, Sara is in that Beta group.

SARA: I am.

NATALIE: The first course we did was... We get out of our abusive relationships, but then we are left abusing ourselves over and over again through our thoughts. It's like the abuser is a mind worm. He is burrowed into our brain. We have to get those voices out of our brain. We can do that, and people are doing it. It is very transformative. So if this sounds like something you need, go to joinflyinghigher.com and apply today. That page will also tell you more about it and has a video for you to watch.

SARA: Can I tag in and plug that too?

NATALIE: Absolutely.

SARA: About a year ago I felt the urge to look toward the future instead of all the stuff I had been doing: grieving, processing, and trying to get safe. It has not been all roses and twinkies for me. It's been a really rough three years. A lot of devastating and heart-breaking things happening despite getting free. Right around the time I thought, "I think I have benefitted in the ways I want to from Flying Free," you introduced the idea of Flying Higher when I got to that point as I was making some changes in my personal and professional life.

It has been so, so good. If you're in a place where you are divorced or partially out and are thinking, "I did this so I could be miserable for the rest of my life?" No! Don't internalize that as the fact of the matter. What Natalie said is true. When we get out, we're out physically. But there are a lot of ways in which our mind is still in bondage. The great thing is that we are the bosses of our minds. We can make incredible change and transformation through addressing those things and looking closely at them. That is what Flying Higher is about. It's been extremely rewarding. Just do it.

NATALIE: That was awesome! Speaking of that, Sara, you are actually launching your own business. You are doing your own business. Tell us what you decided to do. What made you step out? That is kind of scary, I know. It is scary to step out and start a business. You have no idea if you are going to find enough people that need your services, if you will make enough money to put food on the table, all of that. You aren't relying on someone else. I'm curious about what you do. What do you do for healthcare and stuff? Anyway, I want to know all the things.

SARA: Some of it doesn't sound spectacular at all, but maybe that will encourage people all the more. Last summer is when things started. I've been doing ESL, English as a Second Language, online since right before I moved out. That was in 2017, the summer of 2017. It paid okay and it was what we needed. It was a huge blessing for that. But there is no job security at all, no benefits, and there is no way to move up. You just add to the number of classes you teach. But I think I needed a somewhat brainless activity for earning money.

I pulled out a writing project that I had started years ago but hadn't moved forward on because, who can be creative when you are just in constant trauma? Not me. I also thought I was a complete piece of trash. One thing my ex said about me was that my degree in English was a joke and everybody laughed at it and I should apologize to the professors who got me a full scholarship.

NATALIE: He was a nice guy, wasn't he?

SARA: He was so precious. Bless his heart. Toward the end, I could tell that was total crap. Living within that environment had a significant impact on my self-confidence. I got to the point where I decided I wanted to start writing again. I called my sister. I hate the word "accountability" because of things I've been through, but I said, "As an accountability measure, when you come visit me in the fall, I will have the rough draft to this book finished." She said, "All right, because I am going to read it."

So I did. I can't say that all the writing was great, but I busted it out. Around that time, it sort of whet my appetite to say, "Wake up these dreams again. You are more than what you are doing. You have so much more to offer. You are amazing and you have incredible giftings. Put them out into the world. What's the worst that can happen? You've already faced the pit of hell. You can do this too."

It's interesting because I made that decision on my own, and I knew it would necessitate moving from homeschooling, which is what I had been doing for multiple reasons, to public school. I had no idea how that would work. I came to find out about a tiny charter school near my home that I would never have even thought of. One thing I have seen that is so beautiful and good and the opposite of what I lived in, what we all lived in, as I stay open, there is no striving. Things just happen as I challenge the status quo and I believe for better. Things come together. I just take whatever I think is the next step as best as I can. If I screw up, I just keep going. Things kept coming together.

I was about to enroll them in school and my ex decided he would not pay alimony anymore, and he did it without notice. It became necessary for me to get more work

because I had a lot less. It was a significant amount. The catch-22 of that was that once I put them in school (I knew this beforehand), one of his stipulations for alimony ending was that. If they were in school, he wasn't paying me alimony. We could argue over whether that is fair, but I had agreed on it, so whatever. The great thing is that I had made that decision on my own, but afterward it would have been forced. But I got to sort of preemptively strike on my own.

I put them in school in December of last year. They got three months in before COVID shut everything down. But during that time I started looking into copywriting, which is writing to sell. There is more to it than that. But I thought I wanted to use my creativity. I wanted to use compelling words. I just love the way language opens up our minds and connects us to each other and can help people see value in things.

I kept coming up against... I realized a lot of the firms wanted someone who is very experienced, but I thought, "That's where you come in." I remember applying for a job and three minutes later (and it wasn't an auto-response, which makes it even worse) they wrote back and said, "Nah! Not you." I just laughed. That was the other thing. Being brave made it less traumatizing to go through what I might have considered failure before. After a couple of months of that I decided, "Okay. If nobody wants me in a business, I'll make my own. Let's do this."

So I made my own website and started asking people who were doing things I cared about if I could help them with content marketing for their websites or even business plans. I had joined a fitness group online. This guy was putting out a program that was brand new, and it was amazing. It related really well to survivors. I said, "Can I edit all this for you for free?" I started doing things pro bono and asking for reviews. That also brought me experience and connections to people that ended up serving me later.

That is what it has been so far. A lot of the work has been coming to me. I now work with a seasoned editor for a major publishing house. She pushes stuff to me. I'm working for you, of course. I've worked for several people in lots of different fields. That has been exciting because not only do they provide me different kinds of work, but I'm learning about those fields.

NATALIE: What I think is fascinating about this is... You offered that to me too. You offered to edit something. I cannot remember what it was now. I said, "Sure. Why not?" Then I was so impressed with what you did I said, "I need some work with this." Eventually it developed into something. Here's the fascinating thing that I want people to notice. This is what any business is. You put value out into the world. You help people. That's what it is. You help people, and then they want your help, and they pay

you for the help. That is basically what any business is. You were willing to say “I’ll help you for free” at first to give yourself experience and to make some connections. Now, because of that, how long would you say...? It’s only been a few months that you have been doing that, right?

SARA: Yes. I was doing some work for free earlier in the year, but since... I had some paid jobs interspersed with those free ones. But I haven’t done any pro bono work since the beginning of the summer, I’d say.

NATALIE: That’s amazing. I’m so proud of you!

SARA: Me too!

NATALIE: This is something that anyone can do. There are so many women who think, “I don’t know what I am going to do when I get out. I don’t know how I’m going to put food on the table. I don’t know this. I don’t know that.” Our brain on autopilot will always say “I don’t know,” because a brain wants to keep looping on the same things over and over. It is efficient. It hates being interrupted. A lot of women say, “I don’t know.” But your brain knows. Your brain is incredibly amazing. And you know. Even if your brain doesn’t, you know. You can introduce ideas.

When my kids say “I don’t know,” I say to my kids, “If you did know, then what would you do?” They are completely taken aback. They are just stunned. “Oh, my gosh! Well, in that case...” Then they come up with answers because it makes their brains take a step back. It says, “Oh fine. I’ll work on it then. I’ll think about it. I’ll come up with a solution.” Then people do come up with solutions.

People are wired by God to be survivors and to make things work. You are a woman who had financial difficulties. You had health issues. You had two children with health issues also, not just your garden-variety snotty nose here and there. They had serious health issues that are ongoing, involve hospitalizations, involve surgeries, involve all kinds of stuff. Yet you got to the place where you had nothing, and you were able to start over again from that place of having nothing. God was with you every single step of the way.

SARA: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

NATALIE: I think we will end on that note. I know there’s a lot of disillusionment about God in the survivor community because we think, “Where was God when all this was happening? Where is God in my court trial that is falling apart and now my kids have to

ask, 'How come there is no justice?'" I'll be honest. I struggle with the same thing regularly. Here is what I always have to remind myself. God never promised that He was going to overturn the Roman government and set up His kingdom of perfection here on Earth. I'm speaking of when Jesus came. They all said "Jesus, if you're the Son of God, you are going to set up your kingdom here." He never promised there would never be death in the world. Every single person listening to this podcast right now will be dead in the next one hundred years, barring some kind of scientific breakthrough. (Hey, it could happen. I'm hoping it doesn't, though. Can you imagine being one-hundred and fifty years old? I would be like, "Please already. Let me be done. I want to be done." But I digress.)

He never promised that there would never be sickness in the world. He never promised that all the evil people would suddenly get halos and walk around doing great good in the world. As long as we are on planet Earth there will be beautiful, amazing things and there will be a lot of crappy things. The only thing He can offer us and that He promised us is to never leave us or forsake us. He promised that neither height nor depth nor the past nor the present nor the future nor anything else in all creation (including divorce) can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Religious communities will tell you all the things that can separate you from the love of God. They truly believe that there is so much that can separate you from God's love. That's bull. That's not what the Bible teaches us. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. That is what you have. There's a verse in the Bible that talks about Israel being like a woman who is naked and unclothed. God comes along and He covers her. He clothes her, He puts on royal garments, and He makes her a queen. That's what God does when you are at the end of that forest and you're lying naked, facedown on the ground. He's going to clothe you and He's going to make you a queen. That is your destiny. I think that's a good place to end the podcast episode. What do you think?

SARA: Sounds good.

NATALIE: Thank you so much, Sara, for pivoting with me, for coming on this podcast episode at the very last minute. That's a wrap for Episode 96. Thank you for those of you bearing with us and listening to our serendipitous episode. Until next time, fly free!