

HOW WRITING YOUR STORY WILL HELP YOU HEAL FROM EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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 97 of the Flying Free Podcast! I'm excited to introduce you to Stacy Brookman. She is a life storytelling and resilience expert. We got to know each other a couple of years ago through the Emotional Abuse Recovery Summit that she did. Is that still available to purchase?

STACY: It is, yes.

NATALIE: Maybe at the end you can talk about...We'll tell you about all the places where you can find Stacy and access her resources, but we're going to be talking about... Well first, hi and welcome.

STACY: I am excited to be here. We love doing things together and we can just chat.

NATALIE: We do, yeah. It's awesome.

STACY: It really is.

NATALIE: Stacy and I have a good synergy here. Today she is going to be focusing on the subject of writing to heal which I think is so fascinating, and I am so into the whole idea of journaling. That's what I do and teach the people in my group. But she takes a more expansive bent on that. The first question I think I want you to answer is healing from what? What are some things that people may want to heal from that journaling or writing can help them with?

STACY: That's a great question. I don't think I've ever had that asked before. Really, writing to heal helps you heal whatever hurts you've had. I always say there is no trauma Olympics. Hardly anyone escapes childhood without some sort of trauma. All of us can benefit from writing and specifically writing to get into those tough stories.

On my podcast, I've interviewed someone who has come through cancer three times, people who have lost loved ones, people who've been in traumatic situations, emotional abuse... That's what I really focus on, people who have been in emotionally abusive relationships. But writing gets any junk that is in your head out, and you can

heal from it.

NATALIE: Yes. I love that. Of course, the audience here is women of faith who are dealing with emotional abuse, so this is perfect for them.

STACY: Yes.

NATALIE: Can you tell us how writing helps you heal?

STACY: That's another good question. If you don't mind, let me tell you how I found that out. As I'm doing that, you'll know how and understand. I was going through a divorce from a sociopath over ten years ago now. My gosh, it was, of course, horrible, and I did not understand any of the strategies we can use today as I was in that kind of brain fog. I did something that was really healthy for me in the middle of that. I couldn't remember what was going on and didn't remember what was happening day-to-day. I didn't know what was going to happen to me day-by-day because the strategies this guy was using were horrible.

My parents gave me some money for my birthday even though I was an adult. They still sent a little money in a card. As moms, we usually spend it on our kids or we go out to eat or do something. I took that money and thought, "I want to do a writing class, a memoir class." I took that money and I started a class. That was the class that I say saved my life. As I started writing, I realized I was writing these crazy stories of him cutting the heater wires in the middle of winter in Rochester, New York, of calling child protective services on me, and of doing all kinds of crazy stuff.

I would just write these stories out and bring them to my class. I realized, as they were non-judgmental, that they couldn't fix my problem at all, but they held my story with grace and just listened. As I was writing these stories out, I became so much calmer. We did some exercises, and I realized that my theme... I thought I was a professional woman. I started seeing clearly, "How in the world did I end up in an abusive relationship?" It helped me start to heal (because healing is a long-term process).

I started researching about why writing those tough stories, everything that happened to me each week, helped me. I found there is a wide body of research out there. Dr. James Pennebaker from the University of Texas has done a ton of research and lots of others. (I can't remember the man's name from North Carolina.) But the research shows that writing and digging into that tough stuff, writing your feelings, and getting into those stories (we can talk about past or current tough stories) helps boost your immune system and boosts your emotional, physical, and psychological well-being.

There is a wide body of research around, so much so they now have degrees in expressive writing therapy. There are expressive writing therapy degrees all around the world. When I found that I thought, "Gosh, everybody in the world needs to know that writing can heal even if you're not a writer."

NATALIE: I love that. You guys on the podcast, you can only hear her. But I wish you could see her set up behind her. It is absolutely gorgeous. She's got these antique typewriters and beautiful pictures. It's very peaceful, but it definitely screams, "Writing is amazing!" I just love it! You told me before that you have these four strategies, or these four things that you teach. I'm wondering if you would share those with the listeners?

STACY: Absolutely! I'll tell them all first and then I'll go into each one a little. The first one is to embrace your stories. Then you've got to enable your stories. Then you need to enhance your stories. Finally, you need to elevate your stories. Let me tell you a little about each one of those.

The first one is to embrace your stories. It seems counterintuitive to embrace those tough stories. You've got to turn to your past (or in my case it was my present) and stare down those stories that haunt you, the trauma or whatever tough things life has thrown at you. To become more resilient, you've got to become less resistant to those stories. You must acknowledge that they are tough, they are terrible, they are awful. You have to acknowledge you have a story there. When we try to ignore the bad stuff... And you've probably heard the things people will tell you: "Just get over it. Put it in the past. The past is past." Maybe your past is embarrassing or icky. Maybe you think you are just being a baby about these things and it wasn't that bad. We try anything to minimize what has happened.

But what writing does is that it says, "You need to address it. You need to dig into them. You need to uncover everything, all the bad stuff, and just get it out." When you get it out, it loses its power over you. When you are writing, you manipulate that story instead of the story having power over you. That's the beautiful thing. I love that about it.

NATALIE: That's incredible.

STACY: It is, and that's just the first step.

NATALIE: In your personal experience, did you have any kickback from yourself as far as resistance to wanting to look at some of those hard things?

STACY: I did at first. But as I was doing the exercises, I discovered my life theme in some of these stories that was a hidden life theme. I started doing an exercise that I take my folks through, and I started seeing a commonality. I thought I was a professional woman, successful, and all of that. But when I discovered my life theme in this writing I thought, "Wow. Don't raise my hand. I've lost my voice." I could see instances from kindergarten, grade school, high school, young adult, all the way into my mid-forties. I realized that was crazy.

I teach a technique called "free writing" in a specific way. That makes it easy. There is no judgment. You're just getting it out of your head. It's partial words. It's junk. That is step number two, enabling your story. You've got to get that out of your head, because when you go through some sort of trauma... I said there is no trauma Olympics. If your dog died when you were ten years old, that could be a trauma that is sticking in your head. Or you moved to a different city and were totally a stranger. Those sorts of things (in addition to true abuse and other things like that) stick in your head. When you start writing about those things, it is partial sentences. It's feelings. There is no punctuation, no grammar. It makes it easier to get it out. Nobody is going to see that junk. You mentioned that you've journaled, right?

NATALIE: Yeah.

STACY: I resisted journaling for a long, long time, like forever, because when I started journaling a couple of times all I could write was bad stuff. "Here's my horrible day." It was junk, and it was awful. In the back of my mind I thought, "I don't want some future person seeing this and thinking I was a bad and negative person." The way I teach this free writing is that it is only for you. No one in the entire world will ever see it. What that allows you to do is address it and say, "Okay. Here's what it is. When I see it for what it is, then I can fix it."

When I saw my life theme was not standing up for myself, not raising my hand, not sharing my voice with others, I realized I didn't like... I thought, "That's not me! I don't want that." But it rang true. When I saw it, I could change it, and I did. I changed my life theme. Now I speak out. If I see something, I address it in a non-confrontational way. I'm still an introvert. So that helped me become a better me, the me I really should be and the true me.

That's how I became more resilient and started living a joy-filled life because all that junk... It goes around in your head and it's foggy. Your brain tries to protect you on purpose. It makes things foggy because we don't want to address that, "So let's just put this in the back." But it comes back time and time again. When you write and get it out

in black and white, whether you write physically or you type on the computer (different people think different things on that), it helps you heal because you get that out of your head. You can control that story and see it for what it really is.

NATALIE: It's almost like you become a more objective observer of your story instead of being so emotionally caught up in it you are upside down in a tsunami, and you can't figure out which way is up and which way is down.

STACY: Exactly. You are looking at it with older and wiser eyes, but also more compassionate eyes. This is where people start to say, "You know what?" Or you can start to say this, and I hope people do: "You know what? You were doing the best you could at the time." When I was writing, I was thinking, "Why in the world did I get involved with this guy? There were red flags all over the place."

But I was doing what I could with what I had at the time - with the knowledge that I had, with the psychological makeup that I had at the time. (I had just come out of another bad relationship where I was rejected. My whole childhood, all of that is there.) And I did the best I could at the time. It's okay if I didn't see those red flags. Now I see them. Now I will not connect with anybody who has those red flags. In fact, I've put people at arm's length who I've seen have that. So it's okay to look back. Don't look back in condemnation. Look back with compassion at yourself.

NATALIE: Yes. I love that.

STACY: In fact, when I was doing this exercise, I looked back and could say to my eight-year-old self or my sixteen-year-old self who had some of these traumas, "It's okay. It's okay to speak up now. It's okay to share your opinion. It's okay to have a voice." It was that eight-year-old girl who was saying, "No. Don't speak out. Nobody wants to hear your voice. Do not make a ripple in the water. Just be in the corner and be quiet." I operated as an adult for decades from that eight-year-old girl telling me what to do. So I looked back and said, "It's okay to share your voice, and we're going to do that from now on."

NATALIE: That is so beautiful. What I love about that is that there are people listening who are probably thinking, "That's all fine and good for people like Stacey or people like Natalie. They get out there and they speak, but I'm not like that. I'm an introvert. That's just not my personality." Here's the thing: both Stacey and I are introverts. Both of us. We were both in a place ten or fifteen years ago where we weren't saying anything. We were saying things, but we were saying only things that everyone would agree with. That was when we would open our mouth.

Every human being on this planet was created by God with a voice and a story. Whether you are an extrovert or an introvert is completely irrelevant. Just being able to find who the person inside of you is who is hiding in fear and exchanging that fear for love... I love how this whole writing process helps you to embrace that stance of love for yourself and your story rather than hiding from it. That is God's destiny for all of us.

STACY: Right. You don't know what that is until you start exploring, start writing, and start feeling confident in yourself. You've got to love yourself first before you can love anybody else. I know a lot of women who have gotten out of relationships and think they need to get back into another relationship or they need somebody. (Not just women. There are men, too.)

I get it. I understand because you want to be – we're designed to be – loved. But you've got to love yourself first and understand that God loves you and how He loves you so tremendously. You must embed that in your very being and be kind to yourself. Don't listen to that mean girl in your head. That mean girl is almost gone – not completely. I still have moments where I think, "Should I do that? Why yes, I should."

NATALIE: That mean little girl is only mean because she is scared. It's like instead of getting rid of her, we help transform her into the little girl that we wish that we could have been, who felt safe and happy and loved, who could make mistakes without being afraid or without worrying about someone condemning her, ripping on her, or doing bad things to her. That's who we want her to be. We want her to become that person inside of us.

STACY: Yes.

NATALIE: So the third one is enhance. What is that?

STACY: Enhance. Once you have done that free writing and it's a jumbled mess, partial sentences, misspelled words, junk that is out on paper... I recommend people do that for five to forty-five minutes a day or however long you can. Just get that junk out, because that is going to give you golden nuggets. Then you will pick and choose from those free writings, the ugly stuff, and you will form a beautiful story with that. Yes, those horrible, tragic, awful events can be formed into a beautiful story where you can share your wisdom.

That's another thing that happens when you write your story. You have learned hard and won wisdom that you may have not even discovered or implemented yet. As you went through those things, you may not have even realized what you have learned.

When you are culling through these free writes and are forming them into little scenes and stories, you discover not only that wisdom that you can lay out in a beautiful story, but you can learn your superpowers.

I learned that I could be confident. I learned that I could endure. Now, there are some things that I shouldn't endure, which is the abuse, but I learned that I am creative. I learned I am the best brainstormer you will ever come across. That is my superpower. If I had to pick one, that would be it. But I didn't know until I started writing and seeing... Again, see yourself in a different light in that third person and say, "Wow! You've come through a lot. Way to go, girl!"

NATALIE: That is so neat.

STACY: That is really fun. You are going to form these into beautiful stories you never have to publish. Never, ever. You do not have to publish. It can be just for you. You can burn all the free writes if you want. (Although, I have kept mine. I want to go back and pull more stories out of them.) But that is the enhancing. That is where you learn those lessons. You are making things visible to yourself that you can pull out and make lemonade from those lemons.

That fourth step is elevating your story. As you are forming those, you can share them if you want. Most people say, "No, I never want to. There will be implications for that, etc." That's okay. But as they are writing they may think, "Wow. Maybe I do want to?"

Here's what I tell people. If you are doing all that work, steps one, two, and three, you are digging into that dirt and are unearthing a rock. You are carving away at a sculpture inside that rock. You polished it, and it's a beautiful sculpture now. Would you hide that sculpture in a closet? Or would you bring it out for everyone else to see? How much more valuable is your story than a mere sculpture? What would happen if someone were about to go through what you've been through? What would happen if someone were in the midst of going through what you've been through? Wouldn't you want to turn around, give them a hand, and give them a shortcut and share your wisdom so they can get through that easier? That's what your story can do.

NATALIE: That's amazing. That's what you ended up building. You are building a way to help people by doing what helped you. Can you tell us a little more about that? You teach classes, right? Tell us more about what you do.

STACY: Absolutely, yes. I have The Emotional Abuse and Recovery Resiliency Summit. Then I have the Lifestory Laboratory course. I think I shortened it to LifeLab. That's

where I teach all these things and we dive in. Our cohorts dive into those fear stories. We help you get them out of your head easily. You don't even have to be a writer to write your life stories. You have someone there shoulder-to-shoulder with you, digging into those stories, excavating them, doing that free writing, and polishing it.

There are publishing options. I don't do any publishing myself, but I will teach you a couple of different ways that are easy. I love it because it is ten weeks of guided writing with a cohort of other people who have been in emotional abuse or other types of abuse who are all positive in building out their stories and digging into those. It's a really supportive, amazing course. I love doing that.

I also have a YouTube channel where I share things like "What is the difference between a sociopath and a narcissist?" Or "What are some commitments a woman who has escaped those things should make with herself?" Or "How do you even get out of a tough relationship?" You have to prepare. If I had this future wisdom back then, it would have been a lot smoother. I love, love, love sharing all the knowledge and the hard-won wisdom that I have with lots of other people, because I want to give them a shortcut.

NATALIE: That is awesome. Just so you know, I will put all the links to these resources Stacey offers. I want you to know that Stacey is the real deal! She's an amazing person. She's not a fraud. She's not a fake. She is so genuine. I love her to pieces. I love her work, and I'm so glad you could come on here so I could introduce you to the people who listen to this podcast. I'm excited that some of them can find you and get extra help from you in the things you have to offer.

STACY: Absolutely! Thank you so much for having me. This was fabulous. I know the stuff that you do and the help that you give people is amazing. So the more of us we have, the better.

NATALIE: That is so true. That's what we're doing. We are training other women to do all these things as well so we can have a snowball effect. We are just two people, two little ants in the universe. We need to get an entire army of ants. I shouldn't say that. We don't want to see ourselves like ants. Butterflies! We want to get a whole bunch of butterflies!

STACY: That's the saying. With 2020 being what it is, it could be an army of ants coming.

NATALIE: Also, I want you guys to know that Stacey is going to be doing an expert workshop in the Flying Free group. Flying Free will not be open until April 2021. It will be

a while. But you can tuck that in the back of your mind if you are interested in joining that. [Flying Free is now open for applications at all times!] You can apply to join the program at joinflyingfree.com.

She will be doing a workshop (we are going to record it as soon as we finish with this podcast) called "Using Tough Life Stories to Build Strength and Resilience." She will get into a little more depth than what we can do in a short podcast. If you want the whole enchilada, you need to go to her website and sign up for her ten-week class.

STACY: Absolutely.

NATALIE: Thank you so much and thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!