

HOW DO I SUPPORT MY ADULT CHILDREN WHO GREW UP IN A SPIRITUALLY AND EMOTIONALLY ABUSIVE HOME?

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 98 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today, Becky and I are going to be talking about something that is a painful subject. It's a subject I get asked questions about all the time from the women in my programs, the Flying Free and the Flying Higher programs. We're going to talk about relationships with our older kids. I'm talking about relationships with kids eighteen and older, who are out of the house or could still live with you but are basically adults. Your hard work with them is done, and now they get to make their own choices, have their own beliefs, and have their own journey. The problem is that we as moms feel like we're being yanked along for the ride, and the ride is not very pleasant. First, I want to say hi to Becky. She is here.

BECKY: Hey, Natalie.

NATALIE: I want to preface this whole thing, and I know Becky can relate because we both come out of the same background, but I'm talking to moms who are listening who were "all in" on parenting. We were the moms who gave up our careers to stay home and homeschool, bake bread, make healthy meals, be a homemaker, and be there for our kids, pacing the kitchen floor, praying for them every day. We had this vision... Becky, what was your vision? What did you believe all this was going to bring about in the future of your life and your children?

BECKY: I would say most of what I desired as a mom was to not be like my abusive mom. I think a lot of us come out of not-so-healthy home lives, and we want to do it completely differently. We think if we work hard enough, it will all turn out. So we easily buy into systems. In homeschooling, there are these ideas that if you do A, B, and C, the result is going to be D, E, and F, or whatever. So I thought, "Let me homeschool them. Let me make a fresh dessert every day, have the house impeccably clean, make sure they have all this fun with tea parties for the girls and baseball and Legos with the boys, an hour of Bible every day, and praying for them every morning."

But it doesn't work. I'm going to say it's not only because we were in abusive homes. It wasn't just because my spouse was abusive. The idea I latched onto was that my child was not their own independent self, that I could manipulate their entire lives to some, what I thought was a wonderful, end. So I think it's two-fold. I don't think it is just

because of the abuse.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree. I think it was a — you used the word “system” for the formulas we used, but I’d like to use the word “system” in this way. It was a systemic problem. A part of it was being married to someone who was really hypocritical, putting on one face to the outside but behind the scenes was manipulating, was critical, and negative, and was undermining the things we were trying to do. Then part of it was that we went along with that. We thought that was normal, possibly because we grew up in homes where that was normal. What do you think?

BECKY: Yes, some of us grew up in homes like that. But for me, the church was telling me that “A good wife is quiet, a good wife is supportive, a good wife is submissive, a good wife... Even though her husband has trouble, all men have troubles.” I don’t think they realized the magnitude of the trouble I was having even though I begged.

Let me fast forward quickly to today. I have five kids. The last one turns eighteen next month. With four of my kids I would say I have a good relationship, but I feel like I walk on eggshells a lot. Part of that is me, and part of that is them. I would rather go through the abuse of my spouse than the pain of my child having to walk on eggshells around them, not having a good relationship, or always questioning the relationship. I will walk away from exchanges and it is peaceful. But I walk away questioning, “What did I say?” I feel like I have this fragile mindset of, “They went through this divorce. They only have one parent now.” There are a plethora of issues being a parent to an adult after decades of being in an abusive marriage. It is not easy at first to navigate.

NATALIE: What I’m hearing you say is that we’re not sure (and I can feel this too) where our responsibility begins and where it ends. I’ve spent so many years feeling so responsible for all these people. I have nine kids, for those who don’t know. I felt responsible for my husband and for these nine kids and that whatever happens in their lives, if they are happy or they are unhappy, it is directly related to something that I did or said or thought or believed and that if it brought about a bad result that I need to change it somehow and make it better for all these people. It’s exhausting!

BECKY: Exactly. “Exhausting” is the perfect word. For one, because you lose a lot of sleep over it. But the emotional drainage of walking away... When I have a conversation with you, Natalie, or with my best friend, I never walk away thinking about everything we said. That right there should be a clue to stop and ask, “What is going on here?” When I sit back and think about it all (and I try to educate myself as much as possible), the thing I had to realize was that I was by far not the perfect parent, but I did my absolute best with what I knew at the time. I can say that wholeheartedly. You know

me. If I am in for a penny I am in for a pound. But whether or not I want to accept it, they were in a home with an abuser for two decades...That's the thing. It's their entire life that they were in this home...

NATALIE: When they were developing! When their brains were developing.

BECKY: Exactly. So whether they realize it or not, they developed habits from what they learned. The culture, or a better word is the environment of our home, taught them that certain dynamics were okay. Some of my kids are realizing this as they get older and realize that is not a healthy dynamic. I can't speak for every child, but I can speak for most of them. They are not in any way like our spouses in that they are intentional. It is more like it is a habit. I have one child who really treats me like my ex, and I had to put some firm boundaries down and that is the most painful thing. To this day, I think about it three to five times a day.

Here's another thing I've learned. What is the one thing that your ex-spouse did? He would undermine you, and what that did... Coming from a home just like that, I tried to reflect back on "What was I thinking when I was eighteen, nineteen, or twenty about my parents?" Obviously I, just like my kids, could not stand the abusive parent. In my case, it was my mother. I would go so far as to say I despised her. But my father, I resented him and held very little respect for him because in my immature, frontal lobe, not-developed-brain, all I saw was an abuser and one who could save me from abuse but was choosing not to. Or the lack of respect came from wondering why he didn't have the guts to challenge her or the guts to stop it.

My dad was my best friend. He passed about five years ago, and we had a very close relationship. But to the day he passed, in the back of my mind, there was this tiny little thought of, "I'm not sure you really know what you're talking about because of my childhood." So when I have a conversation with my kids, I don't think it's right for me to expect or require a certain level of respect, because for their entire lives they were taught not to respect me. That doesn't mean they don't love me. That's where I had to really train my brain to think the right way. They love me. I know that. They don't necessarily respect me, but they were trained to be that way.

But what is my responsibility in all that? Well, there are certain levels of behavior that I will not allow. There are boundaries just like there would be with... I know this sounds weird because it's your child. But if you go to a job and have co-workers who hate you, that's fine. But there are still boundaries you are going to set for everyone in your life, whether or not they are your child. That's how I look at my kids. One child loves me to death, but she has her own issues. The way my ex-spouse taught all of my kids to deal

with me was when their life is not going right, when they have an obstacle, when they have something to overcome, when life is just crappy, what do you do? You turn and blame it all on mom. That's what my ex did.

NATALIE: Yes.

BECKY: So they are responding how they are trained. The only thing I can do, and I hate to say this, is relate to them like I would my ex. I say, "I'm sorry that you're having a really tough day and that this situation or obstacle is in your life now. But I am not the obstacle. I love you to death and I'm here to help you." What I have learned is that I cannot help them, and don't even try, because they already have it in their mind that I'm the problem. Again, it is how their brain was trained.

NATALIE: And you are supposed to fix it. You're the problem because you're not fixing it.

BECKY: Exactly. I just have to look at my kids like I would anybody else and say, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but that is not the truth. I am not responsible for your hardship, and I will not be the one who fixes it. I wish you the best." I literally have stopped giving my opinion because that makes it worse. I just have to be responsible for what I will or will not do or what I can or cannot do. I need to not entangle myself too closely with them.

My husband said to me not too long ago (the good husband)... He has three of his own kids, and he's a good example of how entrenched a parent should be with an adult child. It's not entrenched at all. What I've seen is that when his kids have troubles, they don't tell him. They solve it themselves. I think that is more normal or natural or healthier. The other thing I had to think about was, "Why are my kids coming to me with their problems?" Not that I don't want them to. But becoming your own person should mean that you deal with your own problems.

Part of this is that I need to push them to take care of their own problems for themselves and be as little involved as possible. That doesn't mean I'm not part of their lives. We have a get-together today with the entire family. I'll make a good dinner, and we'll sit around the table and enjoy each other's company, but that's it. I will not ask how every part of their life is going. That's not my job. That's not my place. I'm trying to realize that is how I need to treat my adult kids because if I do anything else, it backfires.

NATALIE: That's very interesting. I am feeling everything that you are saying. I feel that

for me, it is the same thing. It is trying to figure out the difference between loving my kids and getting entangled with their lives.

BECKY: I think “entangled” is the perfect word.

NATALIE: When I am entangled (which I usually am), I feel like I’ve got emotional whiplash all the time because there are so many of them and they all have different issues going on. They all have different levels of wanting to relate to me or to come to me. I want them to come to me because I want to support them. If our kids come to us and want to tell us what is going on, I want to be there and listen and love them.

But as you said, I don’t want to have to feel the pressure... Not that they are all... I’m thinking of one child who would never put pressure on me to fix his problems ever. So they are all different. They all have different idiosyncrasies. He would never put pressure on me to fix his problems, but I care so much about him that I entangle myself in his problems to where he says, “Mom! Just stop. I’ll be fine. Just let me figure out my own life.” That’s where I need to step back, let him be a man and figure out his own life, and not be so scared.

BECKY: Yeah, scared that they are going to do what? Exactly what we did: fell on our face, learned some things.

NATALIE: Made mistakes, yeah.

BECKY: Now I think the women who have come out of these marriages... My greatest fear is two decades of pain. I have to remember that it is their decision. Even though it was two decades of pain, I’m a much better person for it. I wish it never happened, but it’s not the end of my life either. Thank goodness it wasn’t. What I’ve learned... You know how when your kids are around you, you can sense a problem with one of them?

NATALIE: Yes.

BECKY: I have learned to shut my mouth. Do not ask. If they want to talk, they will talk to me.

NATALIE: Yeah, I need to get better at that.

BECKY: When they do want to talk, the other thing I’ve learned is to shut my mouth, listen, and don’t try to fix it. Here’s what we learned in these bad marriages. There is a problem, whether it is because of our theology, the church, or how we were raised, and

we think we've got to fix it. That's not true. Today, if my good husband has a problem, I just tell him, "I love you. I'm here for you, and I know you are going to work through this." I don't say, "What can I do to fix it?" Sometimes I might say, "Do you need help?" but not coming up with a solution.

The problem is that now we have these brains, our brains, which are trained to problem solve all the time. It's funny because I just had a memory of my counselor, who was amazing. He did the EMDR and all of that. He kept saying, "You need to learn to just be. Just learn to be." I didn't realize how significant that was, because if you are always trying to solve the problem, you are never just being. Part of being is experiencing everything that is going on around you. So instead of me trying to fix my kids' problems, instead of trying to figure out... Not just fix the problem, but go one step further and psychoanalyze you and figure out where this came from in your childhood.

NATALIE: Yes! I am raising my hand – totally guilty! My older kids would really love it if I would just knock that off.

BECKY: Mine too. That's where I just learned to listen. Don't ask and don't interrupt. Just listen and then ask one question. Obviously, in my heart, I care for them. So I say, "I'm so sorry. I hate that you are experiencing this. Do you want me to help?" That is my only responsibility, because a lot of times they will say "No." Natalie, I've called you before when I just needed someone to vent to. I just needed somebody to understand what I was going through. I didn't expect you to fix my problem. Do you know what I mean?

NATALIE: Yeah.

BECKY: I think that's what they need from us. If we can rewire our brains to get free from that abusive marriage and that idea of fixing everything, we could experience a really great relationship with our child. Here's the kicker. That means you are not as enmeshed with them as you think. That whole system you were talking about, "If I read my Bible, if I raise them the right way, if I homeschool them, if I do all these things," the result is a super enmeshed relationship with your child that is very unhealthy. If we can just get away from that idea that enmeshment means a good relationship... A good relationship means enjoying time together. I'm really just talking to myself at this point, because I need to hear this.

NATALIE: I love it. This is so good for me. I'm doing this talk for... Bob and Polly Hamp are having a conference in January. I'm in the middle of writing my talk, and I'm putting together my slide shows for it. My slide show has a universe, a circle, and I'm trying to show how we need to separate our universe from the universes of other people. I've

got this calm, peaceful looking woman in this circle with stars behind, and then these other angry, mad people are around her. In one slide, all their universes are crowded up against hers, and she is feeling anxiety and stress. In the other slide, their universes are separate. They are still having all their problems, but she is a separate person. So she can have peace inside of her own mind.

That's what I think most of us moms are really longing for: "Could I just have some peace and rest inside of myself." And I was thinking, even if our kids don't respect us... And they may not. I think they have some kind of respect for us. But even if they don't respect us and they just love us, we have to respect ourselves. I think we can get the love and respect that we need as human beings (because everyone needs love and respect) from knowing our Creator loves and respects His creation of us, and we can manage our minds to where we love and respect ourselves.

From that fullness of feeling love and respect from ourselves, we can love and respect our children in a healthy way that keeps their universe separate from ours, gives them autonomy and agency of their own to solve their own problems, and not feel like we have to be the ones to solve them.

BECKY: I texted you something a while ago. I said, "The irony is that in our abuse we were not given autonomy, yet when we get out it's like we don't want to give our kids what we didn't have." That is kind of scary. The only reason I'm saying what I am saying is because I had to figure it out through the pain. I just didn't know where my relationship was with my kids. I know they love me. But I think there is a big difference between loving someone... Let's think about a sibling. You can love a sibling, but you might not respect them.

The respect I'm thinking of is that my kids respect me for making them dinner. They love my homemade food. They respect me for keeping a clean house. But they do not want to hear my problem solving, because in the back of their head (I know because I did this myself. I'm not sure it can ever be overcome, and I'm okay with that. That's what I have to be okay with) is this gnawing... My kids have said to me, "Why did you stay for twenty years? Why didn't you get us out earlier?" There is no appropriate answer to that, because I am damned if I do and damned if I don't.

I could have gotten you out earlier. they would have had to have visitation with a child molester. I don't know at what point it would have been good for me to leave. On the other hand, they spent twenty years, and now I've lost some of their respect. They are proud of me for building a business or making a new product. They are proud of me, but I don't think... When I say a "lack of respect," I don't mean this disdainful hatred. But

they kind of question my ability, my problem solving or my mental ability. "She really doesn't know what she's talking about. Look what she did with her life." I get that. I have to be okay with that, and I am.

NATALIE: I think sometimes they might say that or come across that way, but I wonder how much of what we say they think about later, and it comes back to them and they wonder. I think it's not all bad. One other thing I was going to say as far as respect: I think sometimes our kids feel so safe around us... I'd like to think that my kids feel safe enough to be able to dump. I know families where the kids are very respectful, but they aren't very close because...

BECKY: They are afraid of their parents.

NATALIE: Yeah. Exactly. They're not safe because they know they will get a lecture. I want to bring up this point, too. One other thing I see moms ask questions about, not as much, but they will say, "I think my older child should do this, this, and this. They won't. What can I do to get them to do those things?" That's like, "Whoa, no!" When our kids are... (I don't know if this is good or bad), when my kids are around sixteen years old, fifteen to sixteen, I start taking my hands off of them.

BECKY: Exactly.

NATALIE: I start letting them drive their own life.

BECKY: Yes, because it is better for them to learn responsibility in your home under the umbrella of legal responsibility until age eighteen than to learn it at eighteen and have bigger problems. If you want your child to do a specific thing, you are really prepping them to get into relationships where that becomes the norm, which is where we've all gotten out of. You don't want the cycle to continue.

NATALIE: Right. We want to teach them agency. "You get to decide." I was just reading a book to my littler kids called... I can't remember. (I didn't know I was going to say this, or I would have prepared this for the podcast.) It's a children's book that teaches boundaries and consent, when to say "yes" and when to say "no," and that you have the right to say "yes" or "no."

One page had this little boy who wanted a hug from his little sister. They were little kids. It was a cartoon. The little girl was looking up at him like, "Ew. I don't want a hug right now." My ten-year-old says, "Why doesn't she want a hug? What's wrong with a hug? Why doesn't she just give him a hug?" I said, "It doesn't matter why she doesn't

want a hug. What matters is that she doesn't want a hug. That's all that matters. So the little boy needs to respect that and back off." Well, he just couldn't understand why that was.

These are things that are embedded in the psyches of our children. We need to teach them, "No. Not only does your little sister get to say 'no,' but you get to say 'no' as well. You don't have to hug your grandma just because she wants a hug. You could say, 'No thanks. I'm not going to hug you.'" These kids aren't learning this. What they are learning is that it's the polite thing to make someone happy, especially if they are an older person than you. If that littler child asks for your toy, "You better give it to them because that is the Christian, godly thing to do. You share." It teaches our kids to be trampled on and manipulated by everyone in their lives.

BECKY: Right. And they're learning that they have less value each time. Because it is better to say, "When you want to give a person a hug and they want to hug you, isn't that great? You are both doing what you want to do." I had a conversation with a daughter this past week. It was on a sensitive matter. This child is fantastic. We have a great relationship. It was in the morning before she went to work. I was kind of beating myself up with, "You shouldn't have talked to her before work. You are going to ruin her day," because we were talking about a sensitive topic.

I was calling to ask her about her experience as a child. For my kids, it's not a happy thing to think about when they were a child with what their father did. Anyway, I was beating myself up all day. I kept saying to myself, "There is nothing you said that was wrong. If she didn't want to talk about it, she could have told you." I was trying to reprogram myself. Then she called me at 7:00 that night and said, "I'm so glad we talked. It helped me reframe what I was thinking about this thing." I was thinking, "I was killing myself all day wondering if I had hurt my relationship with her."

It's not like something I have in any way mastered. Now I go back and think, "Why was I feeling that way? What work do I need to do?" I don't need to work on my kids. Like you said, we did all the diaper changing when they were little. We need to work on ourselves and stop trying to work on them.

NATALIE: Yes! I think that's a good place to stop. Thank you so much for listening. This is Episode 98. We've got two more episodes until we reach Episode 100. We record our podcasts way in advance. Today is October 31, but you are listening to this in December. In two weeks we are going to have Episode 100. It's going to be... I'm working on this right now. I am taking 20-30 second excerpts from every episode we've had so far and putting them together into one master episode. I'm not sure how long

it's going to be – maybe forty-five minutes to an hour. It will have all these little soundbites, amazing little quotes that our guests have given. My profundity will, of course, be part of it.

BECKY: That sounds awesome.

NATALIE: Anyway, that is coming up in a couple of weeks, so stay tuned for that. Thanks for listening to this episode. Becky, thanks for joining me on this kind of painful but fascinating subject of parenting older kids.

BECKY: Anytime.

NATALIE: Until next time, fly free!