

## EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR Q&A

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 282 of the Flying Free Podcast. On April 15th of this past year, I invited everyone on my mailing list to a free Q&A on Zoom where they could ask me anything related to emotional and spiritual abuse in a private setting. I do this about every six months or so, so if you're not on my mailing list and you'd like to be, just head over to [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com) and sign up.

I recorded that session, and while we spent two hours together, I selected an hour's worth of questions and answers to share here on the Flying Free Podcast. I took out any identifiers such as if someone mentioned the number of their children or how old their kids were in the questions — I took all of that information out so it's totally anonymous, and I would like to share this with you.

If you like this episode, please know that I answer questions every single day in the Flying Free private forum as well as in a two-hour live Q&A every month for members of Flying Free as part of their monthly resources that they get. So if you'd like access to me along with five other coaches and hundreds of women going through similar situations, consider joining us. You can learn more about Flying Free by going to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com). So now here are the questions and answers — at least some of them — that I'd like to share with you.

QUESTION: I feel the need to begin telling my adult children and close friends about the hidden abuse that's been going on for years. Do you recommend doing that?

NATALIE: Well, I am always a big proponent of being honest, especially with the people who need to know. I don't have any more details, so I don't know what your motivation is. Are you filing for divorce? Obviously, if you're going to file for divorce and you have adult children, I think telling those children why you're filing would be important.

But even if you're not filing and they've got no idea, I've seen very few situations where the kids are completely clueless and they just think mom and dad have the most amazing relationship, unless the abuser is so covert and when the kids are around, he's doing nothing to the mother that's obvious. I can't picture that. I think it's very, very rare.

But your kids more than likely know that there's something going on or that there was something going on. You're the one who knows your children best, and you're the one who knows what your relationship is like with them, and so if you feel like you want to tell them and that they need to know that... My kids all know for sure. Well, my kids saw

it, though. So my kids saw things that were going on, plus they experienced. What my husband was doing to me, he was also doing to them.

So once I knew what the words were for it, I used those words and I would say, "When your dad does this, this is the tactic that's being used." And that doesn't mean that they bought into it necessarily, because I don't think kids, especially teenagers... As humans, we want to deny what's happening if it's painful. It's just a coping mechanism.

And then kids don't have the relationship with their dad, even if they're experiencing emotional abuse from their dad or their mother — like in my case, my mother — they don't have the same relationship that you have as a spouse. So the dynamic is still different. Plus, you have to remember that our cognitive functioning and our memory and our brain development doesn't really come online where we're understanding these kinds of dynamics until we're a little older, so their childhood was they spent less time with dad and maybe had less experience with that than a partner would. Does that make sense?

When people even come to the private forum and say, "Should I do this or should I do that?" I don't ever tell them, "Oh, you should do this for sure," or "You should do that." I tell them, "You know, deep down inside. The answer's inside of you. I'm not privy to all of the multi layers of your relationships and all of the nuances of your situation. You are. So you're the wisest one and you're the only one that can make the best decision in that situation."

Now, sometimes we might make a decision and then we end up having fallout. Sometimes it doesn't matter which way you choose — there's going to be fallout either way. So it's just a matter of weighing pros and cons of what you want to deal with. Or "What's my reason for telling?" "What do I hope the outcome will be?" Those are all questions for you to ask yourself, okay?

QUESTION: In the middle of a divorce, my husband has been the absolute sweetest. I still want the divorce, but now I feel incredibly guilty because of how kind he's been since. How not to feel guilty?

NATALIE: So all of our feelings and emotions come from thoughts in our head. They come from beliefs that we have. So if you're feeling guilty, it's in your body, it's because you have a belief that you're doing something wrong, right? We feel guilty. Sometimes it's good guilt. If we've violated our moral code that we have inside or our value system, then we're going to naturally feel guilty about that. But sometimes it's false guilt because maybe we have a moral code that's really not actually in alignment with God's

moral code.

For example, if you were taught that the color red is a satanic color, just say... I mean, you might be able to think of other teachings. I'm not going to say what they are, but there are lots of teachings circulating out there in the Christian world that are not in the Bible or that were used back in patriarchal days, but we don't use them anymore.

But let's say that you were taught that wearing red was wrong. And then you find out when you're thirty years old that wearing red has nothing to do with Satan, and it's just a color that God created, and you can wear it if you want to.

The first time you wear it, you will feel guilty because in your brain, your brain's been wired to believe that wearing red is a sin. And so of course you're going to feel guilty at first. So you're going to need to rewire your thinking and change that belief.

And sometimes that takes a little time. You've got this big oak tree of a belief: "Wearing red is a sin." And then you plant this little seed of a thought that, "Maybe wearing red isn't a sin." And that little seed has to be watered and nourished and that thought has to be practiced until it grows into a little sapling. And then we need to not give a lot of attention to this belief over here that wearing red is a sin so this big oak tree will die, and the little sapling of our new belief will grow strong and tall like a big oak tree. And you know that you truly have leaned into your new belief when you don't feel guilty anymore for wearing red. Does that make sense?

So he's been kind. You have to remember that this happens with almost... Unless an abuser has found a new source of supply, the abuser will want to maintain control over you. And this guy has been watching you for a long, long time. He's been observing what triggers you, he's been observing what works to emotionally manipulate you. He knows how to pull on your strings. And one of the ways that these guys know that they can pull on nice girl's strings is by being nice to us.

They know that we're just going to melt. And we're just going to like, "Oh, let's give him another chance. He's trying so hard. Poor little guy. We must be the wind beneath their wings." And we've been wired to believe those things. They can be terrible to us, and then when they're nice to us, we think that that just wipes out... Our body knows. Our body knows that that's not true, but our brain has been wired to believe that if they are nice or if they say they're sorry then that means true repentance, and then we just need to take them back and buck it up and sweep everything under the rug. That's not what true repentance is.

By the way, I am reading an amazing book right now and I'm going to be interviewing this author soon and it's an incredible book. I think Sheila Wray Gregoire interviewed her and might even have a podcast out already. But anyway, it's called *Forgiveness After Trauma: A Path to Find Healing and Empowerment* by Susannah Griffith.

This book, it's not an easy "Forgive and forget" kind of a book. This book truly addresses the trauma that abuse victims go through and what forgiveness actually looks like after you've experienced that. Here's where you can see where I'm at in the book and I've got all these earmarked things and tons of things underlined. It's such a good book.

So he's being nice. We call this a mask. It's just another mask. These guys know how to try on different masks. "I'll try on this mask." Whichever mask works to control the other person. Right now, he does not want to get a divorce. If you divorce him, he won't have control over you anymore. But he knows that if he puts on a nice mask that you'll feel guilty and maybe, just maybe, you might call the divorce off.

Believe it or not, this little tactic works on a lot of people, and a lot of people have come into the forum and said, "Yeah, I filed for divorce and I called it off because he seemed like he was changing. But as soon as we got back together and started living together again, it was back to same old, same old."

So just consider that you can do it, but remember, you got to the point where you were done enough to file for divorce, and that is a huge step. You've got this far. Why not keep going? If he's really truly has changed, then he will love you and support you and be interested in giving you an amazing divorce, and then even after that, being willing to... I don't know if you have kids together, but he'll be an amazing father and he'll be a wonderful co-parent. And who knows — maybe several years down the road, as you see consistent, changed behavior, it'll go great.

One way you can always tell if someone is really changed is you do a boundary. You say "no" to them. You give them feedback. Give them some negative feedback and see what happens. If they're just like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. You're right. That was really wrong," or "I totally respect your no," or whatever, then maybe there are some changes happening there. But it could also be another mask. If they're just trying to lure you in, then they'll do whatever it takes to do that.

QUESTION: My husband complains that I'm not very affectionate with him. I was wondering if the previous emotional abuse I suffered by my husband has caused me to be this way. I love him and we've worked on our relationship a lot. He used to hit me and mentally abuse me. He discovered God and started reading the Bible and boom —

the abuse stopped.

NATALIE: Well, I can't ask you more about this, but I'd like to know when that happened, how long ago that happened, as far as him suddenly changing. So if you've been physically and psychologically abused by someone, your body stores that. There's a great book called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk. Your body stores that trauma in it and it recognizes, "Whoops, this guy is dangerous. This person is not safe." So you can't just make your body stop knowing what it knows based on several experiences or maybe even years, possibly even decades, of experience with this dangerous thing or person, okay?

So the fact that your body is unable to be affectionate with him, that is actually just a normal, natural reaction to abuse. And if he's complaining about that, that is an indicator that he has a sense of entitlement. He's minimizing the impact of his abuse on you, and that's not love at all. What he's doing is just saying, "I want what I want when I want it, and you need to be affectionate to me and you should forgive and forget and move on."

Well, that's not how it works. That's like lighting someone on fire with gasoline and a flame and then putting that person in the ICU and then going in there and he's saying, "Come on, why can't you get up and have sex with me? Come on, let's go. Let's go," and not acknowledging that he's the one that put you in that ICU in the first place, and now you've got a body full of burns and scars all over and you just aren't gonna be able to get up and go anymore with him. So the fact that he's complaining, he hasn't changed. He's just changed tactics. That's all.

QUESTION: I know my marriage is over and I know what I will say, but why am I afraid to tell him I am done? I'm hesitating and I need courage and boldness. How can I get out of my fear for a conversation?

NATALIE: So remember we talked about all of our feelings in our body come from beliefs in our mind. So if we're feeling fear in our body, it's because there's something that we believe in our mind — it may be true, maybe not true, but whatever it is, it's real in our mind that we believe it — that is causing us to have that fear.

There are lots of reasons why women are afraid to tell their partner that they're done. Some of them are afraid of physical repercussions. Maybe he will hit you or scream at you. Maybe he will not hit you, but maybe he will yell at you. Maybe he'll put a hole in the wall. Maybe he will rage for several days. Maybe he will give you the silent treatment. That's very painful also. Maybe he will pull all of the money out of your

checking account and you won't have any money. Maybe he will start hiding assets. Maybe he will start telling people at church that you're the problem and you're abusive. Maybe he will start telling your children that you're a terrible mother and start building a case and start alienating them from you.

Those are all very real fears, and so I think just acknowledging and going, "Yeah, the reason that I'm afraid is because there are some of these things, these ramifications, to telling my husband that I'm done."

How could you get out of your fear? I think when we focus on the long term, then we are willing to go through the big blow up, okay? So on my blog, I talk about the 10 steps out of the pit. And we talk about how you're down in the pit and it's dark and it's damp and it's lonely and it's scary down there. If you want to get out of the pit, there's a ladder and it's got 10 rungs on it, and you have to climb those 10 rungs to get out of the pit.

But the problem is that every single rung of the ladder is burning hot. It's painful. So when you put your hands on it or your feet on the step, it's going to hurt. And the only way that you can get out is if being down in the pit becomes so painful and so dark and so horrible that the horribleness of being there becomes greater than the horribleness of climbing those rungs and getting up and out. That's when you know that you're ready.

So you want to redirect your fears. Another way of putting it, there's a book called *The Tools* by Phil Stutz and Barry Michels. One of the tools is you see this thing in front of you that's scary and you have to conquer it. Instead of just looking at it and observing it, you want to look at it and go, "I'm coming for you. I'm going to do this," and you plow right into it. And you can do that if you're ready. Like, "I'm going to do this. It doesn't matter how painful it is. It doesn't matter how hard it is. I know that I need to beat this thing and I'm going to do it. I'm going to plow right into it."

Also another shameless plug for Flying Free, but this is a perfect place to put it. If you become part of Flying Free, you get to be in a private forum with all of these women. A lot of these women are going through what you're going through, and some of them are wanting to get out. They come in and they will get "rah rah rah" from the rest of us, all right?

They'll say, "Pray for me. I'm going to have a conversation with my husband tonight," and we will pray for them. They will say, "Here's what I'm thinking about writing to my husband," or "Here's what I'm thinking about writing to my child," or "Here's what I'm

thinking about saying to my church elders," and then they'll write it out for us and then we will help them tweak it. Or we will say, "Yeah, that's perfect. That's great. You're going to do great."

So it helps to have support around you so that you don't feel like you're so alone. And then when there's fallout, you have a place, a community, you can come to and say, "Oh my gosh, you would not believe what happened last night. This is what he said and this is what he did, and now he's not talking to me and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And then we can gather around you and support you through that whole process.

QUESTION: I would love to know more about how I can not get triggered when I'm in a situation in which my needs are being ignored or misunderstood. I am committed to healing as much as possible while staying within my marriage, and yet I don't quite know how to protect myself without my heart getting hardened.

NATALIE: How you're framing it is like your heart's going to be hardened into this bitter, little, hardened shell. No. What you're actually doing is you're protecting a soft heart of love. And you're learning how to offer a soft heart of love to the woman who has your name instead of as a sacrificial lamb to an abuser who's just going to take you and throw all of his sins on you and then send you out into the wilderness. That's what you're doing. Your heart is not getting hardened.

So I actually just recorded a podcast episode today that won't be released for a couple of months, but it was about this very thing, some steps you can take to unhook from their projecting their own garbage onto you. They're taking their pathology and what they struggle with, and they're saying you have those problems. And they do that because then they don't have to feel the shame and the weight of their own sin or their own issues.

They just put it on you and then what happens, though, is that you — me when I was in that situation — we react and we're like, "That's not who I am and we didn't do that and I can prove it to you," and we try to explain and we try to show them.

I gave the example in the podcast episode, which you'll hear in a couple months, of, let's say that he comes home and says, "The house is a mess. I can't believe you didn't even clean the house." And maybe you were at work too or maybe you had a sick kid or maybe you had just cleaned the house three days ago and you had other priorities today. So what he's doing is instead of him taking responsibility in helping out around the house, he's projecting his apathy and laziness onto you and making it all about you. And if you accept it, if you go, "Yeah, I give you credibility. When you say those things to

me, you're credible, and I should buy into what you say," that's when we start defending ourselves.

But let's say that a six-year-old came up to you and said, "You're just a stupid face." We wouldn't go, "Oh no, is my face stupid?" No, we wouldn't do that because we don't give any credibility to the six-year-old who says something stupid like that, right? So these guys, they're like a six-year-old in an adult man's body, and he's projecting his crap onto you, but you don't have to give him credibility.

So let's say that if you didn't give him any credibility and he was saying these things to you, you'd just be sitting there going, "Huh." And then you could do what Tina Swithin — she's the author of *Divorcing a Narcissist: One Mom's Battle* — you could say, "Well, your opinion is noted." But you know that's just him. All of that crap? That's about him and his problems. It's not about you. So the house isn't clean. Who cares? You had other things going on.

Once you can see this, then you'd be like, "Oh, if he wants the house to be clean, then he can clean it. But I'm not cleaning it today." And then you can say that. "While your opinion is noted, it sounds like you really want a clean house. So here's a mop, here's a vacuum cleaner. Have at it, my friend." Do you see this? It doesn't have to be about you when it's actually about him.

That is exactly the work that we do inside of Flying Free, is unhooking from their universe and what they say, and this is what sets you free. Whether you're going to stay or leave, if you can unhook from them and stop giving them credibility and stop believing what they say and start rewiring your brain to believe the truth about who you are and start focusing on yourself and learning how to take care of yourself and not managing him and all his drama over there anymore — this is all about boundaries as well — that's when you can start healing.

Now, granted, when you're still in an abusive environment and they don't like boundaries, so they're going to get mad, they're going to keep picking on you, it is very, very difficult to do some complete healing, but you can at least get started with separating yourself, at least in your brain. Maybe on the outside placating and fawning just to keep the peace, and especially if you have kids.

But if you can set yourself free in your brain so you know, "Okay, I'm going to clean, but I'm not doing it because I have to feel guilty about him telling me that I'm not a good cleaner. I'm doing it because I want to do it and I want a clean house or because I'm doing it for my kids or I'm doing it because for the reason of managing him for my own



safety," all right? But do you see the difference between trying to get him to love you and see that you're a really good cleaner and just going, "He's never going to do that. He's never going to love me anyways. And I am a fine cleaner when I need to be, and I need to just let his opinions about me go. They can be his opinions."

QUESTION: My husband and I had been seeing our pastor for some spiritual guidance. He stated that my hope should obviously be in God and not my spouse. My question is, how long should I continue to hope that God will work things out in my marriage?

NATALIE: God doesn't do that, you guys. God is not this puppet master going, "Okay, now I'm going to make her do this and I'm going to make him do this, and look at the little dance we got going." That's not who God is. God gives us freedom. He gives your husband freedom and autonomy to make his choices, to be an asshole if he wants to be, and He gives you freedom and autonomy to make your choices. How do you want to show up?

Remember how we just talked about how you could show up like, "Oh no, I gotta do what he does and I must be a terrible person because he says I am"? You have freedom to do that, or you can change your thinking about yourself. You can think actually very well of yourself. God thinks well of you, so why can't you think well of you? Why would we not be in alignment with the mind of Christ towards us? Why would we be in alignment with the mind of our adversary, who is working through this abusive individual that we're living with? We don't want to do that.

So when we talk about having your hope in God, here's how I see it: God promises, Christ promised — here's what He promised when He left Earth. Remember right before He left Earth? He said, "Don't worry you guys. Yes, I'm leaving, but I'm going to give you a helper." He didn't say He was gonna give us a book, by the way. He said He was gonna give us a helper, and that helper is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is was going to be embedded inside of us, living and breathing and moving within us in our spirit.

So we already have that — whether you're feeling it or experience it or not is irrelevant. Well, I mean, it is relevant. It's certainly nice to feel that feeling and to experience God. But honestly, my book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, is about this exact thing. It's about so many things, but this is definitely one of them.

When we are putting our hope in God, we are putting our hope in this: We are trusting by faith and knowing also through experience that God is with us no matter what we are going through. God is with us if we choose to stay in our marriage, or maybe we

don't have a choice and you have to stay in your marriage, or if we choose to get out or have the ability to get out. God is with you either way.

You can never, ever, ever be separated from God's love. Jesus promised He was going to send the Holy Spirit, the helper, to you. He was going to love you and be with you always and never leave you or forsake you. Our hope is in that. And that started at some point in your life and it will go for all of eternity and it will never end. That is our hope in God.

This is what hope in God is not: "Well, I really hope that God makes my volleyball team win this weekend. I'm going to put my hope in God that we get to win." "I'm going to put my hope in God that I never, ever get cancer." "I'm going to put my hope in God that I'm really, really rich and get to live in a mansion someday." "I'm going to put my hope in God that I marry an amazing guy, also very good-looking." "I'm going to put my hope in God that my abuser is going to have a miraculous change and turn into a Prince Charming."

That is not what we put our hope in God for. So when pastors give you that kind of prosperity gospel thinking, that's all it is. That is not biblical. That pastor does not have a relationship with God in which he understands how God actually operates in the lives of human beings. And I would not put a whole lot of stock in a pastor who uses clichés like that to try to get a wife to capitulate to her abusive husband.

QUESTION: I'm so hesitant to move forward with separating out of fear of my sons' reactions. I believe separation would be very surprising to them because they don't know about all of this.

NATALIE: Yes, it would be surprising for them, for sure. And they may not react in the ways that you want them to react. Remember, their reactions, their feelings, are due to what they choose to make this mean for their own lives, and that has nothing to do with you. Your life is separate from your children's.

I know us mothers, we think that our children are hooked to us, but they're not. They're separate individuals. Especially once they get to be that old, now we're trying to launch them and get them out there, but we have our own lives that we need to continue to live. You probably still have 40 or 50 years left. What are you going to do with that 40 or 50 years? Are you going to live your life based off of what those three kids are thinking and feeling and doing, or are you going to steward your life before God based on what you believe is best for your life and your future?

I try to get women to think of themselves in two ways. Number one, they could think of themselves in terms of their childhood, like I did in my book. I'm going to show you a picture of me when I was maybe seven or eight years old here. See that?

So you can put a picture of yourself up — I have this up by my computer — and you can go, “Would I tell that girl... Would I say, ‘No, you have to live your whole entire life with an abusive partner because if you don't, then other people will be uncomfortable. And your job is to make sure that nobody is uncomfortable. And that includes all of your kids, whatever kids you have. You know what, little Natalie, you're not as important as the kids you're going to have someday and their feelings about things.’”

So if I had decided to live that way and knowing what my oldest son did, I would have probably stayed. Or I would've never gotten together with Tom. Tom and I will be married seven years this year, and it's been the best thing that's ever happened to me and the best thing that's ever happened to my kids. But I would never have experienced that if I had decided that my job was to manage my children's thoughts and feelings. And believe me, even though my oldest one was the only one who cut us off, my other older kids had thoughts and feelings about that that were not positive. They didn't take it to the extreme my oldest son did, but they still were very uncomfortable. And of course that made me uncomfortable. They're my children. What they think about me matters, and it should matter to us.

But should we make lifelong decisions based on their level of comfort for our lives? No. And I don't want my children to grow up and do that. I don't want my kids to grow up and live their lives for everybody else and their comfort level. So I need to model what that means. I need to model what it means to be an adult who makes my own decisions for my own life and stands confident in those decisions and says, “I love you so much, children. I realize this is very uncomfortable for you. This is not what you were expecting. This wasn't your dream for our family, and this probably goes against everything that I raised you to believe. However, this is the reality of the situation, and this is the decision that I'm making. And you do not have to agree with me. I don't expect any agreement at all, but I do love you and I hope we can still maintain a relationship.”

And maybe one or two of them will decide, no, they don't want to have anything to do with you. I know women whose kids have done that. They just completely cut them off. Again, that is not about you. That is about that child and their emotional intelligence level, emotional development, and where they're at. And maybe they will turn around. I know for my older kids, as they've gotten older and matured, they have grown out of some of that thinking and they think very differently now than they did ten years ago

when this whole thing went down.

QUESTION: After much wrestling, I came to believe my now-separated husband was emotionally abusive. Some of the most verbally abusive behavior — swearing, name-calling — ended, but without genuine acknowledgment or recognition of the impact of that behavior. Would that still be considered emotional abuse? He has had long-term difficulty with taking responsibility.

NATALIE: That is the very definition of emotional abuse, is putting the responsibility for his behavior onto someone else and not taking it onto himself. So when he's not acknowledging or recognizing the impact on you, again, yes, that is emotionally abusive.

Repentance is basically changing your mind. I think that's what it means in the Greek or the Hebrew or whatever. It literally means to change your mind. So you can't change your mind unless you see what's wrong about what you're thinking. So if you can't acknowledge what you've done and if you can't acknowledge the impact of that abusive behavior on the other human being, you haven't even begun to change your mind. There is no repentance there. There is not even the beginning of a hint of repentance there.

Someone saying they're sorry — “I'm sorry” — anybody could do that. I could verbally vomit all over all of you guys right now, and then after I'm done say, “Oh, I'm sorry.” Does that mean I'm sorry? No, it just means I know how to play a game, and that's what these guys do. They know how to play a game. They know that if they say something or if they look a certain way or if they have a little tear come out of their eye that you're going to believe their mask.

Now, I'm not saying that about this person, because it doesn't sound like she believes the mask anymore. And if you don't believe the mask, they know that if they go to church or your friends or your kids that maybe those people will believe the mask. And they'll just keep trying on different masks until they find the one that works with whoever they're with. Then they've got you or they've got the other person. But it's just a mask. Anybody can put on masks. That doesn't mean that that's who they really are.

QUESTION: How do you respond to a counselor who has turned against you and now believes the lies and projection from my estranged husband in last-ditch marriage counseling? I haven't gone back to counseling, but should I confront him in some way? With a letter? I'm concerned he will do this to other abused women.

NATALIE: Well, I talk at great length about counselors and all of those kinds of

experiences in my book, *All the Scary Little Gods*. How do you respond? So here's my philosophy, okay? I believe that we have influence in people who are in movement towards us. And I get this from this amazing book. It's called *A Failure of Nerve* by Edwin Friedman.

He teaches this concept that you only have influence on people who are in movement towards you. So people who are in movement away from you — you're blowing hot air into the wind. Now, if you want to write a letter for your own sake, for maybe your own closure, for your own reasons or whatever, then do it. But if you think that your letter is going to influence that person, it won't. It will only make them mad because they're not in movement towards you.

They're not coming towards you going, "Oh, please, could you give me some feedback? I really want to grow in wisdom and I really want to hear your input." No, this person isn't in that place. They're not looking for your feedback. So you can give it to them, but it's not going to be received well, and they're certainly not going to change.

Now, if they violated counseling codes or whatever and they've got a license, you can actually report them to your state's licensure board or whatever. I don't even know what the name is. I would Google it and look it up if I was going to do this. Otherwise, telling him what he did, he's just gonna blow it off. And then you will have wasted all of that emotional energy for nothing. Unless you're doing it for you. If you're doing it for you, then it's not a waste. Then it's for something.

Are you concerned he will do this to other abused women? Yeah, he will. There's a lot of crappy counselors out there. There's a lot of amazing therapists and counselors out there, and there is a lot of really, really crappy ones. Yes, they are re-traumatizing people left and right, and they shouldn't be doing that.

QUESTION: Why do adult kids often favor their dad even when they knew he was leaving for someone else? He was sexually abusing me. I don't feel like I could tell them that. The day before he left, he had sex with me and then sat on my face and just...

NATALIE: Oh my gosh, I am so sorry. Yeah, I think kids favor... They don't favor the abuser. I think what they do is they know instinctively. Our bodies know things that our brains don't. We just are in so much denial. But I think children, no matter how old they are, they can sense who is a safe person and who they need to be careful around. And they want, desperately, desperately need and want the love and approval of both of their parents.

So if they know that the only way that they can get the love and approval of dad is to be on his side and they can see that dad and mom are polarized, what are they going to do if they feel safe in your love? It's so sad, and this is very below the surface psychological level, but they will align with dad to get dad's love and approval because they desperately need that.

It's only as they mature and grow and see the reality and come to a place in their human development where they see the truth and are ready and willing to acknowledge the truth about that parent, they're able to go back and sometimes make amends with the parents. I've seen this. I've seen this happen to women. Well, and I feel like it happened a little bit with me and my oldest son as well. That's ten years later. Sometimes it takes time.

QUESTION: How do I handle my soon-to-be ex criticizing my parenting and talking negatively about me to the kids? How do I handle him denying emotional abuse I've experienced?

NATALIE: Well, you don't. You're asking, "How do I handle this other human being who is outside of my control?" We don't. We can't. We have no control over other people. This is one thing I teach in the program, too, is how to distinguish between the things that we can control and the circumstances that are out of our control. Because when you let go of all this drama that we can't control and you turn all of your laser-focused attention on what you can control, whoa baby — that is when things start to shift in your life. We are so focused on controlling these things out here and we're not paying any attention to what we can control, and that is why we are so stuck in our lives.

So, your soon-to-be ex is criticizing your parenting — okay. This kind of goes back to what we were talking about before. That's what he does. He's going to criticize your parenting. Are you going to buy into what he says about your parenting or are you going to work on being confident in, "This is how I parent and I like how I parent, and I have reasons for how I parent this way. And of course, he's going to criticize me"?

I've talked about this even on the podcast, the duck and cat analogy. He's a duck. He's not a cat. He's not going to meow and go, "Oh, good job." He's a duck. "Quack, quack, quack, quack, quack." He's going to track mud in. He's wet. He's cold. He's slippery. He stinks. That's what ducks are. Kittens are cute and cuddly and soft and they make a quiet little purring sound. They're warm.

You thought you went to the pet store. You thought you walked down the aisle and you thought you were getting a cat and you didn't. You ended up getting the duck. You

didn't know that till after you said, "I do." But now you've got a duck and you have to lean into that reality.

So ducks are going to criticize your parenting and there's nothing you can do about that. "Quack, quack." We just need to let him quack. How do you handle him denying emotional abuse? If he's talking negatively about you to the kids, okay, he's gonna do that, but we're gonna let go of that so we can focus in on what we can do.

You get to have your own relationship with your kids that doesn't have anything to do with him, right? You can just focus on your own relationship with them. One thing that I used to do... I'm trying to do it a little bit more. I have fewer kids at home now, so I feel like I get more one-on-one time with my younger kids. But when I had a lot of kids at home, I would take a different child out every single week and spend one-on-one time with them. We would run our errands and then we would go to a restaurant. Back then, it was a fast-food restaurant. They each had their favorite restaurant, okay? So one liked Wendy's, one liked Noodles. So we would go and get our meal and sit and talk and we would have one-on-one time.

Build your own relationship with your children. And then when your husband criticizes you... My ex will sometimes say things to my kids... Actually, he really doesn't do that anymore, but he did when we were first divorced, he would say things. And my younger kids, and some of my older kids, too, they would come home and they'd say, "Yeah, dad said this about you. Can you believe it?" They didn't buy into his crap because they separated what he was saying from what the reality was of what they were experiencing with me. They knew he was just BS-ing them.

So you focus on your relationship with them and let go of all that. Of course, he's going to deny that he emotionally abuses you. We don't care if he knows that he's emotionally abusing you. We care that you know. You're the one who needs to know this, right? You're the only one who needs to know what's true in your world for you. Everyone else can deny it.

You have to remember, I was excommunicated. My entire church took a vote. There were probably over 400 or 500 people because there has to be a quorum to pass a motion, and this is a huge three-campus church — took a vote specifically to vote me out. I've had people come back to me and say, "I voted you out, and I'm so sorry. I was wrong. That was wrong for me to do that. I just believed whatever the leaders were saying, and then I just voted against you."

And then I've lost my family of origin. They haven't talked to me for five years. I had

friends that I had had for decades at this church that completely cut me off after that, all in the name of God and love. They were all denying that I was emotionally abused. How do you handle that? What do you do about that?

You let it go. You learn how to tolerate other people's disapproval. You just go, "Okay, I guess those people are going to believe that story. I'll get to have my story." And you know what? You get to have your story. And every one of you used to be a little girl that looked just like this or something like this — an adorable little girl, and she gets to have her story. Believe her. She needs one advocate besides God, who is already her advocate. And the most important advocate that you can give this child is you. You're the one.

QUESTION: It seems like there's a mismatch in between what I hear in more research-based circles versus Christian circles about the hopefulness of reconciliation in cases of spiritual and emotional abuse in marriage. Many Christian circles present this sunny optimism that most situations can and will be healed and that the abuser can and will change. But most of the research-based and non-church-affiliated Christian resources share a more sobering outlook.

NATALIE: That's because one is based on research and one is based on Christian clichés. They're not even biblical. Do we see this in the Bible, you guys? Did we see Saul who was trying to throw javelins at David and running after him and kill him — did Saul have a change of heart and become a good man? No, he didn't. Did Herod? Did the Pharisees? Not in general.

A couple of them who weren't abusive in the first place... Like, Nicodemus was just questioning. He just had curious questions. And Joseph of Arimathea — those were Pharisees that were not in the same grouping with the brood of vipers that Jesus called them.

They didn't change. You don't hear about any Pharisees coming later and repenting and changing. You don't see these Pollyanna stories in the Bible. Wicked people were wicked people. And if you want to read about how to deal with wicked people, the whole book of Proverbs is all about how to deal with... Fools are abusers. You can put the word "abuser" in place of the word "fool." And the whole book of Proverbs is about abusers: what to do, how to manage them, what to do with them, how to respond to them or not respond to them as the case may be.

But I think Christians, they're very tunnel-visioned. They just have their own little teachings that they follow and they're not looking at the Bible in context, they're not



looking at the whole scope of the Bible, and they're also not looking at the reality of the situation around us, which is we live in a world of tremendous social injustice, tremendous racism, we have genocide happening in different places all over, tremendous violence, tremendous power grabs. That's the reality of our situation.

The modern version of Christianity is not addressing any of that, but Jesus Christ did. And I believe that if we are going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, that means we are going to have to walk a path that is not walked by the wide road of whatever this modern version of Christianity is. It's embarrassing, I think, to call myself a Christian today in this day and age because of what that means to so many people. We are viewed as oppressors because this version of Christianity is oppressive to people.

But we don't have to be in alignment with that. Jesus Christ was the exact opposite of that. You guys, the healing begins inside of each one of us. I talk about this in the podcast a lot, but it begins as a tiny mustard seed, one little tiny mustard seed. That's you and me. One tiny little grain of yeast. That's you and me. That's what starts the whole process. We are a mustard seed. We are a grain of yeast. And then God, this great, big creator, powerful God, God does the rest. And He does not do it through violence and through, "I'm going to decide who's in and who's out." He does it through love. Jesus Christ was our example and that's who we're to be in the world.

So how do I reconcile these opposing viewpoints? I mean, you can't reconcile them. You just have to decide which viewpoint you're going to adopt.

QUESTION: Is it ever a good idea to just wipe the slate clean and start over with the narcissistic, abusive husband who is somewhat better, or should you require a disclosure of what he's done secretly in the marriage and require repentance?

NATALIE: Well, first of all, again, that's just one more way of denying reality. Let's go back to the gasoline analogy. He threw gasoline all over you, burned you over half of your body. You're in the ICU or maybe you're coming out, you've healed, but you're completely scarred. You're unrecognizable. And he's saying, "I want you to give me a clean slate. I don't know what happened here, but give me a clean slate. Let's start over again. We can start over again."

Is your body going, "Yeah, clean slate, nothing happened. It's all good." Or is your body like... It remembers; it knows. Plus, not only that, but you have visible scars all over. Well, my friend, you may not have visible scars on the outside of your body, but trust me, your innards, they are scarred. You more than likely have physical issues because of the abuse.

I do. I still have physical issues because of the abuse. I have heart palpitations. I have high levels of anxiety that get triggered just by hearing a song or by reading something on Facebook, and I have to manage all of that on a regular basis. Why? Because I have decades and decades of wiring in my brain that will be with me. I've learned how to make friends with that so that I don't go and spiral downward and I'm off the grid for days. I will spiral down for a couple of minutes and then I come back online again.

But I'm not going to deny what I have experienced because then I'm denying and throwing under the bus this little girl, and I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to ever do that again. I talk about that in my book, how I came to that place where I looked in the mirror and said, "I've got you, girl. No one else has you, but I do."

That doesn't mean that you can't stay with him, but I just wouldn't pretend like nothing happened. He can, and he probably will. They love to pretend that they never did anything to you. But you don't have to buy into that.

QUESTION: When you've told your family about the emotional abuse and they give money and wish your soon-to-be ex happy birthday, I find it unwise or unsafe to have an intimate relationship with them because they see nothing wrong with what they've done. Would you also find this relationship to be strained if it were you?

NATALIE: I mean, my mom had my ex over for Christmas. At my dad's funeral, my mom and my two sisters had an after-funeral family gathering, and Tom and I weren't invited, but my ex-husband was. So yeah, I know what that feels like.

So yeah, that is absolutely reprehensible. There is no doubt about it. And believe me, you are not the only one. You and I, we are not the only ones. There are so many women whose very own mothers and fathers throw them under the bus in favor of their abuser, especially if the woman is the one who filed for a divorce because of the abuse or because of even the cheating — maybe the husband cheated.

I don't understand and cannot wrap my brain around that level of apathy and lack of love for your child. I, in a million trillion years, can't think of any reason why I would toss any of my children away like that or stab them in the back like that. So yeah, if you don't want to have an intimate relationship with them, sometimes we have to just, like Jan Silvia says, we feed people like that with a long-handled spoon. So we might go to Christmas with them, but we don't open up and share our guts with them, right? We don't make ourselves vulnerable with them.

But we, for the sake of our kids or grandkids or whatever, we might try to have a civil

relationship with them where we just go and maybe it's more transactional. We talk about the weather or the sports or the latest something we watched on TV, right? But you don't have to have a relationship with any of those people if you don't want to. Again, this book about forgiveness after trauma, it's a really good book that addresses some of that stuff as well. When do you create boundaries for yourself with other people, with your family, when they are mistreating you or aligning with your abuser?

QUESTION: I'm endlessly stuck trying to figure out whether my husband is abusive or just immature and at times selfish. I've had so many people see him either way.

NATALIE: It doesn't matter how other people see him, by the way. You're married to him. You're the one sleeping with him. You're the one doing his laundry, partnering with him, raising children with him. You're that person, not all these other people. We don't care how all those other people see him.

QUESTION: It seems every few days I see him either way. For years he's generally kind to me and interested in me, but it seems that if it comes down to it, he'll blame something on me before taking ownership of it himself. I think he has a fragile ego and is self-protective, and he does love me, but he protects his reputation first.

NATALIE: Yeah. I felt like my ex loved me to the capacity that he was able. Someone recently said, "My dad loved me as much as he could, but the amount of love that he had to offer was a thimbleful. That was all he had to offer. So he gave it all, all the love he had to me, and it was a thimbleful's worth. But I needed more. I was a child. I needed more than just a thimbleful's worth of love from my father." And children do need more than that. They need more love than that.

QUESTION: So could you shed more light on this issue or point me in the direction of how I can understand this better and how to deal with the issues?

NATALIE: Now, I don't know your dynamic. If I was coaching you, I'd ask more questions to find out. But if you're in a situation where you're really avoiding triggering your partner because you know that if you give him feedback or if you call him out on something or if you say "no" or if you don't do what he wants you to do, that he's going to get upset with you and blame you and turn everything back on you, and if you're really good at that, and if that's the only time that he really triggers and throws things back on you, then you can often, by making sure you're walking on all the eggshells and avoiding all of the mines in the minefield, you can have some peaceful stretches of time in a relationship like that.

But be aware of why that's happening. If you really want to find out what your relationship is really all about, then start stepping on some mines. It's very uncomfortable because it's going to blow up in your face at times, but start saying "no" to him. Start doing your own thing. Start making your own decisions. Start expressing when you disagree with him. Start giving him feedback when he's doing something that he shouldn't be doing. Start calling him out. See what happens.

And if he blows up in your face every time and doesn't take personal responsibility, then you're living with an abuser and you've learned how to manage him really, really well. But is that how you want to live? That's not a normal relationship.