

WHEN THE ABUSE SURVIVOR HAS AN AFFAIR: INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN ESTRINGEL

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 285 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have a special guest. She's a friend of mine and she's also a coach inside of the Flying Free program. Her name is Susan Estringel. She's a Life and Relationship Coach, Yogi, and Music Therapist with a message of self-compassion and resilience. Drawing from her own journey as a survivor of emotional abuse, Susan brings a personal perspective to conversations around Christian abuse survivors who have affairs.

With a passion for lifting others up to find and reclaim their voice, Susan offers a unique blend of lived experience and professional expertise in navigating the complexities of healing after having an affair. She specializes in rewiring limiting beliefs, setting boundaries, and shedding the heavy burdens of shame and guilt associated with affairs. So welcome to the Flying Free Podcast, Susan.

SUSAN: Well, thank you, Natalie, for having me. I'm excited to have this discussion today.

NATALIE: I think it's an important discussion. It's not something we've ever talked about on Flying Free before. It's unique, it's very painful, there's a lot of shame surrounding this topic, and yet we do have several women inside of Flying Free who have been vulnerable and honest and shared that they have had affairs, and they're looking for help and healing, but it's a tricky situation because they're also living in an abusive home.

We're going to start, actually, by listening to a question that a listener on the Flying Free Podcast sent in. We're going to listen to her express what it's like to have had an affair but also to be living in an emotionally abusive relationship. And Susan, I wanted to invite you on this podcast so that you could address this issue since this is something that you actually work on with women on a regular basis.

LISTENER: Hi Natalie. I've been listening to your podcast lately and they've really helped me label what it is that I've been going through for the past twenty-eight years. My husband is the kind that rages, humiliates, belittles, calls names, and it's not all the time. It's just once in a while. It'll just be whenever I have to bring up a concern or whenever we have a disagreement about something or he doesn't like my tone.

I've learned to not engage too much so that I don't get that kind of reaction from him.

And it's calmed down quite a bit, but it's still been happening. I've kind of been feeling something's wrong for a long time, and now that I know what it is, instead of dealing with it, I chose the wrong path and I had an affair.

Now that I've had the affair and I've been dealing with the outcomes and the consequences of it because my husband found out, of course, now he wants to work it out. I feel like I want to work it out, but the rage, the anger, is so much worse. So my question is, I don't even know, because of what I've done, how long do I let him do this, continue this? Because I'm pretty tired and I just don't know how much more I can take.

NATALIE: Wow. It's heartbreaking to hear that. She's not the only one who's going through this. She's expressing what many women are going through in shame and silence. I'm wondering what your reaction is just to hearing her share her experience.

SUSAN: Well, I have a lot of compassion for her, and my heart just breaks about the situation that she's in. The first thing that comes to mind that I want her to know is that she is not alone. She is not the only Christian woman who has been in this situation and has chosen to have an affair. I've coached women and you've coached women. We've seen within the community that this is something that does happen. And it happens in response to the pain that she's experiencing inside her relationship.

NATALIE: Right. Okay, so if you were to coach her, what would the first thing be that you would address with her?

SUSAN: I would want her to hear that she said she took the wrong path.

NATALIE: Yeah, I noticed that too.

SUSAN: And what I would offer to her is she made a choice. When we think that we took the wrong path, we make ourselves "wrong" or a "bad person." And I would say just from coaching the women that are within the Flying Free community that we know how caring and loving and hardworking they are. And although we have not met this woman, I can say the same thing about her. She's been in a committed relationship for twenty-eight years with someone who has belittled her, raged at her, humiliated her, and she's still there trying to make it work.

NATALIE: Yeah, and she's noticed how she has no voice either. She said it can be okay as long as she doesn't bring up a concern, as long as she doesn't show up as a human being, and she just placates and does whatever he wants her to do. She's a non-person in that relationship.

SUSAN: Yes. And what I heard was she's basically twisting herself into a pretzel to become so small that he doesn't do these things, so she doesn't trigger him, as if she's responsible for his behavior.

NATALIE: Yep. So another person comes along after you've spent decades living with that kind of just a complete lack of love and emotional abandonment, and someone else comes along who's kind, who cares, who listens, who actually sees her. She's been invisible for over two decades, and now someone sees her and shows her some kindness.

You could be a victim of another predator, by the way. Do you want to address that? Because I think it's possible for victims to actually have affairs with someone else who's another predator, who's actually just using their hurt and their pain to take advantage of them and get their own needs met. Do you have anything to say about that?

SUSAN: Yes, it does happen and it's something to be very aware of when you're in that situation that because of the heightened vulnerable state, you can be taken advantage of by somebody else — that they do not have your best interest at heart.

NATALIE: Yeah. I have seen that. I've had a couple of friends that have experienced that. Okay, so what would you do next then? Where would you go from there as far as helping her to see, first of all, that it wasn't the wrong path, it was a choice that she made, and we all as humans are going to seek ways to alleviate pain or to solve our problems? It's just what we humans do. It's part of our wiring.

Our starting place for how we solve those problems is going to be different depending on our programming, depending on what we know about our situation or our awareness or even what our awareness of what our options are. You may not be aware that you have lots of different options. You might only think you have two options or one option. So where would you go from there?

SUSAN: So at the beginning, she says that she's beginning to have awareness that she's in an abusive situation. But I think I would want to turn up the volume, so to speak, on her awareness. Let's talk about what happens when we have a conversation with our partner and talk to them about finances or something that's possibly an area where there may be normal conflict between couples and what a normal response looks like and what an unhealthy response looks like.

So if I come to my spouse and I say, "Hey, money's a little tight this month — we need to work on or watch what we're spending," a healthy person would say something like,

"Tell me more about that. What's going on? I haven't had a chance to look at our checking account. Thanks for bringing this to my attention." And then there's a conversation about what can we do together jointly as a couple to make sure that this thing doesn't happen.

What I suspect is happening when she brings normal concerns up to her spouse is that he denies what's going on, then he attacks her, and then he reverses the roles and he becomes the victim and it becomes all her fault. And of course, the acronym for that is DARVO.

NATALIE: Do you know what DARVO stands for? Do you want to say it?

SUSAN: Deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender.

NATALIE: Yes, right. I noticed that towards the end she said she'd like to work things out with him. And I think that's part of that programming that says, "I'm responsible. I'm responsible to fix the relationship. I'm responsible to show up the way that I need to show up to make him comfortable or to make him happy. And now I really screwed up, so now I'm responsible to fix that mess. And now I owe him."

There's like, I think, a sense of, "Now I owe him" before, but I think she's always thought that she owes him. Now that she had the affair, it's maybe more tangible to her or she's got more of a reason that she can come up with in her brain. But I think before she probably felt that way too. "Well, I married him. I made that choice. So now I owe him my life. I owe him to be whatever it is that he wants me to be, which means that I can't be myself. I can't be a person with needs and desires and deserving of respect."

SUSAN: Yes. And I wanted to highlight too, when she asks the question at the very end: "How long should I continue to allow him basically to rage at me because of what I've chosen to do?" And we can really hear at the end the desperation in her voice. And I wanted to talk about what happens when you get stuck in that situation between, "I have beliefs," or "My perception of my beliefs is that I need to stay in this relationship. The church tells me I must be here. I have to stay." And you feel stuck and there's no place to go.

And I want to let her know if she's having thoughts about, "I wish he would just die so I could get out," or she's thinking about killing herself, that that is something that happens in these relationships when we feel like we have nowhere else to go. And there are other options.

NATALIE: What's interesting is that if you think about the church's response overall in general... And of course I'm speaking in generalizations — I'm not saying that every church would respond this way — but from my experience and from the experiences of literally thousands of women that I've talked with over the years, a church would, generally speaking, support the partner — if there's an affair that happens or if a partner cheats — the church would support the partner who was the “faithful” partner, especially if that faithful partner said, “Oh, I forgive the cheater and I'll take them back.” The church will support that because now we're talking forgiveness.

I've noticed if women are victims of someone who is cheating on them... And usually with men, if your man's a cheater, it's often a perpetual thing. From what I've seen, a lot of times when men are cheating on women, they're doing it serially because it's more acceptable in our culture for men to do that. “They have sexual needs.” That's the idea. That's the myth that is promoted in our culture, I think.

But I've had friends whose husbands have cheated on them, and when they've taken their husband back, the church really supports them and encourages them to do that. “Good for you — you forgave your husband. Let's keep the relationship together at all costs.” It's always, “Keep the relationship together no matter what,” even if it means forgiving over and over and over again.

In this case, with a woman who's a victim of chronic emotional and spiritual abuse — sometimes physical abuse as well — and there's a lot of fear and control and power-over tactics happening, who goes and has an affair as an outlet or a way of relief, the church is going to encourage the abusive man and praise and give accolades to the abusive man, actually, for taking her back.

And it's so twisted because he wants to take her back because he always wants to have control over her. An abuser wants control and power over his victim. So of course he's going to take the woman back because he wants to continue to maintain his power. And now he's got the perfect leverage to do that. If he didn't think he had it before, which he already did, but now he's going to use that as leverage until the day she dies. She owes him her life now because she did that thing. And the church will say, “Yes.”

SUSAN: Yes, that he has the right to guilt her and shame her.

NATALIE: Yep. There is no redemption for her. There's no opportunity for redemption for her in this story if you think about it.

So way back when I was in my other marriage and I was a young wife, I had a friend

whose husband cheated on her, and it was just one time — he was a good man otherwise. It was a very bad, horrible situation. He came back, he repented, he did his dues, they ended up getting back together. To this day, they have a strong, healthy marriage. This was before they had children. They ended up having a family — they have a strong, healthy marriage today.

So it can look like that, but there was no abuse happening in that situation. Neither partner was abusive. It was a one-off thing that was... No excuses, I don't think, for him. He just had an affair with someone at work. Obviously, there were issues in their marriage that had gone unaddressed — not abuse issues, but other kinds of issues. Just basically been married for a while and just were kind of floating through life and not really connecting. But all of that was addressed through counseling and therapy, and they ended up being able to repair. How would you compare that to this kind of situation?

SUSAN: So what I really like to kind of view an affair through the lens of, it's the canary in the coal mine. It's the warning sign or the smoke signal: "There's something in this relationship that needs attention." So when we look at your example, maybe they'd grown apart or hadn't been spending enough time together or there were just some things that weren't lining up. And what happened as a result of the affair is they worked together with a trained therapist to improve the connection in their relationship and help resolve it.

What we see happening in this other relationship is we know she's been emotionally abused and had a lot of pain, and in response to this pain chose to have an affair. Now, I'm not saying that she thought about it, but that's what's happening. It's just like somebody who goes to drink or gamble or eat and do all of those things that help buffer with pain.

And her spouse finds out about it. Now he is verbally saying, "I want to work on the relationship." However, what's happening is that the rage is increasing. His attacks on her are getting worse. It wasn't a wake-up call for him to say, "Oh my gosh. I love you so much. I can't believe that our relationship has gotten to this point. Let's get into counseling and work on this together."

NATALIE: Yeah, or "Let me get into counseling and work on my rage issues that would drive you to this point where you're seeking love and connection somewhere else." So that kind of repair that's necessary to repair the relationship is not going to actually happen when a relationship is at the foundational level abusive. It's not going to happen.

SUSAN: Because the person who chose to have the affair is always the one at fault.

NATALIE: Yes. And she was before the affair. Okay, so how would you advise her then?

SUSAN: So she, like all of us who can be in this situation, an emotionally abusive situation, needs to decide, what does she want to do? Does she want to choose to stay in a relationship with the knowledge that it's been this way for twenty-eight years, and likely if she stays for twenty-eight more years, it's going to continue, if not get worse?

And there are things that she can do, and we talk about that inside the membership, about how she can stay and set boundaries and begin to focus on herself and what she needs. She can try a trial separation or she can choose to leave the relationship. There's a spectrum of things that she can do.

NATALIE: And I want to just say this: If someone who's in a situation where your husband is raging at you when you stand up for yourself or say an opinion that's different from his or express a concern, if you are going to set a boundary in a relationship like that, you'll get more. The rage and the anger and the abuse will increase. But sometimes we need to see that play out.

I wouldn't recommend this if we're talking about physical violence. If you think that if you set a boundary for yourself to protect yourself that now all of a sudden you're going to increase your odds of being physically injured or in mortal danger, then that's not the time to set boundaries. That's the time to actually go into a trauma response. The fawning trauma response — there's a reason why that's a trauma response, and it's important that we use that response when necessary to keep ourselves safe. Or the flight response? Very important.

But setting boundaries could be a good first step if you wanted to stay. But if you realize, "I'm not allowed to set boundaries because if I do, it's going to get me in deeper trouble and I'm going to be in some kind of danger and things are going to escalate," then it's not going to be possible to stay in that relationship without just losing yourself.

Your only choice at that point is, if you don't want to leave, is to stay and lose yourself. Your life then becomes about that other person. It's like a flea on a dog. The flea gets to live... Well, no, that's a terrible analogy because the... Help me out here. What's a good analogy? I'm trying to think of a parasite situation where the parasite gets to live and the host ends up dying. Is there any situation where a parasite actually takes the life out of the host?

SUSAN: I'm sure we'll come up with it after this recording is over with.

NATALIE: Someone's out there driving and listening to this going, "Oh, for crying out loud. It's this." They know what it is, but we don't, but you get the idea.

SUSAN: It's like being a very young, small child in a relationship with the old adage of, "Be seen but not heard." He is the person that can have a voice in a relationship. She is not allowed to.

NATALIE: Yes. It's soul-crushing is what it is. Okay, so what is it that you would want people to know the most about infidelity?

SUSAN: What I really want them to know, and we've talked about this some already, is that oftentimes in an emotionally abusive situation, it is a buffering response to pain. I just want to open up people's minds that that is an option. A lot of times people believe it's just because somebody's attracted to somebody else. And in these situations, it's because the other person is meeting a need that has gone unmet, oftentimes for decades.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, so one of the questions that you had said that we could talk about, I'm so curious about it. You said, "How can Christian beliefs and expectations around marriage contribute to infidelity?" So you wouldn't think that, because I would think, well, your Christian beliefs and expectations, the way I grew up, there's so much shame around that kind of thing that you would avoid that if you could or you'd try to put that out of your mind, or if someone was being kind to you, depending on the circumstances, you might... I don't know. Where were you going to go with that? I'm just curious.

SUSAN: So where I was going with that question is when we feel like we have no option other than to stay where we're at, it really does create an environment where we feel like there's no way out.

NATALIE: Yes. Oh, this is so good because honestly, I feel like one of my missions in life now is helping Christian women to have permission to get out of their abusive relationships. They don't have to, but I want them to know that it's an option. I mean, some people might go, "Well, of course it's an option. It's an option for people who don't love God or an option for people who don't believe the Bible or don't want to obey God or don't want to be a good Christian."

No. I'm saying it's an option for people who love Jesus with all their heart, for people

who believe in the Bible, for people who want to obey God, for people who want to live out their Christian faith authentically and genuinely and with their whole heart. It's an option for them as well.

And actually, God supports women who are living in these oppressive environments. He supports them in their efforts to extract themselves from those environments just like He supports all of us in our efforts to help other oppressed peoples extract themselves from those environments. We're actually called to do that as Christians. We're called to be the hands and feet of Jesus and do that for other people, so why would we not also do that for ourselves? Where was I going with that? I guess I was making a point. Oh, just that I wanted people to have permission.

SUSAN: Permission to leave their relationship.

NATALIE: Yes. Because if they did, what would have happened differently?

SUSAN: Yes. If they knew that they are not allowed to set boundaries, they're not allowed to have a voice, and in those situations, when that happens, we have permission to leave. It shortens, I think, the duration of the abuse. And that you don't have to stay stuck where you're at. And when we feel stuck, one of the feelings that comes up is desperation. And you can really hear that in her voice.

NATALIE: You can.

SUSAN: The desperation. She's at the end of her rope.

NATALIE: Yep. And then sometimes when we're desperate, if someone throws us a lifeline, even if it's not the right lifeline or the lifeline that will actually give us the best bang for our buck if we go that route... Do you know what I'm saying? It's a lifeline, but if it's the only option that she thinks she has, why would she not take that in some ways when you think about it? If it's the only relief that's been offered her in twenty-eight years, you can understand why someone would take that.

This podcast and other things that we do, it's to help people see that there are other options, and I encourage you to look into those options. It doesn't mean that you have to make those choices but just know that you do have choices many times. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes you're stuck because of finances or kids or whatever, but it's something to look into. It's important to look into those options.

Maybe you can't leave right now. But you could, if you do some planning and thinking

and get your brain to solving some of these issues, some of these problems that you have or these hurdles to getting out, you could possibly get out down the road. You can make a long-term plan. Even just thinking that it could be possible one day is going to get your brain started because our brains love to solve problems.

So as soon as we crack open a little window in our brain to a possibility, our brain will start working on that and go, "Okay, if that's a possibility, what would that look like, and how would I begin to solve problems along the way to see that that might happen down the road?" And then your brain will start noticing little things even around you. Maybe a course or a podcast or something on social media or a book, and you'll start learning about things. And that new education or those new ideas will start coming in and those will lead you to more ideas and those will lead you to more solutions. And pretty soon you're on your way. But just opening up your minds to the fact that you do have options is a really important first step.

So what about this person's guilt and shame? It's happened. Now she's got a husband who's leveraging it against her. I don't think she mentioned her church, but her church or religious friends could be potentially be leveraging that against her as well. She's definitely leveraging it against herself. So all of these voices, now they're embedded in her brain, and these voices are in her brain. How to solve that?

SUSAN: So some things that I wanted to point out is that shame is, "I am a bad person." Guilt is, "I've done bad actions." So I think it's just important to recognize the difference. She has taken actions that I'm guessing are not in alignment with her beliefs. I don't think any woman who's in a married relationship goes into an affair with the belief that, "This is okay." There's the knowledge that, "I'm going against one of my values."

So there's that piece, and then there's the shame: "I'm a bad person because of these actions that I've taken." And again, I will go back to, we know from the hundreds of you, thousands of women that you've worked with, that women who are in these emotionally and spiritually abusive situations are not bad. They are the people that show up and volunteer and help out. They are overdoers, overachievers, people-pleasers. They do everything in their power to make sure everybody around them is happy at their own expense.

NATALIE: That's right. I love that you brought out that the guilt that they feel... We always feel guilt when we've violated something of our own values. I actually just did a podcast — I don't know if it's going to come after this one or before this one — but I was saying, and I've said this before, if we were taught our whole life that the wearing the color red was a sin, and then all of a sudden we decide to "rebel" and wear the color

red, we might do it out of defiance, but there's still going to be a part of us that was programmed to believe that wearing red was wrong, so we might struggle with that feeling of guilt.

So a lot of women feel like that even about the thought of leaving their abusive relationship. They've been programmed believing that divorce is always wrong no matter what, and so the thought of leaving causes them to feel guilty like they've done something wrong because that is a core value. They value commitment in relationships.

And you can get a divorce — I just want to point this out — you can get a divorce and you can have an affair and still maintain that you value commitment and that you value fidelity. But there are going to be circumstances in which you might violate those values that you have for whatever reason that you're doing it, and then, of course, you're going to feel guilty about that. So just to normalize the guilt that you're having and to know where that's coming from.

Some of these guys that I know, chronic cheaters, they don't feel guilty at all because they just think, "Well, of course, we have needs. And if my wife's not gonna give it to me the way I want it, then I'll just go out and get it somewhere else." They don't care. That's why they can do it over and over again and then expect their wife to go along with that. But this woman cared. She cares, and it doesn't sound like she's still doing it. Sounds like she's out and now she wants to repair her relationship with this abusive man.

But we're trying to say that's not going to be able to be repaired because it takes two people that are 100%, all in on making that repair, and he's not willing to repair. He's just going to use this now to abuse her even more deeply than she's been abused before.

So her hope, I think, is in just number one, I think, acknowledging that reality, and then number two, deciding what she wants. Ten years from now, where does she want to be? Does she want to still be with this guy or does she want to be able to get out so that she actually can experience a relationship that actually is in alignment with her core values and that enables her to be who she is, where she can feel safe and respected and experience all that mutuality — a mutually loving, kind, and respectful relationship? Because that is a possibility for her. She needs to know that. That's a possibility for her, but not in the relationship that she's in right now.

SUSAN: And I just want to say to her and other people who may be listening that those relationships do exist. Because I know at one point I believed that they did not — that a loving, mutual relationship was just a fairy tale and that I needed to continue to stay in

the relationship that I needed to stay in.

NATALIE: Yeah. And you and I both know too, from working with enough women, that we've seen women come out of abusive marriages and actually establish themselves in healthy relationships, and they... I mean, it's not like we ride off into the sunset or anything, but it's a 180 turn. It's a night and day difference in what we're experiencing and what they're experiencing in their new relationship. So definitely possible and even probable if that's what you want.

All right, so Susan, I'm sure there are people listening who maybe they've never told a soul and never even knew that there was help for Christian women who have had affairs, or maybe there's women who are listening right now who are having an affair and who feel stuck in a cycle and don't know what to do. And I'm just wondering if you could tell us where they could find you and what you offer as far as help for them.

SUSAN: So they can find me on Instagram @calledtohelpothers. And then my webpage is also the same: www.calledtohelpothers.com. And I do offer one-on-one coaching packages to work with them.

NATALIE: Okay. And I will put those links in the show notes for anyone who wants direct links. Otherwise, you can just put it in your browser and you could go directly to Susan's page. Is there anything else that you want to share with us before we close?

SUSAN: I would just say that women who find themselves in this situation, self-compassion is key. And a lot of times we need to have somebody in our exterior environment offer that self-compassion so that we can learn to offer that self-compassion to ourselves.

NATALIE: Right. Thank you so much. Really, thank you so much for coming on here and talking about a very difficult topic that I think needed to be addressed.

SUSAN: Thank you.