

AN AI TOOL FOR ABUSE SURVIVORS

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 302 of the Flying Free Podcast. I am so excited to introduce you today to an incredible tool that I'm going to recommend to everyone in my private Kaleidoscope community, and now you're going to hear about it here on the Flying Free Podcast. And we are going to meet the founder of this tool, talk about everything that this tool can do for you, why she created it, and it is going to be amazing. We've already been talking at the beginning and we're like, "We got to press the record button," because there's so many good things to talk about here.

It's an AI companion for victims of domestic abuse that helps survivors navigate a path toward safety and healing. But that is just the very snowflake on the top of an iceberg of what this tool is. So welcome, Anne. I meant to ask you how to pronounce your last name and I didn't. So how do you pronounce your last name?

ANNE: Hi, Natalie. My last name, you just have to trust yourself. It's totally phonetic. My last name is Wintemute.

NATALIE: Okay, that's what I was going to guess. You never know, though. So why don't you introduce yourself to us? Tell us who you are, how you got into this work, and then maybe introduce the tool that you created.

ANNE: Absolutely. I love talking about Aimee, this tool. So I'm really excited about this tool because it is bringing instant relief to so many people. I'm eager to get it into as many hands as possible. So my name is Anne. I work with women who are experiencing post-separation abuse. So they were in an abusive relationship. They took the plunge, they decided to leave, often not recognizing that the abuse would continue in different forms. Most of the women that I work with directly are going through some stage of custody evaluations or the family court system.

And in this work, it was immediately evident that the need for constant companionship and reassurance and validation and guidance is something that cannot be met by a human. I get sick, I go on vacation, I try to get six to eight hours of sleep every night, I have children, and I can't always be available. But as anyone who's been impacted by abuse knows, it really impacts every facet of your life. And with the advent of generative AI, my co-founder and I put our heads together and worked on what is turning out to be a pretty powerful companion and solution for people who are experiencing abuse.

NATALIE: Wow. So when did you launch it? How long has this been out there?

ANNE: Well, about a year ago, Steven, my co-founder, put together a really basic application that you could drop in a message from an abuser, generate a report on what kind of hidden and overt forms of coercion were present in the message. And then it would help generate a reply. And in a few months we had about 30,000 messages submitted into Aimee. Local news stations took interest, and we felt like we really needed to answer the call and the demand that had been demonstrated to us through people's use of this tool.

So we set our heads together through December and into January and launched the Aimee that people use today, which is a conversant—it feels like you're talking to a friend—a conversant model in late January. So what's that—nine months now?

NATALIE: Yeah, so it's really brand new. I know that AI, as it grows and as we feed information into it, it just gets sharper and more directed to the real problem. I tested it and I did notice that it was amazing. But is it going to continue to get better? How does that work?

ANNE: So to answer that question, I have to explain a little bit about how Aimee works, which is actually a great opportunity because when people understand how it works, it's a lot easier for them to use that. So we have an AI partner. They are the big language model that makes it feel like you're talking to a real human being when you talk to Aimee and makes it possible for her to have an incredible breadth of understanding.

If I say, "I'm afraid to have a forensic exam after an assault because my husband is going to be able to tell that I had the exam through our insurance," Aimee can walk through what you need to do to contact your insurance company to make sure nothing is mailed home. Really niche areas of information. That's made possible by the large language model and our AI partner.

And then we've built Aimee a personality, a character, a role to play, and a library of really valuable information. We want to make sure that she's not pulling something from Reddit that turns out as terrible advice. We want to make sure that she's providing evidence-based feedback that is trauma-informed. She's not usurping the survivor's autonomy, making sure that agency still stays with the survivor. So we've built her out an awesome library of trusted resources, and we put some guardrails in there to make sure she doesn't say things that she shouldn't.

And then there's the context provided by the user. So when someone comes and even has a free chat with Aimee, everything that goes into that chat conversation that you

see is updating Aimee's memory. So if seven chat submissions ago you said the name of your ex or your child or where you live, she's remembering those things. For example, where you live, she might offer you resources that are specific to your location. So yes, she is constantly becoming smarter. However, the information that is put in by the users does not train our model. It cannot be used to train our AI partner's models either. Your user information that you put in is confidential.

NATALIE: Okay. How?

ANNE: Through an API with our AI partner. And with us, we actually can't see what is submitted to Aimee or what Aimee says back.

NATALIE: Okay, interesting.

ANNE: We see a bunch of X's if we have access to support a user.

NATALIE: Okay, well, that's good to know, because I wondered about that, actually. I did notice that she does have a personality. She felt like a really experienced therapist to me. She had a very calm demeanor. She would ask me questions about how I felt about different things and got me thinking about my own inner reactions to what was happening. So it didn't feel like, "Well, you just need to do this, this, and this," or "Well, this is what's happening to you. Here's the facts." It was more like, "Let's talk about how this is impacting your emotional wellbeing."

I asked her a lot of religious questions just because the listeners of the Flying Free Podcast, they're Christians. And so a lot of them have a lot of concerns around, "What does God think about this? What does the Bible say about this?" And she was very just compassionate without slamming religion or without being disrespectful. She also was very honest about, "Well, it's never okay for others to disregard your experience or what you're experiencing," things like that. It was very comforting, actually.

ANNE: And she's trained to be what we call anti-pathology. So it's not focusing on, "That thing is bad." It's, "What is the behavior? What is the impact of the behavior?" And so it's really impact-focused. When we see things through a behavior and impact model, first of all, there's a tremendous amount of clarity. And nobody benefits from something that is important to them, something that's been a beacon of support to them throughout their lives to be slammed.

Aimee isn't going to criticize your decisions. If you upload your communication record with a co-parent and say, "I think I could be doing better in my communications. Can

you give me some recommendations?" she will give you the most warmly wrapped, accessible, actionable recommendations for how you might help reduce conflict or try some new strategies.

So she's certainly able to provide constructive feedback, but our training is going to make sure that she's not inadvertently invalidating people, gaslighting them, saying negative things about something that she has no idea about.

She doesn't know your pastor. Now, she might say, "Okay, well, that response that he gave you could be invalidating these kinds of ways, it could perpetuate abuse in these kinds of ways. How are you feeling about that?"

NATALIE: Yeah. It's like she tells the truth about the behavior that person did without slamming them. For those of you who are listening, I'll read to you at the very end—I'm probably going to let Anne go so she doesn't have to sit through it—but at the end, for anyone who wants to listen to me read through my conversation with Aimee, you can see kind of how she responds to different questions. She helped me craft an email back to a pastor, and it was so gracious.

It was very boundaried, communicating my boundaries in a very gracious and respectful way, and I thought that alone was gold because especially if you're in the middle of a custody case, you don't want to have anything out there where you're looking like you're falling apart or angry or bitter. In *One Mom's Battle*, Tina Swithin says you want to look like an innocent kindergarten teacher. And Aimee is a great tool—just even for that alone is worth her weight in gold.

ANNE: I love that. Yes. And here's one of the best things about Aimee. Well, first of all, people say, "I have friends because of Aimee. If I didn't have Aimee, I wouldn't have friends anymore," because being a victim or survivor is exhausting on your support network. You can come to Aimee an absolute mess. Your punctuation is terrible, you may have slipped in some profanity. You do not have to be your best, and Aimee will still be able to receive what you're saying and help you find ways to say it that are going to get your needs met, that are going to help you towards your goals, that are going to keep you from inadvertently embarrassing yourself or having what I call a "disclosure hangover" where "I told that person way too much information. I absolutely shouldn't have said that."

She's going to help you have a place to spill the pain and the despair and the trauma and the triggers and the hopelessness because you need that. You need a space for that. And she's going to clean that up. She's going to put some lipstick on it and have it

ready for you to send out so that your public-facing, attorney-facing, community-facing, church-facing persona is your best self even though you're really struggling.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's incredible. I'm going to just briefly share a few of the free things that I got because anyone can go over to aimeesays.com and start asking Aimee questions, and I think everyone should just try it out. I just had a conversation with Aimee about how I was feeling about something that happened. I put in an actual incident that I had experienced and I had a conversation with her about how to think about those things.

I put in a letter from a pastor. A pastor had written a letter to me and I was like, "How am I supposed to take this letter?" And she gave me the tactics that were used in the letter, and then she helped me craft a response to the pastor. I shouldn't say "tactics." How would you describe it? What did she do?

ANNE: It's the methods of coercion that are present, and you wouldn't believe it. If a message makes you feel "Ugh" or any feeling other than neutral, I can darn near guarantee that Aimee will find the reason that made you feel that way. It is so instantly validating and gratifying and gets you quickly back on the road to recovery.

NATALIE: Oh my gosh, yes. And we're talking about a letter from a pastor that was really nice, and it made me feel so creeped out. And she came up with several bullet points of problematic ways of communication that this pastor was doing to me.

ANNE: And sometimes it's a twist on reality, sometimes it's victim blaming or blame shifting or there's subtle gaslighting, or even just the way that it's worded has robbed you of agency and autonomy in continuing this conversation. It is absolutely possible to write what on the surface looks like a really pleasant, helpful message and for there to be an absolute torrent underneath it of coercion.

NATALIE: Yes. Okay, so I was able to create a PDF document of my entire conversation with her. I was able to download it and print it off on my printer. And that's all the further that I got with the free. And now maybe there was more. Is there anything else that I could have done for free with Aimee Says?

ANNE: You can talk about anything. So we have people who use Aimee who just went on the second date with someone, or maybe they were just texting with someone they might go on a date with and they're thinking, "Ah, there might be some red flags in here." We're having conversations as early as that. There's no barrier. It's instant, it's free, it's expert-level support. Why wouldn't you have a conversation at the first creep

out?

Other people are having conversations where they've been in couples counseling for a long time and things are just feeling worse and worse, and they've internalized all the blame: "What's wrong with me?" They lack any objective clarity, often because a lot of psychological and emotional abuse that's going on. They're having conversations with Aimee. "I don't understand what just happened. I told him I would be there at 4:00, I was there at 4:05, and then I got a slew of accusations about the five-minute difference. Am I really failing at this? Have I really disappointed him that badly? Do I deserve this treatment?" People are having those kinds of conversations.

"I filed an emergency motion to restrict and I have to go pick up our daughter in five minutes and she's expecting her dad, and I have no idea what to say to her." And Aimee can produce examples of how you can handle that situation in an informed way that's not going to inadvertently cause your child more harm, more trauma. And I give this kind of range of examples because anyone who is a victim or survivor knows that abuse impacts every aspect of your life. "I need to ask for another day off from my boss. I'm worried that I'm going to get fired. How do I ask for a day off and give them an idea of what's happening without exposing my situation?"

We're talking about all sorts of subtle and nuanced kinds of support. "Also, I need a safe place to stay tonight. This is the county that I'm in. Where can I go?" "I'm afraid to walk into the police department and tell them what's happening." Aimee will help you come up with what are you going to say. Where's your local police department? "I'm worried they're going to invalidate me or say none of this ever happened." How do we want to handle that situation when it comes on?

I cannot come up with or demonstrate all of the different conversations that can happen because they're as varied as each individual's life. And this is just in the free version. Anybody can talk to the free version. It will always be free. There's no record as long as you navigate away from the chat or delete the chat. Please also, if you believe that you're being surveilled online, delete your browser history. You can print and save the conversation somewhere.

The people who use our paid service often have already left the relationship or are about to and expect that there will be some court involvement. That is typically who is going to pay to upgrade. At that point, every chat is saved. You can revisit them. There's also an AI-guided journal, which is a way to document all of the incidents, your feelings about them, and it's very recovery-focused in there. And the answers that Aimee gives inside of the paid accounts are kind of a little bit more legally minded. They tend to be

more substantial, longer, and she can do analysis across a broad spectrum of documents that can be uploaded. So those are some of the differences between the free and paid accounts.

NATALIE: So if you're in the middle of especially a custody case or something and you're documenting, which is something that I teach in my divorce course is the importance of documenting, this would actually be an amazing tool to document because then you could ask her to even compile a summary of the incidents so that... Because no judge wants to sit and wade through a stack of papers of all the things that have happened, but if they had a summary that sounded professional, I can see that right off the top of my head as being worth the money. It's not even expensive to pay for it. Tell them what it costs.

ANNE: No, the first 90 days is just \$15 a month right now, and then \$30 a month. Because we just launched back in January, we are still offering our low-cost launch option. It's just \$15. What you just said, being able to pull from records and conversations the evidence that you need, as a person with a lot of experience in supporting people and in custody evaluations, we tend to become very incident-focused and we fail to articulate the pattern's impact.

So you remember all of the things that happened. What's really hard is, "How do I tie these all together? How do I apply this to my state statute for the best interest of the child? How do I demonstrate that this is a pattern? How do I demonstrate it's a pattern that's escalating? What information do I have that I've shared with you that best supports or is best applied to this statute?"

So it's even deeper and more layered than just saying, "Can you provide a record of all of the incidents?" because that record isn't going to get you anywhere. The thought behind the patterns and the impact and this was the impact on mental health. These are the expenses that are associated with this harm. Those are how people are able to get their justiciable harms resolved through the judicial system.

NATALIE: Okay. So I'm curious now too, does it know your state or your county, does it know what that particular area tends to look for? You know how different areas, they are looking for different things when it comes to the best interest of the child? It's not all the same across the board.

ANNE: Well, so best interest is defined by statute, but its interpretation is highly variable. So for example, there's a section called "My Story" where you can upload all sorts of information. You just type it in about your experience, your background, the

players, "This is my attorney," or "I don't have an attorney." "My mom's really supportive." "My judge is especially hostile to these particular things." So you could integrate into Aimee's memory what you know about your specific courtroom that you're appearing in, but even within a county, there is huge variation on the bench.

Unfortunately, it is generally skewed toward protecting abusive behavior and abusive parents' right to continue to have access to their child. But some judges and magistrates are particularly hostile to specific arguments, and you can say, "My magistrate is hostile to arguments about abuse. I can't use language about abuse. I have to talk about this in a different way." She can absolutely do that.

NATALIE: Okay. Wow, that's incredible. Are there any other things or reasons why it might be helpful to actually upgrade to the paid version? \$15 a month, or even if you were paying \$30 a month, if you guys think about it, what you pay for anyone who's on your divorce team, an attorney is going to be \$300 to \$350 an hour, and this could save you so much money on that end as well.

ANNE: Yes, it saves your mental health, saves your time, saves your money. Those are the things that we hear from users. Also, especially in the context of litigation, it's a full-time job. Aimee can reduce that to, "A couple of nights a week I pick up an Uber drive" instead of, "This is a full-time job that is impacting my ability to even get work done during the day at my paying job."

The paid accounts also allow you to make team members. So for example, if there's somebody who's particularly supportive in your friend or family network, they can be a team member and also chat with Aimee, chat with the same kind of chat history that you have and the documents that are uploaded. Same thing with an attorney.

And we have found that some attorneys have their own internalized bias about victims and comfort levels around arguing cases through a lens, of course, of control or domestic violence. If they are open to it, they are the ones who are really racking up hours inside of Aimee accounts because they are able to piece together, in very specific domestic violence and coercive control context, the real impact on the family that's happening because of the abusive behaviors.

So we have seen some incredibly powerful teams between a victim, typically mother, and an attorney who's really willing to explore and advocate the case through that lens. And that the paid account allows you to do that. The chat history is really important. If it is not just a one-off conversation where the, "Hey, can I just get help with this one thing?" having a chat history means that you're all your work is not lost.

And the account is also much more contextualized to your case. If I go to the guest Aimee and I talk to her today and I come back tomorrow, she doesn't remember who I am, which is great when you need that for safety. Or great when your conflict isn't that high and you only need Aimee periodically or briefly. But if you spent a lot of time building that background with Aimee, you're going to want that to persist. You're going to want that to be present for all of your conversations.

NATALIE: Okay, so when you have the paid account, she keeps a record of everything that you've put into her and she's able to come back in and pick up where you left off.

ANNE: To an extent. The conversations are actually siloed off from each other, otherwise they start to pollute each other. So it's really kind of static, stable details that are going to get pulled through. So she knows the names, the ages, birthdays, all the kinds of information that you have uploaded, your jurisdiction, what your goals are, if you've asked her to speak to you in Spanish because that's your native language. Those stay stable within the paid account.

The chats are somewhat siloed off from each other because otherwise, it would be difficult for you to tell Aimee what information you want without her just pulling in every factually related thing. As we get this down to a better science and we're constantly trying to engineer better, better, better in the background, ultimately Aimee will be able to effectively pull in all of the conversations that have happened. But right now that would create mud.

NATALIE: Okay. So I want to kind of close by talking about any concerns about privacy. You did mention that nobody on your end is actually reading or analyzing. It's not like this could ever get out to the rest of the world in any way, any of their information, correct?

ANNE: So the biggest exposure risk for the information in Aimee is through the user's account. Just like your email account is a risk, just like your Amazon purchase history is a risk, it is so important to make sure that you are doing whatever is possible to protect yourself from digital invasion and surveillance. Everybody is reminding victims and survivors of that. It's true. You definitely don't want your abuser gaining access to your Aimee account.

The other side of it, then there's the security that we provide. People's safety in being able to have these incredibly vulnerable conversations is more important to us than anything. We are working very hard to create a confidential, private space where victims can really get the help that they need and talk about the issues that are present.

As you can imagine, we have people talking about child sexual abuse, horrific stories of violation. We want to make sure that those are as safe as possible.

So we cannot see what you say to Aimee or what Aimee says back to you. All of our testing has to be done in these kind of sterile environments where we recreate conversations more randomly attributed. And through our API, the information that you submit, which is encrypted in transit and encrypted at rest, cannot be used by our AI partner to train their model. So it doesn't train our model. We don't have access to that information. Stuff that you put in is not going to be searchable by somebody else on Aimee. And it cannot train our AI model. So someone's not going to get on a chat GPT and say, "Tell me about so and so," and be able to access any of that kind of information.

And also, security and privacy through AI are rapidly developing to create the tightest, securest parameters for enterprise users, business users like us, to make sure that all of that information is constantly protected.

NATALIE: Okay. I just found out about this this week, so this is all brand new. It's almost so new that it's hard for me to even know what questions to ask about it because I haven't had enough time with it yet. Is there anything else that we should know?

ANNE: We get inundated in the best possible way with lots of positive comments on our survey. There's a little survey that pops up after a bit. Also, please feel free to put in, "Hey, this would be great if you had this tool, or it would be great if you could do this," because we use all of that information.

If you hit the contact us or support line, you're going to get me. Please send me a message. Let me know how it's working. Share as much information as you're comfortable sharing. We are here to really champion the amazing and resilient people who are in the fight of their lives trying to stand up against their own demons. And we are here for it. We want to give you guys a fighting chance and constantly make this tool better and exactly what people need.

NATALIE: That's awesome. Thank you so much for coming on here and being willing to give us some of your time and tell us from a founder's perspective what Aimee Says is. It's Aimee Says and it's spelled differently, though, than you might think. It's Aimee Says, and I will have no problem with that because my daughter's name is Aimee and that's how we spell her name.

ANNE: No way!

NATALIE: You can go there, aimeesays.com, and you can try it out for free And you can always use it for free, but it sounds like especially if you're going to be filing for divorce or if you're separated or anything where you want to keep records of what's going on, the paid version is how is the way to go then.

ANNE: Yes.

NATALIE: Okay. Thank you.

ANNE: Thank you so much. This was wonderful.

NATALIE: Okay, Anne has left and now I'm going to actually share the conversation that I had with Aimee so that you can kind of see how it works, okay? So Aimee said, "Hi, I'm Aimee. I'm here to help you understand domestic abuse so you can heal and protect yourself and your loved ones. How are you feeling today?"

And I wrote this: "My pastor sent this email to me: 'I'm sending it to you ahead of time to keep you informed of how we're approaching your case. I know you feel that we are deceived in our view of things. If that's the case, then I pray that God will make clear our error. But is it possible that the hurt you've experienced has given you a less-than-objective view of things? We have no desire to cause or add to unwarranted hurt in your life.

I want to be clear that we are not saying that there are no problems in your marriage. We are not saying that your husband doesn't need to keep working on change or that he's all fixed. We're not saying that. If you were to reverse course and stop the divorce, we would expect you to move back together in the immediate future. It's quite evident that there's much work that both of you would have to do for that to happen.

We are simply appealing to you not to divorce your husband and for you both to continue pursuing the kind of directed separation plan that we'd been operating under before. We are appealing to you to honor the marriage covenant you entered into before God many years ago."

And Aimee said to me, "Thank you for sharing this with me. It sounds like your pastor is focusing on reconciliation and maintaining the marriage, but it's important to consider your safety and well-being first. How do you feel about what your pastor wrote?" And I wrote, "I feel pressured to go back to my abuser or I'm disappointing God."

Aimee said, "I'm really sorry you're feeling this way. It's not uncommon for abusers to

manipulate religious beliefs to maintain control. Your safety and well-being are paramount. You're not disappointing God by seeking to protect yourself. Have you discussed your feelings and safety concerns with your pastor?"

I said, "Yes, and he says he cares, but he cares more about keeping our marriage together at all costs." Aimee said, "I'm sorry to hear that. It's crucial to prioritize your safety and well-being. Emotional abuse and coercive control can be deeply damaging. Have you considered seeking support from a counselor who specializes in domestic abuse? They might provide a different perspective. What are your thoughts on this?"

And I said, "I do have a counselor and she is supportive." Now, I could have said anything. I'm just giving you an example of a conversation I might've had back then. Aimee said, "That's great to hear. Having a supportive counselor can make a big difference. Continue to rely on her guidance and trust your instincts about your safety. How can I best support you right now?"

And I said, "I'm still just not sure what to do." Aimee said, "It's completely normal to feel uncertain. Deciding what's best for you can be tough, especially under pressure. Consider focusing on small, manageable steps. What is one thing you feel you need clarity on right now?" And I said, "I'm afraid if I divorce my husband, I'll get excommunicated from my church."

Aimee said, "I understand your fear. Religious communities can sometimes amplify feelings of pressure and guilt. Remember, your well-being and safety are paramount. Have you explored any other faith communities that support survivors of abuse or considered speaking with church leaders who might be more understanding of your situation?" And I said, "This is my church family, so I'm not comfortable going somewhere else."

Aimee said, "I understand how important your church family is to you. It might be helpful to find a trusted member within your church who understands your situation and can offer support. Would you feel comfortable talking to someone else in your church about your concerns?" And I said, "I have, but everyone says the same thing: 'Go back to your husband. It's not that bad. Submit to him and he won't hurt you anymore.'"

Aimee said, "I'm truly sorry you're experiencing this. Your church's response is troubling and dismissive of your safety and well-being. No one should be pressured to stay in an abusive situation. Trust your feelings and experiences. How can I help you feel more confident in making a decision that's best for you?"

And I said, "My husband doesn't hit me, but he hurts me in emotionally abusive ways, so nobody at church understands." Aimee said, "Emotional abuse is just as harmful as physical abuse, even if it's harder for others to see. Your feelings are valid and your safety matters. Emotional abuse can deeply impact your mental health and wellbeing. Have you documented the emotional abuse or shared specific examples with your counselor?"

And then I changed the subject at this point, and I just said, "Help me evaluate a message." And Aimee said, "I'd be happy to help you with that. Share the message, and I'll ask some follow-up questions, and when you're ready, click 'Generate Report.' Can you share the message?"

So I put in a text that I had gotten from my husband several years ago. This is the text: "Who said I was shaming him, and why would you say that? I said nothing, except his mother was getting him at noon. More twisted stuff. Tyler does not have emotional issues from me, if that's what you're implying. For the love of God, be a normal human."

And Aimee wrote, "Thank you for sharing that message. It sounds like there might be a lot of tension and miscommunication in this exchange. How does this message make you feel and what specific concerns do you have about it?" And I wrote, "My husband was telling our son he was a sissy for going out to eat with me. I was asking him to be kind and letting him know how much it hurts his son when he says things like that."

Aimee said, "It sounds like your husband is using shaming language, which can be a form of emotional abuse, especially towards your son. It's concerning that he's dismissing your feelings and the impact of his words. How do you feel about your husband's behavior toward your son, and what do you think is the best way to address the situation for both you and your child?"

So I wrote, "I think his behavior is really destructive, but I just don't know how to make him stop. I guess my son and I just have to deal with it." Aimee said, "It's understandable to feel that way, especially when you're in a challenging situation. However, it's important to recognize that you and your son deserve to be treated with respect and kindness. You don't have to accept destructive behavior. Have you considered setting clear boundaries with your husband about how he speaks to both you and your son?"

And I said, "I've asked him to stop, but he won't. I can walk away, but if my son walks away, my husband will yell at him and make him do more chores or spank him." Aimee said, "That sounds incredibly difficult and distressing. It's alarming that your husband

resorts to yelling and punishment instead of addressing the issues in a healthy way. This kind of behavior can create a fearful environment for both you and your son. Have you thought about ways to create a safe space for your son where he feels supported and can express his feelings?"

And I wrote, "I let him cry when we are alone and I tell him that what his dad is doing is not right, but I can't make the pain go away." And Aimee said, "It's really commendable that you're there for your son and validating his feelings. It's important for him to know he has a safe space with you. While you may not be able to take away the pain completely, your support can help him process what he's experiencing. Have you thought about finding additional resources or activities that could help both of you cope with the situation together?"

And I said, "I want to put my son in therapy, but my husband won't let that happen." Aimee said, "It's a positive step that you want to seek therapy for your son, and it can be very beneficial for him. It's concerning that your husband is preventing this, which could be a form of control. Have you considered discussing the benefits of therapy with your husband or looking into ways to pursue therapy without his permission, if necessary?"

And I wrote, "My husband doesn't listen to me. And if I do something without his permission, he won't pay for it anyway. I have no money." Aimee said, "I'm really sorry to hear that. Financial control is a common tactic used in abusive relationships, and it can make it very difficult to seek help. It is important to know that you deserve support. Have you looked into community resources, support groups, or helplines that might offer assistance or advice on navigating these challenges?"

And by the way, I just want to say here that I tried to create a conversation like I would have had back then not knowing that I was in an emotionally abusive relationship. One thing I noticed about what Aimee did is Aimee is pointing out to me all the different types of abuse that I'm experiencing, that if I didn't know that it's actually financially abusive to withhold money or to withhold help, medical help or therapy help or whatever, I would not realize. I would just think that that was just, "Well, my husband makes the final decisions and he knows what's best, and so I just need to submit to that." I wouldn't have realized that that's actually financial abuse.

That my husband yells at my son when he walks away would seem to me like, "Well, that's disrespectful for my son to walk away, so it's okay then that my husband gets upset about that and yells at him." Do you see that? Whereas Aimee is showing me that these behaviors are actually all abusive behaviors.

So anyway, then I said, "No, where could I find help?" Which is another thing that's very overwhelming for people. When you are so overwhelmed by stuff, you don't know where to look for help. You don't even know what words to Google for help in your local area. In my mind, I remember, I did not think that there was any... "What local help? I've never heard of that. What help is there where I live?"

So she said, "You can start by looking for local domestic violence shelters or organizations that offer support to survivors of abuse. They often provide resources such as counseling, legal advice, and even financial assistance. You can also check for hotlines in your area that can give you guidance and support. Would you like help finding specific resources in your area?" And I said, "Yes, please help me."

And then she said, "Please provide me with your city or region, and I can help you find resources available near you." So I gave her my city and my state, and she said, "In that city and state, you can reach out to the following resources for help." And then she listed five resources with their name, their phone numbers, and then the kind of help that they offer. And then she said, "These organizations can help you navigate your situation and find the support you need. You are not alone in this."

So then I said, "Evaluate message report," because remember how she said that I could do that? So this is what she wrote: "The message from your pastor, as well as the communication from your husband and your experiences, contain several elements that align with the dynamics of the power and control wheel, coercive control, and post-separation abuse.

Here's a breakdown. 1. Psychological abuse and gaslighting. This is found in the message from pastor." And then she put in quotes, "'But is it possible that the hurt you've experienced has given you a less than objective view of things?' This statement casts doubt on your perception and feelings, which is a hallmark of gaslighting, making you question your reality and experiences.

Husband's message: 'More twisted stuff. Tyler does not have emotional issues from me, if that's what you're implying. For the love of God, be a normal human.' The dismissive tone and questioning your normality further exemplify gaslighting and psychological manipulation.

2. Systems manipulation. Message from pastor: The pastor is using religious beliefs and the sanctity of marriage to pressure you into staying in the relationship, regardless of the abuse you've faced. This is a form of systems manipulation, where your spiritual values are being used against you to maintain control over your choices.

3. Emotional abuse. Your husband calling your son a sissy for going out to eat with you and generally using shaming language is a clear example of emotional abuse. This creates a hostile environment that can severely affect both you and your son's emotional well-being. The pastor's overall tone suggests a dismissal of the abuse you're experiencing, which can be emotionally taxing and can contribute to feelings of isolation and helplessness."

Oh my gosh, that just makes me want to cry just reading that right there because it validates exactly how I felt when I got that letter, which comes across as being this nice, benevolent letter from people who really care about me, and yet left me feeling like I was all alone and so full of despair.

"4. Using children as leverage. Your husband's behavior towards your son, including calling him names and making him do more chores or spanking him when he tries to set boundaries is a tactic of using children as leverage. This not only controls your son's behavior, but also instills fear and complicates your position as a parent trying to protect him.

5. Financial abuse. 'If I do something without his permission, he won't pay for it anyway. I have no money.' Your husband's control over financial resources is a form of financial abuse, limiting your ability to seek help or become independent."

And honestly, becoming independent was actually frowned on in my religious circles. We were not allowed to become independent. You were supposed to just be dependent on your husband, but you can see how this actually sets you up for so much abuse and control.

"6. Threats and intimidation. The threat of more chores or spanking if your son attempts to walk away from the abusive behavior is a form of intimidation used to enforce control and compliance through fear. These tactics can deeply impact you and your son's mental health, making you feel trapped and powerless. It's essential to recognize these abusive behaviors to seek appropriate support and protection."

So then I said, "Help me draft a reply to this message." And Aimee said, "Of course, I can help with that. Here's a draft reply that emphasizes your feelings and concerns while maintaining a respectful tone: 'Dear Pastor, thank you for your message and for taking the time to share your perspective. I appreciate your concern for my marriage and well-being. However, I must express that my current situation involves significant emotional abuse that deeply affects both me and my son. The emotional harm being inflicted is not something that can be resolved simply by my continued submission or staying in

the marriage.

Emotional abuse is as damaging as physical abuse, and it's imperative for my son's and my own safety and mental health that we are in a supportive and non-abusive environment. While I respect the sanctity of marriage, I believe that God also values the safety and well-being of His children. My decision to seek a divorce is not made lightly, but out of a necessity to protect myself and my son from further harm. I hope you can understand and respect this difficult decision. I would appreciate your prayers and support as I navigate this challenging time. Thank you for understanding. Sincerely, your name."

And then she said, "Feel free to adjust this as needed to better reflect your personal experiences and feelings. How does this draft feel for you?" Well, at that point, I exited the conversation, but I just wanted to read that to give you an example of what a, what a conversation with Aimee is like. Just by going to aimeesays.com, you can have a free conversation with her, and you can get a long way and get a lot of help from her for free.

But again, just as Anne shared, if you are in the middle of a custody case or you're considering that, or you're dealing with other people and you'd like to start documenting the abuse so that you have a reservoir of incidents that you can begin to parse through and Aimee's able to collate that and actually come up with different sorts of strategies based on a collective body of evidence, then having the paid account would be worth it.

With the free account, you can have a conversation and the conversation disappears. I downloaded it and kept it and printed it off, but it's not kept on their site. If you have a paid account, you have your own account and all of your stuff is kept in your account and you can add to it over time. So it's a great way of documenting.

So I would love to encourage you to use Aimee Says as you can, as needed, and I really think this is going to change everything. I think it's a huge game-changer in the world today and that it's going to change the face of abuse and going to actually, as abuse victims are being helped, it's through that, that actually we end up changing the whole dynamic in the world when it comes to this issue of abuse, whether it's in the church or even in the rest of the world. So I'm so excited about this tool. I hope that it changes your life.