

Flying Free Podcast



Episode 18

Forgiving Abusers and Healing Raw Emotions

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to episode eighteen of the Flying Free Podcast. Today Rachel and I are going to be answering three important questions that were sent in by listeners. I want to thank these women for taking the time to go over to our recording page where they could ask their question in their own voice for the podcast. If you have a question you would like us to answer, I'm going to include the link to that page in the show notes. If you are listening on Apple Podcast or another app, you can go over to my website, click on the podcast link in the menu bar and that will take you to all of the podcasts. We will have that link in the show notes so that you can ask a question, and maybe we will include your question on the next podcast.

We have had over 20,000 downloads since we started this podcast in January. First, let me tell you that we are excited that we aren't talking to nobody. Second, we are excited that the things we are talking about are meaningful to so many people. I get requests from people every single week asking for the option to read a transcript rather than listen to the podcast. I try to write blogposts as well so that people have things to read, but people also want to read the podcast. However, it costs \$1 per minute to have transcriptions made, so if a podcast is 35 minutes long it costs \$35 to have that turned into a transcript. There are other costs to doing a podcast, such as hosting costs. I'm going to throw out an idea and see what happens. If anyone is interested in sponsoring an episode for \$50, I will have a transcript made and include your name in the show notes, or you can dedicate that episode to a survivor you know or to an organization you want to highlight. We will include that in the episode and in the show notes.

Whatever is left over from the transcription cost I would like to give to Rachel. (For example, if it costs \$35 to transcribe, there would be \$15 left over.) She is a single mom. She is working a job to support her child, and she does not get paid for this. She does this just for the fun of it and to serve you. I think it would be nice to give her a little tip. I don't need that because this podcast is a feeder. I get free advertising for my book, *Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage* – I get to talk about that anytime I want to. I also get to talk about my private Flying

Free Membership group, which opens up every four months. This podcast is a feeder into those things that do generate income for me. But it would be great to be able to give Rachel some monetary value for the time that she spends preparing and recording the podcast with me. So, \$50 to sponsor an episode. You can send me an email and let me know that you are interested in doing this until I get something set up, perhaps on each podcast page. In the meantime, send me an email at natalie@flyingfreenow.com and let me know if you are interested in sponsoring an episode, and we will get that started.

I also want to thank everyone who has sent in a review on Apple iTunes. We just reached ten recently, and I said a couple of episodes ago that if we got ten reviews in that I would give one of those ten people a hard copy of my book, *Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage*. So that happened, and the winner is Chris. I won't give more information about her, but you know who you are, and I'll be sending you an email this weekend to get your address to send you a copy of my book. I'd like to do this again! If you'd like to submit a review at Apple iTunes, the instructions for how to do that are in the show notes on the website. Click on the podcast link in the menu bar and go to any episode to see how to leave a review. For the next ten reviews that come in, I will choose another winner to give a copy of my book.

The other thing I want to mention is that someone sent me an email and said, "You should talk about having people ask their local library to have your book on hand." It is easy to do. Just go to your library, make a request that you would like this book, and they will purchase it. There is a special place where libraries purchase books, and my book is in that special place. They can purchase it for you to check it out, and other people will be able to check it out as well. I am throwing that idea out there.

I think that's all the housekeeping stuff I had.

Let's get started with our first question. I will play that now, and Rachel and I are going to answer it.

Caller one: I would like to ask you about forgiveness and how you handled forgiving your ex-husband, how you went about doing that, or if you still struggle with that. It's a very important topic to me, especially as a believer, for we are asked to forgive. Some of these things are very difficult to forgive. Thank you very much for your answer.

RACHEL: I love this question because you can tell the heart of what she is asking, which is – how do I do what God has commanded us to do in Scripture? That desire is so beautiful. Even when we feel overwhelmed by the possibility of forgiving someone who has hurt us so deeply, this issue leads to how God and His Holy Spirit enable us to do something that we have no idea how to do and is only possible through His Spirit. I think it is very difficult to forgive someone who has spent years and years hurting you. I think there is often a misperception about forgiveness that it is a one-time thing; but it is a daily thing because hurts come daily. So daily it must be released back to God, to allow the hurt, anger, and bitterness that may arise – to allow God to come into that and release the justice of it. We know that He will. He is just beyond our comprehension. He saw all of it, and you can trust that He will deal with it in ways that we probably don't even realize. But I do want to emphasize this need to let go of it. It's not something that is a one-and-done thing.

NATALIE: She asked about how you forgive your ex. I was thinking about that. Have I forgiven my ex? I think what helped me, and I don't know where I heard this, was recognizing the idea

of forgiving a debt – like a monetary debt. If you were to forgive a monetary debt you would say, “You no longer owe me money.” When someone has hurt you, they owe you an apology or restitution. So, forgiving that debt would be saying, “You don’t owe me anymore. I am going to forgive you of that debt.” But it doesn’t mean that it didn’t happen. It doesn’t mean that you cover it up or say, “Because I forgive you, now I’m going to act as if it never happened.” I think some people think that’s what it means. I think it would mean that when it comes to reconciliation. When we are reconciled to someone – when they come to us and say that they are sorry, they truly repent, and they make restitution on their own – then we don’t forget, but we can move on in our relationship because there has been reconciliation. Now we move forward in our relationship. But I think what we are dealing with in emotional abuse and our ex whom we have divorced, the whole reason we’ve divorced them, is that they have not repented. They have not turned away from their sin and are continuing to do sinful things towards us and towards our children. They have perhaps said they are sorry, but they certainly didn’t mean it because their behaviors haven’t changed. I used to think about this when I was married to my ex. I would think, “I forgive him, but he has never said, ‘I’m sorry.’” It’s harder to forgive someone who has never acknowledged what they’ve done and isn’t sorry for it. How can they be sorry if they don’t think they did anything wrong? That was hard for me to try to figure out. I think forgiveness does not mean that we cover it up or pretend it didn’t happen. Recently, I wrote a public Facebook post where I outed a family member of mine, from my family of origin, who had done two public egregious things against me. There are Christians who would say, “You need to forgive her, but you took vengeance on her by outing her.” Well, no, I did not take vengeance on her. If I wanted vengeance, I would have talked in a lot more detail about many of the things she has done over the years. I would have said horrible things about who she is as a person. I would have slandered her. That’s the kind of thing that is taking vengeance on someone and being cruel to them. What I did was expose something she had done to me that was a public thing. I gave very few details; I didn’t even name who this person was. Most people don’t even know who my family of origin is. Do some people know? Yes, they do. But there has been no repentance on her part, no understanding or comprehension of what she did, and no concern or care. That’s why I mentioned it. So, it doesn’t mean that you cover sin up or pretend that it didn’t happen. It also doesn’t mean that you minimize, excuse, or hide the sin that happened against you. It doesn’t mean that you back down. People may say to you, “You divorced your ex, so you must not have forgiven him.” No! You actually can forgive your ex completely and still divorce him. And, you will have to continue to forgive your ex. Rachel, do you still have to forgive ongoing things that your ex does to you and your child?

RACHEL: My ex-husband – it is funny to talk about him today because it has been a year today since the divorce was finalized. I’m thinking about that and all the things that have changed in the year since then. He has discarded me, and that’s been happening for a long time. It is sort of a gift because he has tried to minimize all contact. He is basically shunning me because of what I did. That’s good because I know a lot of women still deal with daily persecution from their ex-husbands. However, I still in my inner being think about my life with him – almost daily – and I still dream about it, unfortunately. It is still very much a part of my psyche, so I have to work through it. Memories come, and I do have a better perspective each day as I heal on this journey. But it is a process of releasing that to God. As it crystalizes in my mind exactly what he did and how cruel it was, it requires me to release that. It’s a daily thing. It tricky because I think we believe that if we’ve forgiven it shouldn’t bother us anymore, or it shouldn’t come up in our lives. But that isn’t true. I was thinking about Jesus’s command to forgive seven times seventy – essentially meaning an infinite number of times. It easy to interpret that as they keep sinning and you keep forgiving them, and that is one way to interpret it. But I also think it can mean that we forgive daily in the ways that we have to deal with it in our own lives, minds, and

hearts. Keep going on that journey and God will be with you. God helps us. It is supernatural. I was also thinking about a book by Corrie ten Boom, who is an ultimate paragon of the beauty of forgiveness. She toured the world after she escaped the concentration camps and talked about forgiveness. Some Nazi guards came up and asked for forgiveness – the people who had been so cruel to her. She did it, and it was only by God’s power. Reading that book is a good way to be encouraged in what it looks like to forgive and how God enables us to do that.

NATALIE: She describes in that book the man who came up to her, and she did feel a lot of animosity towards him. I think she said forgiveness was like when you gong a bell. There are reverberations that come after that. So, it isn’t like forgiveness is a one-time thing and you are done. It takes time. If you are being retraumatized over and over again, then you have to go through that process with each new hurt that someone does to you. Again, if those are adding up over time because those people are never coming back, never trying to make restitution, that will be much more of a challenge than when someone comes to repentance, changes their behavior, and wants to be reconciled with you. Hopefully, that gives you a different way of looking at it or viewing it rather than the common way where it becomes your problem and you are this horrible wicked sinner if you don’t immediately forgive your abuser and move on with your life. Trauma just does not work like that.

RACHEL: I want to add something to that, Natalie, and say explicitly that forgiveness does not mean reconciliation. A lot of people, especially in the church, want to conflate those two words and make them the same thing – but they are not! You can forgive someone from afar and not allow them to hurt you anymore. That is acting out of love for them because it is not loving to allow someone to hurt you over and over and over again. That is really tricky for women in abusive relationships to get their mind around, so I want to say that explicitly.

NATALIE: I just had another thought. Here is how you can know that you are really struggling with forgiveness. If all you can think about is how you wish the other person would be destroyed, how you hate that other person, or you want them to suffer, then you definitely have not forgiven them. But if you are able to let them go, are able to refocus your life on other things and dive into living your life and moving on, and you cut those ties – that is why it is healthy for us to forgive. Then we get to move on. We are free, not from the damage, but from the stranglehold that that person and their sin has on our life. We don’t want that. I’ve seen people who hate everybody in the world because they cannot let go of anything. They are obsessed with the damages from the sins of other people. That eats you away inside and destroys your own life. You end up with health problems. It is not a way to live. That would be an example of true bitterness and lack of forgiveness. For someone who is moving on with their life and trying to find joy and peace in other things and other people and in the Lord, that would be an example of what forgiveness would look like practically speaking.

RACHEL: This is a lot to ask, but if you come to a place where you truly want the best for that other person and that means God breaking into their life and allowing them to experience the consequences of what they have inflicted on others, that may be the best for them. If you truly want what is best and for them to come to the truth of what they have done and how they interact with other people in their lives, that’s a sign of forgiveness – that you don’t want harm to them but you really want God’s truth in their life.

NATALIE: That’s right. Let’s play the second question.

Caller two: Hi, Natalie. You have probably answered this question so many times before. I want

to know how you really get your emotions out of the marriage. I am now about to separate, and as much as I know things are toxic and not healthy and abusive, there is still this piece of me that thinks, "But it's been twelve years." How do I let go of the vision that I had of being with this person for forever and realizing that unfortunately things probably won't change? So how do you let go, how do you move on and not feel like it's a failure? I guess you covered it a little with identity, but that's what I want to know. Once I move out and am living a whole, separate life, how do I move on? Are there healthy steps to take to tell my heart to let go? Thank you so much.

RACHEL: I think the key is allowing yourself to grieve and to allow yourself to feel the pain from realizing that they weren't who you thought they were. All those good things that you perhaps projected onto them or that you wanted them to be and hoped they could be if only you could be the wife that they needed you to be, right? They are never going to be that person because they choose not to be. They would rather continue being that person than changing and keeping you in their life. Their view on the relationship is that this is the way it is going to be set up with power and control, and you are there to be who they want you to be and to serve a certain purpose in their life, and if you stop being that then they have no use for you. That's not a true authentic relationship. That's something else completely. But you thought it was. You thought it was a God-centered marriage or a marriage like the other marriages you had observed in your life. Coming to that realization, that it was never what you thought it was, is incredibly painful, and it must be dealt with. If you don't deal with it now, it will not let you go. It will come up later in life in ways that you don't want it to. So, allow yourself the time to grieve and to realize that the hope that you had and that you subsisted on (I know I did) for years and years – that he would be different, grow up and mature into the man of God that you knew he could be – that it is never ever going to happen. It's incredibly painful, but it is truth. If we start allowing that truth to settle in, realize that this is the way it is, and grieve the pain of it, those bonds will start releasing. This is a long process because you spent a long time with that person. The roots of your relationship as it was are deeply imbedded in your heart and soul. To a certain extent, I think they always will be. But they won't be nearly as strong. Maybe someone who has been out for a long time can say, "No, that person doesn't mean anything to me now." But I'm not there yet.

NATALIE: You know that song, "Now you're just somebody that I use to know." I remember listening to that the first time and thinking, "I wish I could get to that place." I am at that place now, but I am re-married too now so that has helped. But you are right on – it takes a long time. I've read in books about divorce that it is a loss that can be more profound than losing a spouse to death. I have talked to women who have been both widowed and divorced, and they've told me that is exactly right on. In the death of their spouse, as hard as it was, there was community support, understanding, and validation. It is a normal occurrence of life – people are born, and they die. There was closure. But with their divorce, there was no support, no validation, and no closure. There were layers of losses. You didn't just lose your spouse, but you lost your reputation, your home, your financial stability, and maybe even your children. There are so many layers of losses when you go through a divorce, especially as a woman of faith in a faith community. It is an extremely traumatic thing. If you were the one who initiated the divorce, there is a layer of complexity to that as well because, although you didn't want a divorce, it doesn't appear that way to anyone else. It appears that you are the one breaking up the marriage, when in fact you are the one who is simply acknowledging that the marriage was never intact in the first place and was being destroyed bit by bit on the inside. Understand the grief process and lean into the fact that you will have to walk through that process, and it isn't just a few days but more like months or years and looks different for everyone. I think that during the time of grieving, crying and processing – if you can get a therapist that would be helpful – but also you

need to learn how to honor yourself. Learn how to be your own best advocate because other than Jesus Christ, who will be 100% for you, in your corner, loving you, and caring for you, no one will be a better advocate. I hope you exponentially experience His support on your behalf to the degree that you are not getting support from people. You will have Him in your corner, but you also need to be in your own corner. You need to be able to look in the mirror and say, "I have your back. I am on your side. From now on, I am going to take care of you. I'm going to take care of your body. I'm going to take care of your mind, your emotions, your spirituality." At the end of the day, there is only one person that God has given you responsibility for in this life and that is yourself. You are responsible for stewarding the body, the mind, the will, and the emotions that God gave to you and to you alone. That is a profound shift in the minds of women of faith because we have been taught and brainwashed with the idea that it is selfish – that we should meet everyone else's needs, but we should not meet our own needs. That is a lie from Satan! What that does is neutralize your power, your ability to heal, your influence for the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this world. It does so much damage not just to yourself but to everyone around you when you refuse to take care of yourself and give some kind of a spiritual spin. I'm not saying you do that on purpose. I didn't do that on purpose, but that is what I was taught. That is the only thing I was ever taught.

RACHEL: Put the energy that was devoted to keeping this thing together – because we were putting 100% of our energy into making sure that our marriage stayed together – take the energy that you devoted to that and put it towards taking care of yourself, cultivating a relationship with yourself, and see that you are inherently worthwhile. You didn't deserve what he did to you, but he did it. You are going to pick up the pieces, move on, and not let him continue to do damage in your life.

NATALIE: A couple of other practical things to think about. One of the things that helped me was music. I started a playlist of survivor music to help me. So many artists, not necessarily Christian artists (actually, it is mostly secular artists to be honest) write about relationship break-ups and dysfunctional relationships. One in particular that I love is Sara Bareilles, and I put together a Spotify Playlist (I'll put this in the show notes) of all her songs that have to do with bad relationships. Listening to her music was really healing for me. She's a phenomenal musician, but she is also a really great writer. But you also need support. You are not going to get casseroles from your church friends; but there are a lot of people out there who have walked this path before you. They are going to have compassion on you. They are going to know exactly where you are coming from. Feel free to utilize support groups online. You may be able to find grief support groups, recovery support groups, or divorce support groups locally where you can talk to others who have walked through this. It will really help you to have support from others because even though we need to be our own best advocates we are made and wired to be in community with other people. If your past interactions with people have been very dysfunctional or "Do what we say or you are bad," it would be good to shift away from those relationships and towards relationships with people who have been through a lot of pain, who understand that, and who can help support you as you walk through your own journey. Here is the next question.

Caller three: My question is, I have been divorced for five years and married for twenty-three. My boys now are 26, 25, 22 and 17. I can't seem to get past the fact that they don't hold their dad accountable, and there are no consequences for him in their relationships with him for how he has treated me. He has treated them in very disrespectful ways growing up. He verbally abused them also, but they don't seem to remember that. I hurt so bad knowing that's okay with them, the things that their dad has done to me. They don't know all of it. They know the majority

of it and their answer is, "It's not all bad." I'm sure he's manipulating and sharing things with me that are not true. But I just can't seem to get past that, and I don't want bitterness to grow in my heart for my children. Thank you.

RACHEL: The pain that this situation with your boys has caused you – I'm so sorry. I know that there is a lot of fear wrapped up in this, that this is never going to get better. I want to encourage you to allow God to come into this pain, to trust Him with your boys, and allow them to make the mistakes. I think that's what you are doing. I don't think that you are trying to control them, but the pain is so overwhelming that it is unbelievable hard to wrap your mind around it. I have a dysfunctional mom. She has caused me a lot of pain in my life. I think about how I relate to her, and I have never stopped wanting her to love me. I am hoping – even though I realize it is never going to happen – but hoping that we can have a close, traditional, mother-daughter relationship. I think that may be where your kids are with their dad. He's always been their dad, even though he has caused them pain. The way he is is all they have ever known, so maybe they don't think they can ever expect anything more. But that doesn't stop them from wanting to have a relationship with him and for being desperate for love from him. They are going to have to grapple with that as they get older and realize that he is probably never going to be who they want. They probably also give him a pass because the way he is is all they have ever known. They just expect it. For you, the way they have known you to interact with him in your family as they were growing up – you kept everything together, you were taking up for him, you were making everything work – when you stopped making everything work they don't know how to deal with that because it is completely unfamiliar. They have to come to grips with the fact that the way that they saw things growing up was not okay. Maybe they will realize that; maybe they won't. Maybe it will take a long time. Their inner landscape has been profoundly shaped by the way that they observed things. I am so sorry that this is so painful. I feel for you.

NATALIE: Here's the other thing. You are definitely not alone. This is a very, very common experience. It's something I have heard from hundreds of people in forums: their children – their older children – do not fully comprehend everything that has gone down for the reasons that Rachel already eloquently explained. I've experienced this as well. I want to recommend a book. I'm in the middle of reading a book called Brain Talk by Dr. David Schnarch. He talks about mind mapping and how we map the minds of other people. Humans are very good at picking up on micro facial expressions, tones of voices, the ways words are used, the things people say, and the things that people do to us. What is very traumatic and causes traumatic mind mapping is when someone, on the one hand, does really nice things for us and seems to be a genuinely loving person who cares about us, but on the other hand does these underhanded things, doesn't come to our defense, or does things that are very cruel things that we just can't put a finger on. This causes traumatic mind mapping. I want to read a quote from this book that explains how this happens to children and what a profound effect this has on kids when their parents traumatically mind map them. (By the way, by disgusting he doesn't mean necessarily sexual abuse – that is obviously disgusting. It can be something like giving you the silent treatment when you don't do what your parent wants you to do.)

"Of all the damage created by parents who do disgusting things, here is the one thing I find hardest to accept. If you witness your parents do enough bad things, it can weld you to them for life. Rather than running away as fast as you can, their disgusting behavior actually makes you want to run toward them instead. They can make you their prisoner. How can this be? Once again, it has to do with interpersonal neurobiology. Parents' behavior can be so disgusting it actually warps their kids' disgust reaction. Repeated exposure to disgusting

parenting impairs this reaction making it less odious for you to be around them. Either your mind mapping collapses to the point where you don't recall your parents' disgusting behavior, or you misinterpret it to be better than it is so that you will actually defend your parents if someone else questions their actions." Brain Talk by Dr. David Schnarch

That's all I will read, but I am telling you that this is the tip of the iceberg on what this book has to teach on how mind mapping affects our lives. Lightbulbs have been going off all over in my mind reading this book, Brain Talk. I recommend this book. It's kind of expensive though. I think I paid over \$30 for a paperback book, but it is extremely eye-opening and helpful to me to understand why my kids also do this. My older kids do this, and even my younger kids do this to a certain degree. They will come back from their dad's house having experienced some traumatic mind mapping, and they will want to talk about it. But if I bring up anything negative, or if I say anything or point anything out, they will defend him. This is the closest thing to a good explanation of it that I have found. Although, Lundy Bancroft has a book about parental alienation, how abusive parents can actually turn everything around so that children can reject their supportive, loving, healthy parent and support and want to be around the parent who is abusive. My personal theory - based on what I have read, have experienced in my own life, and seen from talking to so many other women - is that these older children, like what Rachel said, they want so badly to be loved by the parent that is abusive that they will throw the other parent under the bus in order to gain that love and approval from the parent that is abusive. When a woman stands up and divorces her spouse, it's easy to look at that and think that she must have been the problem. Look what she is doing. You have to rise up and have a lot of energy to go through the hell of divorcing an abusive person. That energy comes from the anger and frustration and from saying, "I'm done! I am no longer doing this. I am no longer in denial. I will stand up against this no matter what." Of course, when you are doing that, you look very strong. You look very powerful. You look like you are in control - because you are. You are becoming strong and powerful and in control. You are taking back control of your life. That can be interpreted by older children as, "My mom is fighting." Of course, the abuser will put on a show and say, "Oh, she's leaving me! She's so mean to me." Then the traumatic mind mapping that the abuser did all through their childhood has left these gaps in their brain, and they are unable to put the pieces together - literally, physiologically unable to put the pieces together. It probably won't be until they are much older, have some of their own life experience, or have friends go through similar things until they are able to look back at their childhood and see things as they actually were. This is actually happening to me. I had brain gaps from my childhood, and as I've been reworking through traumatic mind mapping in my own life, I've been able to put together a lot of really crazy pieces that have been missing. Now I have a much more complete picture of my own past. It has brought tremendous healing to my own life. But I'm 52 years old. I'm with Rachel. I wanted to be loved. I was desperate to be loved.

RACHEL: I also wanted to encourage this woman, this beautiful person - just live your truth. Let your light shine in front of your boys. Live your truth and don't fall prey to this idea that in order to be truth they have to validate it and accept it. That's not true. You know what the truth is! Live it in front of them. That doesn't mean you have to talk bad about their dad but live who you are and what you know. It might make them uncomfortable, but that's what they need from you. Don't cave into the desperation for them to accept it because they need to see the truth, and you can live it for them.

NATALIE: That's right. That's it for today. Thank you so much for joining us and thank you to those three women for sending in your questions. We hope these answers have been helpful. If any of you want to ask a question, I will put the link in the show notes. Until next time, fly free

