

Flying Free Podcast



Episode 20 Differences Between a Normal Marriage and a Dysfunctional Marriage

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 20 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Rachel again, and we're going to be talking about the differences between a healthy marriage and an unhealthy marriage. Both Rachel and I are divorced, so we have experienced a destructive marriage – a destructive relationship. I'm remarried, and I'm in a healthy relationship now. Rachel is not remarried yet, but she's in a healthy relationship. We thought it might be helpful for those of you who are listening to hear what some of the differences are because I remember when I was married to my ex-husband and I would tell people about some of the things I was going through. They would just say, "That's normal. Everybody does that. Guys just all struggle with that." I really struggled with thinking that the destructive behavior I was experiencing was normal. It would have been helpful for me to actually hear about what a normal ... I thought that to expect good things out of a marriage was just expecting too much. So, Rachel, hello. Are you ready to dig in?

RACHEL: Hello! Yes, I'm excited to talk about this. I was just thinking to myself how wonderful it is to look back and see how much your life has changed. I can see the way things used to be and they are not even in the realm of the way things are now. I'm grateful for that.

NATALIE: I was just talking to a lady today, and she was telling me that she always thought in her former relationship that she had (her ex would tell her that she had) problems communicating and that she was basically the one with relationship problems.

RACHEL: Right.

NATALIE: You know how they always accuse you, basically. But now that she is out, she has realized, as she interacts with other people and has moved on with her life, that she actually doesn't have those kind of relationship problems at all. In fact, she's realized that she is very insightful and intuitive. Whereas she used to bend over backwards in her other relationship, now she's a very flexible person, very interested in other people and their interests, and very

unselfish. But she never had an opportunity - well she had an opportunity to practice all of that, but it was in such an unhealthy environment that it was way overboard.

RACHEL: That is something I've noticed. The skills that I built up in my marriage are actually really good things and they serve me well now. Being flexible, like you said. My ex-husband used to accuse me of being really sensitive, and I've realized I actually have pretty thick skin because you have to, right? You must just keep trucking on no matter what they say or accuse you of. Being flexible. Being caring. He would always accuse me of not loving him enough, but I'm actually pretty good at loving other people. It's interesting when you put things in perspective like that.

NATALIE: Can you pinpoint something in your former marriage, one of your biggest struggles, and how that particular area is not really an issue in your current relationship?

RACHEL: You know, any time in my former marriage that there was anything that went wrong, anything at all that was off track or unexpected, things were terrible because my ex-husband had this need to be in control. I noticed that if things were out of control in any way that he was unable to regain, he would start barking orders to control me and our son. He'd say, "Double time this," or "Double time that." He would do things and expect things that were completely unreasonable. You couldn't even raise a hint of a question that it didn't seem logical. I've noticed that life is stressful. Life brings up all sorts of unexpected situations all the time, but in my current relationship, when they happen (and they do happen) it is us working together to problem solve. There's never anything that even resembles us against each other or his needing to control me in order to feel safe, secure, or in control. There's a story I want to share. My current relationship and I, we came home for lunch one day. I was going to make grilled cheese. I started the stove - it's a gas stove - and he went out back to check on the dog. The door to the back deck is so silly. It can be in a locked position, but you can still open it, so you don't know that it's locked. I went and followed him out back, so we were locked out of the house and the stove was on.

NATALIE: Oh no!

RACHEL: Immediately, he was thinking, "Okay, what can we do? We can open the garage door." But the door that goes from the garage into the house had been locked as well. He went around and tried to get in anyway. I was still trying to remember if I had left the stove on or not. I was watching it, expecting flames to break out any second. This was like the height of a stressful situation. Eventually, about three minutes later, he came through the house and unlocked the door. He had broken the door to the garage by pushing the handle far enough to break the lock mechanism. But the whole time there was never any blaming me. I mean, the door had shut behind me. There was never any blame cast. He just fixed the situation. Everything was fine, and we made sure to never, ever have that door locked again. But I can't even tell you how terrible that would have been. I would have been hearing about that for days - forever, honestly. It would have been something I would have been mocked about and shamed about. It was an honest mistake like we all make. But that coalesced in my mind how vastly different the experience is being in a relationship with someone who is healthy versus someone who is character disordered, like a narcissist or something like that.

NATALIE: Right. So, what do you think makes the difference between your current relationship's response and your ex's response? What do you think is going on inside their heads that makes the difference?

RACHEL: I think it's the difference of authentic love. I don't know that people who are character disordered have the ability to truly love someone in a selfless way. When there is a situation like that, their control over everything else is much more important than you are as a person in that moment. The stress of it overwhelms them, and it's like they don't care about you at all. It's just about what their needs are. In my relationship now - I understand this and know that he feels the same way - there is never anything that I want to divide us. There is nothing he could do, or any irritation or mistake, that is going to make me condemn him as a person because I value him so much as a person. He's not like a means to an end; he's an end. He is what is most important to me. If he makes a mistake ... For example, the other day we realized that he himself had left the garage door open for an hour or two. It was no big deal. My ex-husband would have freaked out! His stuff is the most important thing to him, his possessions. Even though I was making sure nothing had been stolen, the idea of berating him, calling him stupid, careless, or dumb - he knew he had made a mistake. He was sheepish about it - I laughed it off because it was no big deal. No harm done. So, this ability to see beyond the circumstances, what it comes down to is that you value the worth of the person more than you value perfection. Or the idea that they screwed up beyond your love for them. I don't know if that makes sense. Basically, their worth is the most ... They as a person are the most precious to you, more than anything else.

NATALIE: Right. I think for me, the worst - and I know you've experienced this too - the worst part in my other relationship was just never being able to resolve any conflict. No matter what I brought up, it didn't matter how nicely I brought it up ... I didn't always bring things up nicely. There were times when I was so frustrated because it would be the same thing happening over and over again and nothing would ever change, so I would get so frustrated. But for the most part I really did try very hard to bring up things in a respectful way. I was firm. I would have a firm tone, but it was respectful. I wouldn't call him names or anything by any stretch of the imagination. But if I would bring up a problem or something that was bothering me or something that needed to be done, I would immediately get accused. The tables would suddenly turn, and it was something about me. It was my fault. He was busy and why didn't I understand that. He was trying his best and why was I such a nag. I was too sensitive, and I wasn't trusting God. On and on ad nauseum. We would have these circular conversations, and I never felt like he ever heard me. I remember one time at the beginning of my marriage I rolled over in bed and was just sobbing. He rolled over and went to sleep. I could hear him snoring. I had tons of Kleenex by the side of the bed from blowing my nose. I felt so abandoned and so alone. I felt like that our whole entire marriage. Incidentally, one of the things the church people who excommunicated me said about me was that I had abandonment issues. So, they even made that experience of feeling abandoned be something that was my fault or ...

RACHEL: Something to be ashamed of?

NATALIE: Exactly! They said if I didn't have those issues that maybe I wouldn't be in this horrible situation.

RACHEL: That is so twisted.

NATALIE: It is so twisted. But with my current relationship ... Do people have disagreements and run into problems? Yes. In our marriage, Tom (he's my husband) lost his brother three months into our marriage, and then I lost my dad a couple of months later. We were both grieving, and there were a lot of dynamics going on in extended family because of those deaths. It was very, very stressful. Plus, Tom and I do not agree on some politics. We don't agree on a few things. We are a lot alike, but we're quite different as well. It's been absolutely incredible to

see how two people who are different, who don't agree on everything, can have amazing conversations because there is respect on both parts – not just on one part – and genuine love and understanding from where the other person is coming from. I respect his viewpoint, and he respects mine. Neither one of us has ever criticized the other one for their viewpoint on anything. It's been so refreshing to see, and it reassures me that all these things my ex-husband called me or told me I was and the way he defined me ... I just didn't think that was really me. It wasn't me before I got married, and it wasn't how I thought inside. I've realized it really wasn't me. The real me ...

RACHEL: But it is so damaging in the meantime because this is the person you're supposed to be the most intimate with and who is supposed to know you the most. I'm sorry I interrupted you. Please continue.

NATALIE: No, you're correct. It is damaging. It's extremely damaging. It destroys you and is very dehumanizing and degrading. How can you possibly blossom into the person that you are when your most intimate partner is defining you as a completely different person?

RACHEL: Exactly. It's devastating.

NATALIE: It's an annihilation. I believe it's a murder of sorts because your body is still alive, but your soul and spirit are being decimated slowly over the course of time.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: You lose touch with who you are. But that is not normal. That is not a normal relationship. Normal relationships have issues but ... I guess my main point circling all the way back to the beginning of what I was trying to say is that we can resolve conflict. It doesn't mean that you don't have conflict. Healthy relationships have conflict at times, but they resolve their conflicts, and they resolve them in a way that brings the two people closer together. There is an even greater depth of understanding between the two of you. Your love for each other gets deeper. It's a very profound thing. That has been such an amazing experience. I believe that in my mind. Before, I really thought that was the way it was supposed to be. I felt that was the way God talked about relationships in the Bible. I had seen people have healthy relationships, but I had never experienced that. I definitely didn't experience that in my family of origin, so I never had that kind of relationship modeled for me. It was all me thinking, "Is this really true? Can this really be?" But now I know. A year and a half later – well, I've been in a relationship with Tom for longer than that, but we've been married for a year and a half – it is definitely true. It is definitely something that is a possibility when you have two people who are really willing to come to the table, work hard, and really love one another.

RACHEL: Yeah, and even the conflicts are beautiful because when you both have skin in the game by taking responsibility for whatever role you played, thinking back with self-reflection on how you were interpreting or misinterpreting things, and taking responsibility for that – it brings you closer. There's a reason that conflict happened. There is something there. When you can explore that together, you get to know that other person even better. It's just continually going deeper. When you have the tools to work through things and the responsibility isn't being placed all on one person, it is incredible. I finally understand what the typical Christian church advice means. For example, "You've got to be humble. You've got to die to yourself." I sort of get (I really don't like that phrase "die to yourself"), but I sort of get where they are coming from and can see how it works in an otherwise healthy relationship; whereas it is some of the most

damaging advice if you are in an abusive dynamic. Do you see that, where your eyes finally open up to understand what they are talking about?

NATALIE: Exactly! And it is also encouraging to know that I do have those skills. I have those skills, and I used them in my former relationship all the time. But now ... You can have those skills, but if you are married to an abusive person, you still are not going to have a great marriage because it takes two people with those skills.

RACHEL: Yeah, it does. It is impossible to do by yourself.

NATALIE: I have a question for you that's related. We were told in our former life that to have a healthy marriage we needed to submit more. It was very simple. It was simply that we needed to submit more, and that if we would do that our husbands would then be able to do what they are required to do, which is love us more. In other words, their love was predicated on our submission. They would give a disclaimer and say, "He should be loving you too, but you need to focus on your submission, not his love." How did that work out for you? Do you have a great relationship now because you are submitting perfectly, and your husband is loving you perfectly?

RACHEL: I have a great relationship because the person I am with is a wonderful, godly, patient man, and he genuinely loves me and cares about me; and I feel the same way about him. That is why we have a really good relationship. I talked to him about this just the other day – about submission. I said, "Do you feel like after we get married there is going to be this dynamic where we need to, if there is a hard decision ... What is that thing that people say, that if there is a hard decision, if it comes down to it, it's on the man. That's God's role. People may have different opinions about that." He said, "You know I really cannot envision a circumstance where if we are really profoundly that far apart that I'm the tie breaker, or I have 51% of the power in the relationship." He's right. We have a track record of being able to come to an agreement about things even when we are far apart. For example, he likes to get to the airport really early – like four hours ahead of a flight. This is something I really respect and appreciate about him so much. He's a really good planner. He likes to think ahead on things, whereas I fly by the seat of my pants. I want to be using every minute to do what I want to do, and I don't want to be sitting around the airport for a long time. So, we've both compromised. Instead of being there four hours in advance, we are there two hours in advance. It's still too early for me but I'm willing to yield to him. He has good intentions there. He's trying to make sure that everything falls in line. So, I will sit and read my book, and we will tease each other about it, right?

NATALIE: But he's yielding to you too. You guys are both compromising. That's beautiful!

RACHEL: Exactly. It really is. He is compromising his own comfort, his own planning strengths that come so naturally to him, on my behalf. It's awesome!

NATALIE: There's a quote in my book, *Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage*, that says, "When one person in a relationship makes all the decisions unilaterally, they miss out on the opportunities to truly know and love another human life, to give and take, to capitalize and draw on one another's strengths and knowledge and experience, and to understand real intimacy and oneness."

RACHEL: Yeah. You are totally casting aside all those assets that the other person brings to the table in favor of whatever is going on in your own head.

NATALIE: Right. I think that when you look at the Word of God as a whole and you read about Jesus's interactions with His creation and people, you read about how Christian relationships are supposed to look in the New Testament. (Not marriage – there are a few verses that speak directly to marriage.) But the vast majority of verses in the New Testament that are about relationships are about relationships between brothers and sisters-in-Christ. That describes those relationships. It's always been a mystery to me why, when you get married, suddenly all those verses get set aside (at least in modern Christianity) and it becomes a non-mutual thing. There is no longer such a thing as mutual submission, but now the wife must submit to her husband. Don't get me wrong. I'm a firm believer in submission. We submit to God. When Jesus came to earth, He submitted to His father. I don't believe in the eternal submission of the Son, which is a whole other topic which we will probably never touch on in this podcast. (Now I lost my train of thought because I started thinking about the eternal subordination of the son.)

RACHEL: I think you were going to make a point about this unilateral proclamation that wives always have to submit to their husband.

NATALIE: Oh yeah. I was going to say that it's not that I think submission is a dirty word. I think submission is a beautiful word, but I think submission is required for every healthy relationship for both parties.

RACHEL: Yes.

NATALIE: It's absolutely required. If you don't have both parties seeking to be like Jesus, you're not going to have a healthy relationship. Period.

RACHEL: There is the recipe though. If both parties are seeking to be Christlike, then you've got the tools. Everything will spring forward from that. There will be challenges, but you will have the ability to work through them together if you are seeking Jesus and being sanctified in that call.

NATALIE: Right. We're going to wrap this up, but I just want to say if you're listening and you're interested in learning more about healthy relationships versus unhealthy relationships, I recommend John Gottman's book. It's called ...

RACHEL: The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.

NATALIE: Thank you. The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. Also, if you go to my website, Flyingfreenow.com, you can get the first three chapters of my book for free as a download. All you have to do is click on the top right-hand corner. It says, "Sign up and get the first three chapters for free." What you're doing when you're signing up is saying you'd like to get my podcast episodes delivered to your email in-box, and my articles, which I try to write a couple of them each month. I don't spam people. That's it – just helpful things. Then you will also get the first three chapters for free. One of those chapters, the second one, talks about the differences between a normal marriage ... Actually, it's just all about a normal marriage. The six characteristics that I go over in that chapter are: mutual love, mutual respect, mutual honesty, mutual vulnerability, mutual responsibility, and mutual submission. I am not talking about two perfect people because I can promise you, Rachel and I are not perfect, Tom is not perfect, and Rachel's relationship with her new man is not perfect. But we are talking about a mutual working together and agreement to move forward into Christlikeness. I think that wraps it up. Did you have anything else?

RACHEL: Yeah, I wanted to say that one of the things that is so tricky about distinguishing whether you are in an abusive relationship or not is that sometimes abusive behavior looks like and can be dismissed as normal behavior, right? So, one of the examples I want to give is that in my former marriage relationship, my ex-husband used stonewalling as a way to control me. He would just not talk to me for as long as I would let it go on until I apologized. It was excruciating at times. I don't think I ever lasted longer than three days, and probably not even that. Anyway, one of the things I have had to work through in my new relationship is that he is an internal processor. So, if there is a disagreement or if his feelings are hurt, he shuts down. To me, through my filters of trauma and all this experience from the past, that is him stonewalling and trying to control me and hurt me. What I have come to realize and trust is that he has shown me over and over again that he is going to process it internally, and then he will come to me and be up front with where he's at. He will apologize as needed. We are able to talk things through. Things will be fine. We will be able to work through things, whereas before that never happened. There was never any responsibility taken. It was all on me. Look for those subtle clues. Does the other person take responsibility for their behavior? Do they repent? Do they change? If that is there, then you have a foundation for a healthy relationship. If it's not there, is it even a relationship? That's sort of a rhetorical question because you cannot have a relationship where one party is doing all of the hauling, which is I think what the Bible calls being unevenly yoked.

NATALIE: Right. So true. Piggybacking off what you said, I wanted to recommend another resource called *Beyond Boundaries* by John Townsend. If you are listening and are in between relationships and you don't want to bring your woundedness into the next relationship (or as Rachel just described, she gets a trigger when she gets the silent treatment, but this new person isn't really giving the silent treatment but has different dynamics going on there), this book talks about what to do with some of those challenges so that you don't end up being triggered by the wrong things or end up assuming that your new relationship is like the old one. It's very, very tricky. You are walking on a high wire because you want to pay attention to red flags – there are some things that are non-negotiable – but at the same time all people have flaws. All people make mistakes. All people have issues. But there are abusive issues and there are general run-of-the-mill kind of issues. We who have been through abuse and lived through it are uber sensitive. Navigating that can be tricky. I want to say you've done a beautiful job, Rachel. The other women that I've talked to who have navigated new relationships, they do it beautifully because they are so sensitive. There is a danger of getting into another bad relationship, but there is also a lot of potential for having a relationship in the future that is really quite incredible.

RACHEL: I agree.

NATALIE: I wanted to say as well that if anyone has a question they want to submit for the podcast, if you go to my website, Flyingfreenow.com, click on the menu where it says podcast and open up to this one or any of the recent ones, there will be a link in there that says something like, "Do you have a question for the podcast? Click here." Then it will take you to a place where you can actually record your question. You don't have to leave your name or anything. Just record your question, and we get to play it on the podcast and hear you ask your question. The other thing is that we are now doing transcripts. A beautiful single mother who is divorced from an abusive man has offered to do transcripts for us at half price – but I really want to pay her full price. What I decided is that we are open to take donations. You can sponsor an episode of this podcast. It's about \$50 to pay for a transcript to be made. I'm sorry, not just for the transcript. That would cover the cost of the transcript and we can tip Rachel for being on the program and giving of her time because she is also a single mom, she's working hard, and she's trying to make ends meet as well. If you want to donate, go to one of the

recent podcasts. This one and the previous two will have donate buttons. (You know what, I just realized the donate button doesn't work right now. So, I'm going to go fix that.) Hopefully by the time you hear this the donate button is fixed and you will be able to donate. You don't have to donate \$50. You can donate just \$5 or \$10; it will go towards these two ladies and help to cover the cost for transcripts to be made. So many of you have written and said, "I really want to just read the podcast. I don't want to listen." I can't imagine why anyone wouldn't want to listen to us blab for a half an hour to an hour, but okay, I get it. That's what we want to offer for you. I think that's it. Fly free!