

## WHAT CHRISTIAN WOMEN NEED TO LOOK FOR IN A COUNSELOR

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://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 10 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, Rachel and I are going to be talking about counseling experiences and how to find a good counselor and when to know if you are having a bad counseling experience and you need to end it. And I just want to say that both Rachel and I have head colds, and we are going to do this podcast anyway. So we both sound a little bit froggy, but my husband actually thinks my voice sounds kind of cute. First of all, I thought Rachel and I could just share our own experiences with counseling, and I think that our experiences combined would probably give people a good flavor of what it is like across the board, in some ways. Do you want to start?

RACHEL: Yeah. So, I am so thankful to have a good counselor now that I trust. I've been going to see her for over a year, and definitely a good relationship there and I plan to continue. Before I found her, I was emerging from this web of denial and really coming in to see the truth and I realized, "I don't care what my husband says. I'm going to go find a counselor." My ex-husband had always said that we weren't going to seek counseling. It was just not something that people in his family did, so I had listened to that. I had never gone to see counseling, even though I really thought it was probably something we needed to do. So I found a counselor. She was recommended to me by someone in my Bible study group, so I went in with this mindset of basically "All counselors are the same. If they're Christian or they have the credentials, it's going to be fine." Unfortunately, I had to learn the hard way that that's not true.

I was still in this mindset that anyone who's in a position of authority (and I viewed a counselor in that way), I just needed to do what they said. And I didn't have a good sense to advocate for myself, so what I was seeing as I started meeting with her was a pronounced state of pride. So she was very quick to talk about her credentials. I had just read Leslie Vernick's book "The Emotionally Destructive Marriage," and so my mind was just blown and so I asked her "Have you read that book? What are your thoughts on that?" And she sort of poo-poo'ed it and said "Well, I've got these other credentials and so it'll be fine." "You just need to sort of do what I say" was the message.

And then one day, I remember calling her up because I had been doing a lot of research and I realized that there was a possibility that my husband was a narcissist. I remember

she didn't really take it that seriously, and she was like "Well, my brother is a narcissist and he's a wonderful person. And they can be wonderful people." I was like "Okay," and it just didn't feel like she was taking me very seriously. At one point, my husband started to go to see her because she, I guess, talked to him, so she started trying to convince me that I should do a joint session with him and her. And by that time I knew enough to know that wasn't a good idea. When there's an abusive power dynamic it's really, honestly one of the worst things you can probably do. And so I mentioned that to her and gave my concerns and all that, but I was genuinely interested in what she thought about all of that. And she was like "No, if he starts manipulating me, I'm not going to take that. And I'm just going to say this, this, and this." And I was like "Okay." Thankfully, I had another friend who advised me that, you know, "Maybe this isn't the best thing." So that was one of the first situations where I stood up for myself and said, "I'm going to advocate on my own behalf and step back from this relationship with her."

So I ended up quitting that counselor, and a couple months later found the counselor I'm with now. I'm so thankful for her. She's played a very instrumental role in helping me build trust with someone in a safe environment where there's honesty and without fear of judgement. Even though she can seem a little bit stern, she's very kind and compassionate, and I think that those are things you need to look for over time.

NATALIE: Yes. You know, an interesting dynamic that you brought up is this thing where, and I felt like this too, if I was with somebody who had credentials or who came across like they were an authority figure, I would immediately take the role of the child. Even though in my head I was thinking, "I think I know more than this person about this particular thing," you know, whatever road we were going down. There was so much cognitive dissonance. I still felt like "I must not, though. There must be something I'm not seeing or there must be something wrong with me that I would feel this way, when she or he obviously knows better than I do."

And it wasn't until later on that I started expressing my own opinions. It's interesting, because if you are ever in a counseling situation and you express something that you've learned or that you've gleaned from a book or a friend or another counselor or something from the past and they squash it or they make you feel like "Well, that's ridiculous," or "That doesn't make any sense," that's a huge red flag right there. Because a really good counselor is going to empower the people that she or he is counseling, and they're not going to squash that person. They're actually going to empower that person. They're going to find the good and find the golden nuggets in what that person is saying and encourage that person that "Yes, you know what, you're really getting this." Or even saying things like "I never knew that before." You know, if a counselor is saying "I never knew that before. Thank you," or "What book was that again?" and then

the counselor writes down the name of the book, that's a good direction. That means that the counselor still sees herself or himself as a learner. And that means that they're still learning.

If a counselor is not still learning, you do not want to go to a counselor who is not still learning, because bottom line is nobody on the face of this planet, I don't care how well learned they are, in fact, the wiser people are, the more they know that there is so much more to learn. It's really foolish people who think "Well, I already have it all together. I know more than you." Those are the foolish people. You don't want to pay money to get counseling from a foolish person. What a waste of money.

RACHEL: You've got enough experience with those types of people in your life.

NATALIE: Exactly. Why would you pay money to get more of it? Well, and that brings up another point. So in my experiences, I actually had several counseling experiences, but all the initial ones were either nouthetic counseling or Bible counseling or counseling from an elder or a pastor. I did go to professional counselors where I actually paid money, but one counselor, he talked more than he let us talk, and I actually started timing him. We went to this weekend retreat thing, and it was over twelve hours of the thirty-some hours that we had that weekend. It was a third of the time. I don't remember the exact numbers, but it was a third of the time that we had that we were paying for and we were paying big bucks, like \$300 an hour. It was absolutely insane. He talked for most of that time, or for a third of that time. And I remember thinking, I didn't know anything about narcissism back then, but I did think "This is not right. There's something wrong. He seems to know what he's doing, but there is something very wrong." And there were a number of other really bizarre, weird things that he did with us that I won't go into. When I remember and think back on that experience, I feel super creeped out inside. I mean, the whole time I had this really creepy, oppressive feeling, but back then I didn't think that I could just walk out and leave. I thought "Well, I've paid this money. We have to go here. We have to believe what this guy says." I was invested with a bunch of my money, so I felt like I had to make it work.

RACHEL: That was with your husband at the time, wasn't it?

NATALIE: Yeah, that was co-counseling with him.

RACHEL: You were wanting to make it work.

NATALIE: Exactly. And then together we tried another male counselor who, at one point, leaned forward towards me, like leaned in towards me and said, "You are a buzz

saw. If I was your husband, I would be running a million miles per hour in the opposite direction." Well, by that time, I was coming up to the end of my rope, and I burst into tears. My whole body was shaking like a leaf. I couldn't even think straight. I think I yelled some things. I can't even remember what I yelled. And I picked up all my stuff and I walked out and I got in my van and I was driving home. It was raining. I had to wrestle with the intense desire to drive my van off into the ditch. Because I just thought, "I'm never going to get any help. I'm going insane." I literally thought I was going to go insane. I just had absolutely nobody validating. But again, he was a nouthetic counselor, a Bible counselor. And the question he was asking my husband and I to answer, my husband at the time, was "What is your sin right now? We need to look at your sin right now in this moment. What is your sin?" And I kept saying "That's not the issue. We came here and we're paying you money to talk about a serious problem, and that's not the issue."

So let's talk about that whole thing. I want to read a quote. This is actually from my book, but the quote is not my quote. The quote is from [pastoralcounseling.org](http://pastoralcounseling.org). And these are their qualifications for a Biblical counselor: "Quite simply, anyone who wants to be a Biblical counselor can consider themselves one." Oh. So, like anybody. You can be a brand new Christian and just go "You know what, I want to be a Biblical counselor. I'm going to go Biblically counsel people." Okay. "Biblical counseling is based on the idea that all one needs is a deep understanding of the Scripture to offer counseling." Now, what that deep understanding entails is anybody's guess, but.

RACHEL: Sure.

NATALIE: "While it's true that many who consider themselves Biblical counselors are ministers or other types of church leaders, this is not a requirement. Any person who feels as though they have been called to offer Biblical counseling to another may do so. Because all Biblical counseling is to be based on the Bible and the Scriptures, there is no need for any courses on behavioral study, counseling, therapy, or psychology. And because of this, few Biblical counselors hold degrees in counseling." Bing bing bing bing bing. All the red warning lights should be going off in your heads right now. "In fact, the practice of Biblical counseling is expressly against bringing these secular studies and treatments into the discussion. All counseling should focus on identifying sin, changing behavior to overcome that sin, and making one's life more in line with what the Bible outlines." And I'd like to add, what the Bible outlines would be according to what they say the Bible outlines, okay?

So, in other words, doctors have to go to medical school to work on your physical health, but all you need for your mental health is someone who claims to have a

working knowledge of the Bible, who claims to have all the correct interpretations of the Word of God, and they can do surgery on your psychological well-being, and you're supposed to submit to that and do whatever they say and think that that's okay. I could just go on and on and on. I can get on a roll with this. The other thing I'd like to say is that when the systemic problem that you're dealing with is in-house and you're going in-house to get a solution to the problem, are you going to find the solution in-house if the problem is in-house? Of course not!

The problem is this theology. The reason why women are being abused is because of a theology that teaches that women don't have the same rights, that they don't have the same power. There's a power inequality, and anytime you see a power inequality, you see abuse of that every single time, all the way across the board. I'm not saying that every marriage that has a power inequality is abusive. What I'm saying is that is where you see abuse, you see abuse of inequality. You don't ever see abuse where you have two equals and two peers who respect one another. You don't see abuse there. You only see abuse when one is in a power-over situation.

So why would you go to somebody who firmly believes in that, who firmly believes that that is a godly thing, and say "Help me, please. I'm being abused." Of course that person is going to say "Well, now, you know, this is your job. This is what you were created for. We focus on sin because that's what Christians do, right? We're supposed to focus on sin even though the Gospel says not to, but that's what we do. So because we're going to focus on sin, let's start with yours! Let's start with your sin. Let's beat you down as a woman even more than you already are. And let's take everything that your husband did to beat you down over your sin (because he projected all of his sin on you), so we're going to take all of his sin and put it on you and beat you down for that. And then we're going to beat you down for your own sin, and pretty soon, you won't be able to lift up your head anymore. And hey: that's exactly where we want you." Okay, I'm going to stop talking now. Rachel?

RACHEL: Well, you know what it tells me, though? This kind of mindset, it's a very fear-based mindset. It is not walking in the law of love. It's not evidence of walking in the law of love, which is the entire point of the Bible: God reconciling humans to Himself through His love. It is missing the point, and it's so unfortunate because that's exactly what the devil wants for us. He wants us slaves to fear, slaves to bondage, thinking of ourselves as "the miserable wretch," to never find victory in Christ because it's not actually true victory: because you've got to keep thinking about all the sin that you're in and never actually step in what He did for you on the cross and live in that as if that's the reality, which is what faith is. It's really, really sad, and I hate the fact that there are people out there who are spreading that. It's just ignorance.

NATALIE: Yeah. It is. It's ignorance. And it's pride, because the education is out there, and the information is out there.

[Natalie and Rachel lose connection on the Zoom call and continue the conversation below]:

NATALIE: I have no idea what you just said.

RACHEL: Okay, so I was making a point about the fact that this sort of attitude that you described with these people that's so prevalent in the church, and the description of a Biblical counselor as far as not needing any qualifications, and just feeling as though they've got a deep understanding of what the Bible says, it's really naïve. That whole attitude, though, where "Let's focus on your sin..." that kind of counseling is just "Let's focus on sin and overcome it," and I noticed that it didn't say anything about how the Holy Spirit or Jesus' love helps us overcome it. It's "You better get in line and walk this line of law-keeping," right?

NATALIE: Yes.

RACHEL: So it totally is outside of the entire story of the Bible and God reconciling humanity to Himself through His love, which is the opposite of fear. And I think it's unfortunate, because this is exactly what the devil wants. He wants God's people who would consider themselves His people to live in fear, to live in bondage, and to not live in the reality of what Jesus did on the cross and through His resurrection and what faith is. And what we're called to do is to live in belief in that and to live in freedom. That's what we're called to, instead of living in bondage and living in fear.

NATALIE: Right. One of the other things I was going to say is that I've heard (I don't know where I heard this statistic. Maybe someone out there knows and can put it on Facebook) that one of the fields, one of the top fields that narcissists go into is pastoral/religious/leadership fields. And I don't know if counseling was on there or not, but I think that this would be a field where you would see a lot of character-disordered people go into, because they have such a need to be needed. And they have a need to be the one with the answers.

RACHEL: Be the one with authority.

NATALIE: Yes. And people like that can end up actually re-abusing real victims. Let's segue into that. What do we want to look for and what do we want to avoid in a counselor?

RACHEL: Well, at the outset, I think going back to what I was saying when I first approached this counselor person, I had this view that anyone with the credentials was fit to do what I needed them to do. And I think that instead of having that mindset, it's so important to look at people as individuals and watch what they do and how they interact with you instead of just assuming that since they've got the credentials, they went to school... and this goes for anything. Counseling, or being a pastor, or anything. Just look at what they do. Look at who they are as individuals. Don't just assume that they're a good person because of what position they're in.

NATALIE: That is so good. When you were describing your experience, out of your experience, what would you say are some red flags to look for, and when do you think people should cut loose and how? I remember someone asked a question on Facebook: "How do I end this thing with my counselor? I know I don't want to see her anymore, but I don't know how to end it."

RACHEL: Yeah. I think the biggest red flag to look for in a counselor or in anyone is a lack of humility. Evidence of pride. And that can come across in many different ways, but one of the main ways, I think, is what you were referencing earlier: someone who is not willing to learn, someone who thinks they've got it all together, who is spouting off all the things that they've done or all the ways that they know how to do things or different credentials that they may have. Look for a soft heart. Look for someone who is going to come alongside you instead of point fingers or wagging fingers. Someone who is perhaps, you could say, not judgmental. Someone who understands that in this experience of being a human being, it's messy, and you are not a perfect person and you shouldn't be expected to be a perfect person. Someone who's going to be understanding and empathetic to the struggles that you face and not start spouting off all the things that you need to start doing and "you better shape up."

NATALIE: Right. There is kind of an attitude that "if you're going to claim to be a victim of abuse, then you have to be pristine and pure. There has to be absolutely no sin found in you." And unfortunately, victims are also humans. I love that song by Christina Perri, "Human." If you've never heard that song, it's awesome. I think you need to look for a counselor who, number one, validates your experience and asks really good questions, and then is desirous of learning from you about your specific situation rather than pigeon-holing you into a category, which is a lot of times what you get with the Bible counseling. They group you into a generalized category and a lot of times it's very stereotyped, because they've got very patriarchal views, so they have very stereotyped views about women in general. And if they group you into those kinds of groups (that's really profound), then everything that you say they're going to filter through their own grid of what they know about what they believe about those groups. And they're not

going to actually hear what you are saying about your specific situation. Because the thing is, like you were saying, counselors are individuals, but so are counselees. We're individuals too. We have our own set of circumstances that are very, very different from anybody else's. I mean, yes, there are general patterns that are the same. But we are an individual and we have a different husband from the last person who was just sitting in the chair. And we have a different personality than the last person. We have a different set of circumstances financially, and on, and on, and on. So they need to be respectful of that.

I remember one counselor, she told me that she was not happy with the way I handled a situation, and then when I explained why I handled it that way, she didn't really have any response for that, because she wasn't really willing to listen to the backstory. She wasn't really willing to look at the layers and layers of history that were involved in what brought about that particular incident. She just wanted to look at that isolated incident all by itself, and on the surface, of course, it looked one way. But if you looked at it in context, it was a completely different thing. But she was unwilling. She already had all the answers, she already knew everything, she didn't want to dig deeper.

At one point she said, "I'm really getting tired of hearing the same thing over and over from you." That was actually my point where I said "I think..." Well, I didn't say this to her face. Here, this goes back to the question "How do you break it off with the counselor?" How I broke it off with her is (because she actually went to my church and she was getting training in nouthetic counseling) I wrote her a very, very nice letter. Back then, I was really gushy with people because I wanted them to like me and accept me because I thought "If they don't like me, then they won't help me," and I was so desperate for me. Back then, I believed that my mommies and daddies had to help me. I couldn't help myself. I had to do whatever they told me to do. Now if I could go back and do it knowing what I know now, I would never, ever ask any of their opinions about what I should do. I would just do what I know I should do as an adult woman. "I need to do this, and if you don't like that, I guess that's your problem. But I have to live my life and answer to God for my life, and you have to live your life and answer to God for your life."

So what I did is I wrote a very gushy letter praising her and telling her what a great woman she was and blah blah blah blah blah, and then just said that I was going to move on, and I think I gave some reason why I was going to move on. You know, so she wouldn't feel like I was blaming her. She never responded. She never responded to that email. Which again, was just more evidence that she was not a healthy individual herself, let alone a healthy person who had the reserves to be able to help another human being. So anyway, that was a learning experience.



But I did have some good experiences with counseling. And one was with a Christian counselor who I didn't counsel personally with, but my kids went to her. And she was a Christian, but she was also a licensed marriage and family therapist, so that's a LMFT. She was very, very good. She brought in the Bible, she wove the Bible in, but she used the Bible as a healing balm on a burn victim, okay? That was how she used the Bible. Whereas I'd found that the nouthetic counselors had used it more as a weapon to beat me over the head with it.

And then the other really good counselor that I actually had, she was also a Christian, but she was also a licensed counselor. She also had extra training in EMDR therapy, so we did that. That was also just extremely helpful. The Bible is important. It's the Word of God, and we need to weave the Bible into everything that we do. But the Bible doesn't explain how to do brain surgery. It doesn't explain what's happening in our world today as far as the political... the Bible is one Book. The Holy Spirit, now, He is living inside of us as believers and He lives and moves and has His Being inside of us and gives us wisdom, but the Word of God is a Book that is the Word of God, but it has limitations in that it's only one Book. Do you see what I'm saying? And it can not cover the universe, the entire universe, of knowledge and information. It doesn't teach us how to build airplanes. It doesn't teach us everything we need to know about mental health. It doesn't talk about aspergers or autism. It doesn't address those things. And so we learn by being intelligent human beings who study science and who study the science of psychology, and as Christians, we bring the Bible to bear on all of these things.

RACHEL: I wanted to just add on to what you were saying. I think there is a tendency in some aspects of Christianity, some sects, to worship the Bible as if the Bible were God. The Bible tells us about God. The Bible tells us the story of God, and like I said earlier, how He reconciled humanity to Himself through His love. I think we have to keep that in perspective. The Bible is not God, and we should read it and we should study it and we should get to know God through that way, but it is not the full... I don't want to speak out of turn here, but I want to make sure we put it in its right place.

NATALIE: I just want to close by giving a few things to look for. If your counselor is telling you what to do, is trying to manipulate you, is using the Bible as a weapon, is judging you or threatening you in any way, is using things like "You should do this," "You must do this," run. And by the way, you don't have to write a nice letter and gush about them and cut it off that way. They are professionals, or they're supposed to be. I guess I would definitely not recommend going to a Bible counselor for this kind of thing. You can go to a Bible counselor if you need help understanding the Bible, maybe. But what you do is you stop going. You stop making appointments. If you made an appointment and you want to cancel it, you just call up and cancel it because you're an adult and

people cancel appointments all the time. And then you're done. And then you can go try to find someone who's a better fit for you. And whenever you do go and visit with a counselor, at the very first meeting you can just let them know right from the get-go that you may or may not be back. And ask them questions.

RACHEL: Right. Because they're working for you.

NATALIE: Exactly. That is exactly right. It's your responsibility to ask them questions to find out where they're going to come from, what they know, what their training is, how they would approach certain situations, and also, sometimes personalities just don't click. You know what I mean?

RACHEL: Yeah, that's true.

NATALIE: I mean, if something rubs you the wrong way, you know, their mannerisms bug you or something, don't go back. Or if you feel like they're irritated with you, definitely don't go back. So I hope you've enjoyed this episode, and until next time, fly free.