

## CONSENT IN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: WHY YOUR "NO" FEELS CONFUSING

*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 117 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Jessica Ghigliotti. When I first saw her name, I thought, "I wonder if she's from Italy or some romantic place like that."

JESSICA: No, nothing that exciting. Oklahoma.

NATALIE: She's from Oklahoma. (We can talk about the origins of your name in a minute.) She's a mom of four. She's contributed twice to the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books. She's an author, a small-business owner, a college student, and a survivor. We're going to talk today about consent in marriage, which I don't think we have talked about at all on the podcast. I don't think I've ever addressed it on my blog, so I'm excited to have this conversation with you. So welcome.

JESSICA: Thank you. I'm really excited to be here.

NATALIE: Awesome. We were talking before we pressed the record button, but then I said I wanted everyone to hear this. So let's go back and talk about how you got into this whole... You're a survivor yourself. Are you divorced?

JESSICA: I am. Our divorce was final six months ago, so we are fresh.

NATALIE: Okay, newly divorced. You've gone down the road of studying consent in marriage — the whole sexual abuse thing. Tell us a bit about why you went down that path.

JESSICA: God is really good. After I got divorced, I lost all my community, but then started meeting more and more women who had been in the same situation. We started having these conversations over breakfasts and realizing that a lot of us had the same story where things just felt "off." Most of the Christian women I were talking to had no frame of reference for what consent even looked like in marriage. So it came from a million different conversations over the course of time and sort of built on its own.

NATALIE: I know when I first thought... If you would have asked me about consent in marriage ten years ago, I would have said, "That doesn't even make any sense. What do you mean, 'consent in marriage?' Why do you need consent in marriage? You said, 'I do' — that's your consent."

JESSICA: Exactly. When you grow up Christian, all you hear about consent is that you don't have a choice. It's that before marriage, sex is bad. After marriage it's an obligation, and there's no wiggle room for anything. The secular world is doing a much better job about it than the Christian world is. That is the conversation I want to turn around.

NATALIE: I think it's a good conversation to have. Do you follow Sheila Wray-Gregoire? Her blog, "To Love, Honor, and Vacuum"?

JESSICA: Yes! I've read the book. It's amazing!

NATALIE: The book we're talking about is a brand-new book, hot off the press. Well, hot off the press at the time of this recording. This won't air for a couple of months. (She's going to show it for the YouTube people.) It's called "The Great Sex Rescue." That would be a great follow up to this conversation. Check out that book on Amazon and get it if you want to read some research-based information about why the Christian world thinks the way they do about sex in marriage and the ramifications that have been so destructive all across the board in this area. Why don't you tell us about what consent in marriage is, and why is it hard for Christian wives to understand?

JESSICA: Consent is essentially when you can freely and completely say "yes" unhindered. Anytime you are in a situation where saying "yes" is safer than saying "no," either physically, emotionally, or spiritually safer, if it is safer to say "yes" than it is to say "no," then you are not actually consenting, because there is no true free will there.

NATALIE: Wow! That's huge. There are a lot of women dropping their jaws right now.

JESSICA: Right. In so many marriages, the pattern that I keep seeing again and again seems to be where sex is almost this battle of, "How do I get her to do what I want her to do? How do I get her to say 'yes?'" It's almost like when I try to get my toddler to put her shoes on: "What can I say to get her to agree? What can I threaten to take away if she doesn't? What incentives can I add?" There is no room for that in true intimacy. There is no room for that between true partners.

NATALIE: Right. That gets to the heart of what a healthy marriage even looks like. As

Christian wives, we've been taught that a healthy marriage is... We've been taught our part: "You need to submit. You need to do everything that your authority tells you to do. Your husband is over you. If he wants something, you make sure that he gets it. You keep him happy. Keep the hearth warm and the food coming and the sex coming. Then, if you do all those things, you will have a healthy marriage." Then women, if they don't think their marriage is healthy, are confused. They double down on what they must do. A lot of that is maybe doing things they don't want to do or are afraid to do.

JESSICA: Yes. Christian women especially, when we try to get help and go to the church and say, "This isn't right. I don't feel good about this," one of two things happen. Either we're told that our husband is acting immorally because it is our fault and because we are responsible for his sin for not fulfilling him, or we're told that there's nothing wrong with the behavior and we're still the ones in sin because we don't enjoy it or don't want the same things that he wants. Either way, it's a no-win situation. Either way, it's our fault.

NATALIE: Right. Oh my word. It's so destructive. Why is it hard for women to see when their consent is being disregarded?

JESSICA: Even in secular marriages, not every emotionally destructive marriage is going to be sexually abusive. But every single marriage that is sexually abusive is also emotionally abusive. You never have sexual abuse without these layers upon layers of gaslighting. When I first started writing about consent and having these conversations, women were going, "Oh my goodness! I can understand that. But why didn't I see it? Why didn't I see it?" We started realizing it was because of this pattern of gaslighting. It's the things he would say around the actual abuse to reframe it. Ultimately, the conversation about consent is where we need to start, because a lot of us don't even have a frame of reference for what consent looks like. But that becomes completely irrelevant if we can't see what's going on. We must dive into the things that are being said around it to more easily recognize when our voice is being stolen.

NATALIE: What are some of those things that we will hear if we're being manipulated in that way?

JESSICA: There seem to be about ten that are most common. The first is outright denial. Just complete denial: "No, I didn't do that. No, you're making it up." This is where women who have had a history of sexual abuse before have it brought up again. "Maybe you're just reacting to something in your past. Maybe you dreamed it. Maybe it was a flashback, and this didn't really happen right now." Denial isn't always spoken. Sometimes denial will be completely unspoken. There will be a gift the next morning.

Maybe he'll just be in a super good mood the next morning and say, "What's the matter with you? Did you not sleep well last night? Why are you so grumpy?" It doesn't always have to be spoken. It can just be a complete erasing of what happened. It leaves the woman feeling completely confused, because her experience isn't matching what's going on.

Another big one is saying it was an accident. This one I keep seeing again and again. It's funny, because there is no way to "accidentally" rape someone. There just isn't. There is no way to accidentally remove somebody's consent. But we buy into it because it offers this level of safety. When we're being abused, when I was being abused, you are looking for a level of safety. So if he says, "I didn't mean to. It was an accident; I didn't mean to," that is something you can grab onto and think, "Well, he's really a good guy. It won't happen again. He didn't mean to, so I am safe." Even though it doesn't make much logical sense when you sit down and talk about it, it's extremely effective.

NATALIE: Can I stop you quickly before you go on? You used the word "rape."

JESSICA: Am I allowed to say that here?

NATALIE: Oh, you can totally say that here! But I know there are probably women out there thinking, "Well, rape. Wait a minute. We're talking about consent, and then you use the word rape." But, yeah. That is what we are talking about here. Do you want to address that a bit? I'm sure there are people who think, "I don't want to go that far. I don't want to say that it's that."

JESSICA: Absolutely. Sexual assault is defined as any sexual act performed on, by, or in front of a person without their consent. That is, in general, sexual assault. A rape is defined as any form of sexual assault that involves penetration of any kind, any object, anywhere — anything like that. That is the definition of a rape. Consent is the unhindered willingness for something sexual to happen. So anytime there is non-consensual sex, legally it is defined as a rape. Even if it wasn't forceful. Even if he says, "If you don't do this, you don't get the grocery money," or "If you don't do this, I'm going to continue being grumpy with the children," or "I won't speak to you and will stonewall you for the next week until you agree." That is legally defined in many states — not all of them yet, unfortunately. But in many states, that is legally defined as a rape.

NATALIE: Okay. I want that to be clear to people, because it is hard for us, when we've been brainwashed to believe something, it takes time, and you need to hear something repeatedly before your brain finally wraps itself around a different idea that might be the opposite of what you thought. There may be a lot of women listening to this who

maybe have experienced rape in their marriage.

JESSICA: It's a hard word, and it's a hard concept. I remember the first time I sat down and admitted it to myself, that this is what I had been experiencing. My body felt nauseous. Everything felt tight. I didn't want to face it. I could not. I wanted to shut it back in a closet and not see it. It's an extremely hard concept.

NATALIE: I love how you described it. You want safety. Your brain is looking for safety, so you want the narrative to keep you safe. You'll take the narrative even if the reality is not lining up.

JESSICA: Right, because we are really good at surviving. It's a gift from God that we are built that way, because we are good at surviving any situation.

NATALIE: Yes. Let's get back to some things they will say. That is helpful.

JESSICA: We like to think that this is unusual, but it's not that uncommon. The current stats are something like one in ten or one in eleven women are suffering sexual assault in their marriage or their intimate relationship. That is across the board in every socio-economic group and every religion. It is happening all around us. It's not this fringe concept or idea.

NATALIE: Okay. Good to know.

JESSICA: Another thing he will say to shift the blame off him is to say, "I'm sorry," — to apologize. At face value, an apology seems good. It seems to offer safety. The problem is your apology and his mean two different things. When someone who has empathy or someone who doesn't feel entitled to do something apologizes and says in simple words, "I'm sorry," they are saying, "I caused you hurt. I see the hurt and I'm willing to help you hold that hurt." That's what we mean. When someone who feels entitled to do something says, "I'm sorry," it usually means, "Let's sweep it under the rug and move on." It is just a silencer, because if you bring it up again, a lot of times women will hear, "Well, I said I was sorry. Why are you still holding that over my head?"

NATALIE: Right. It's like their get-out-of-jail-free ticket.

JESSICA: Yes! Exactly. It is supposed to be used again and again. If you don't buy into the narrative, then you are the un-Christian, unforgiving, horrible, bitter woman.

NATALIE: Yep. Exactly.

JESSICA: Taking the "I'm sorry," a step further is the, "I feel so bad for what I did. I'm a horrible person. Now you need to comfort me."

NATALIE: Yes! Oh, I hate that! I hate that because then they are now the victim, and you are the perpetrator.

JESSICA: I've talked to women who have literally been sexually assaulted by their husbands and then turn around and end up holding him while he sobs in their arms, crying about what a horrible person he is. If this is happening, he is just violating her a second time. He is violating her emotions now, and it really messes with people. How can you see it for what it is if he is so sorry and so distraught that you are having to comfort him? It switches on those maternal instincts, and you are willing to do anything just to make him feel better.

NATALIE: Yes.

JESSICA: It was stress. That's a big one where... If we believe that a woman's body... If as a church we believe that a woman's body is there for a man's comfort and for a man to use to deal with the stressors in his life, this one just fits into that narrative even more: "I was stressed, so of course I had to do this." But do you think maybe being sexually assaulted by somebody might be a bit more stressful than a bad day at the office?

NATALIE: Right.

JESSICA: So if he comes home and sexually assaults her because he was stressed, why doesn't she turn around and sexually assault him right back?

NATALIE: Right. What you are doing is helping people to see that... Women take care of everyone else, and we don't really understand or try to take care of ourselves. We help others at our own expense. When they say that... It's like comforting them — the example that you gave before. "Oh, they are stressed. Then I guess it justifies what they did, and I should help them with their stress, right? Therefore, I'll take all the stress. I'll take all the pain. I'll take all the crazy emotions." How can you survive long term? You've got a husband who is not only not supporting you, but he's piling the stress on top of you, yet you're concerned about his stress and making sure that he's relieved. It's insane.

JESSICA: It is. It tears women down, and then you have the church backing it up by saying, "You're supposed to be a living sacrifice to your husband." They forget that we already had the ultimate sacrifice. We already had the ultimate, spotless victim. It's not

every woman's job to be that to her husband. Somebody else already did it, and He's a lot bigger than I am.

NATALIE: Right.

JESSICA: Saying, "I couldn't stop. I was so excited; I just couldn't stop. I wanted to. I got so into it I couldn't stop when you said 'no.'" This one, they have already laid the foundation in our understanding of men when we warn young women not to wear anything provocative or not to kiss or anything like that, because "Once you get it started, you can't stop." We're already laying the foundation by naming this myth that there comes a point where a man cannot stop what he is doing, even if you ask him to. That's a pure myth. The thing is that he won't stop if he has given himself permission beforehand not to stop.

NATALIE: Yes.

JESSICA: "Because I love you." If they say, "I have to do this because I love you..." As women, we are so conditioned to accept any mistreatment, any treatment at all that we get, if it has the gift tag on it that says, "I love you." Think about the little girl whose pigtails are being yanked by the boy behind her. She is told, "He only does that because he likes you. You should take it as a compliment." As women, when we grow up with this idea of, "If somebody loves me, that's all that matters, and nothing they do could be harmful," then when we are married to someone who is harmful, it makes it really hard to see what's really going on when he harms us and then says the words, "I love you," to cover it up.

NATALIE: You know what else complicates that? If you grew up in a family where love was associated with different kinds of abuse, you see nothing wrong with it, then. You just assume that is what love is.

JESSICA: Right. Or even things like, "Aunt Gertrude loves you, so come give her a kiss on the cheek, and you don't get to say 'no' because she loves you."

NATALIE: Right. Exactly. I know I felt like this, and I've talked to lots of women who felt like this, that we still felt like we were children. We were children who had to do what other people wanted us to do because we were raised in homes... That's kind of an old school thing, right? The child needs to be seen and not heard. The child needs to do exactly what he's told. He can't express himself with a different opinion than what the mom or dad have, because that is considered rebellious. I think that is perpetrated in the Christian culture rather than allowing children to develop and express themselves.

It's healthy for children to learn how to say "no." That's not a bad thing. Yes, sometimes they need to eat their Wheaties or whatever. But there should be, "If you don't eat your vegetables that is fine, but you don't get dessert." But I will not sit there and make you eat your vegetables, and "You have to stay there for the next two days until you've eaten them." That was the way it was.

JESSICA: Right. Now we need to be teaching children (this is totally another topic), but teach them to set their own boundaries and praise them for standing up for their boundaries.

NATALIE: Yes.

JESSICA: One of the other things that they will say is that he had to because he was so angry. This is victim blaming at its finest. They are throwing it back on her. "I had to because you made me mad at you." I remember one time I was driving and there was this road rage incident. I was scared, but we made it through. The men were screaming at each other. We made it back home, and I was still shaking while washing dishes and processing the road rage incident that just happened. I was playing it over and over in my head and thought, "That is the angriest that I have ever seen him." Then the thought hit me. That was the angriest I'd ever seen him, but nobody got raped. It wasn't that he was mad at this other dude driving, so he hopped out of the car to go sexually assault him. That thought never even occurred to him, because it is not just being angry. It's not just being frustrated at somebody. It is that he has decided that if he is angry at you, this is a response that he will allow himself to have. There is nothing that makes a man who is angry sexually assault somebody.

NATALIE: The other thing is a lot of times when someone is angry, they want revenge. They want to get back at the other person. If you think about it, is that really what we are doing with sex? We're making sex about revenge or getting someone back just because we're angry?

JESSICA: Absolutely. In a culture where there is so much porn and so many men have seen it, that is what it is becoming to men, maybe without them realizing it. That's what so many wives are having to deal with — that it is a form of revenge. It's a form of getting back. It's a form of taking back the power and regaining the control. This also happens with the idea that you're having a fight with somebody. You are having an argument and then you have makeup sex. Now, being intimate after having an argument with a partner that you love could be amazing. This is one of the gifts God gave us to build intimacy and to build connection and to say, "We as a couple are bigger than any problem there is."



But the problem is when it is not mutual — when after a conflict or even during a conflict, one party is insisting on having makeup sex with the other and they don't want it. Then it is not about making up. It's about regaining the power and the control, but because it has the title of being called "makeup sex," it's incredibly difficult to recognize that it's not about coming back together. It's part of the argument, and it's part of winning and regaining that power.

NATALIE: I love how you are reframing all this for all of us. This is super helpful. Is there anything else that these guys say?

JESSICA: The last one I have is, "Because my needs are unmet. This would be because you don't give me enough or you don't give me the kind of thing that I want." Basically, this is saying that, "The only reason I must cross your boundaries is because you have boundaries. If you just didn't have boundaries in the first place and would do whatever I want, then I wouldn't have to assault you, because you wouldn't have boundaries." It makes your boundaries the problem. My four-year-old was arguing with me the other day about how he shouldn't be in trouble because he said, "Mama, it was just a doing. I just did a thing. It's the rule that's the problem. It wouldn't have been bad if there wasn't a rule there." (Now this four-year-old is going to grow up to be a lawyer.) But it fits the narrative so much. "Dear wife. I wouldn't have to break your rules if you didn't have any rules. Therefore, you are the problem."

NATALIE: It reveals the emotional childhood that a lot of these guys are in. This is not emotional adulthood. If you think you can have sex with your wife and come up with all these various reasons why it's perfectly fine for you to do that and why it's very evil, wicked, and bad for her to say "no"...

JESSICA: Yes. A good litmus test, if you are trying to figure out whether you really gave consent, is how do you feel afterwards? After a loving connection, you're not going to feel empty. You're not going to feel emotionally dead, and you're not going to feel sad. If you feel further away from your partner than you did before, if you feel lonelier than you did before, that is a red flag to dig in and start exploring some of these ideas and start seeing if there really is consent or if you are just conceding and giving in because that's the easier option, but you're not really being valued as a person.

NATALIE: Are those some questions women should ask themselves if they think they might be...? I'm sure there are people right now who are thinking, "I think this is me, but I don't know for sure. How can I know for sure if I am in a sexually abusive marriage?"

JESSICA: Yes. So, "How do I feel afterwards? How do I feel about the idea?" In a healthy marriage, even if those people don't want the same frequency, the idea is never revolting or scary, or you never despise the idea. So, "How do I feel about it?" Also, explore the idea of, "What would happen if I said 'no'? Am I safe to say 'no'? Not just physically, but am I safe emotionally? Would the children be safe physically or emotionally if I said 'no'? Also, do I feel like God would hate me if I said 'no'? Do I feel like I'm not spiritually safe if I said 'no'?" In order to be saying "yes" and to feel good about it in a way that is not harmful to ourselves, we have to be able to say "no."

NATALIE: Yes. So even if you thought, "If I say 'no' he's going to pout or give me the silent treatment for the rest of the night," is that a warning sign?

JESSICA: That is a warning sign. That is very covert abuse, but that is still sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can be and usually is more covert. It's not usually what we think about with it being violent and forceful. It is usually these passive aggressive, "If I say no, there will be a consequence," so it's easier to say "yes."

NATALIE: So can you explain a situation in which a good man might not actually realize that he doesn't have his wife's consent?

JESSICA: Absolutely. When we are stressed, we have the fight, flight, or freeze responses. The freeze response is, many times, used to justify things, but if a woman freezes during sex, a good man will not keep doing things. He's going to say, "Are you okay? What's going on?" and stop. But there is a fourth stress response called the fawn response, which is partly conditioned in us based on what we have experienced in life, and part of it is how we are programmed, because for ages, if there was a sexual assault, the best chance a woman had of survival was to please and pacify her assailant. So this is still something that we deal with. Women who've had a history of sexual abuse are more likely to flip into this fawn response where they might say "no" on the inside, but their body automatically takes over and starts acting, playing the part that feels safe to play. If it is smooth enough, if her fawn response is strong enough, she can have all this going on inside her without her husband having any idea that what is going on, she doesn't want.

This is why having conversations about boundaries is so important, because you can have a conversation and say, "Look, I may have seemed like I wanted that, but this is not an activity that I am comfortable with. Do not try this activity again." These conversations need to happen not in the bedroom, not when anything is going on, but in an environment of safety where both people can sit and talk about it and make sure they agree. Once a husband understands that an activity is not something that his wife

wants and that she is likely to fawn if this happens, that she will likely go along with it and suffer the emotional consequences inside in silence, once he knows that, if he continues to do it, then we can't keep saying, "It was an accident. He didn't mean to."

NATALIE: Yep.

JESSICA: But absolutely — having these conversations, sitting down and saying, "This is as far as I want to go. This is what feels good, and this is what doesn't feel good," it's very, very important. A good, healthy man will appreciate that and respect that.

NATALIE: Yes. I think so many women don't even know what a healthy man looks like. When you talk about a healthy man being someone who wants to sit down and hear what your thoughts are, they think, "Is that even real?" To them, it is so far out of the scope of what their experience has been their entire life. I think we need to reiterate the fact that it is real. There are healthy men out there. If there are healthy women out there, there are healthy men out there too. Just as many.

JESSICA: Yes.

NATALIE: Just because you haven't been married to one or maybe your dad wasn't one... I think most of us can think of somebody that we know in our lives who we've met who is healthy that we could use as a role model — or even someone in a movie. There are characters in a movie. Ted Lasso. That's a healthy man. Have you seen Ted Lasso?

JESSICA: I haven't, but I've heard about it a lot.

NATALIE: You've got to see that show! It's so, so good. Ted Lasso is a healthy man.

JESSICA: I will make a note to watch that now, because I'm curious. I also want to say, if you think any of this is going on, please call the domestic violence hotline because... First, you talk to them anonymously. Nobody is going to pressure you to make any decisions you don't want to make. It's just a conversation, and they are trained professionals who can help you talk through things and figure out what your situation looks like.

NATALIE: Yeah, that is good advice. Then you wrote a book. Did you write a book about this?

JESSICA: Yes, I did.

NATALIE: What's it called? It's new, right? Didn't it just come out?

JESSICA: It is. I just released it last week on Amazon. It's on Kindle or paperback. It's called "10 Things Your Husband Says After He Rapes You: A conversation about gaslighting, blame-shifting, and consent in marriage."

NATALIE: It builds on what we've talked about today then, right?

JESSICA: Absolutely, yes.

NATALIE: So if you listen to this and want more details about these things (because we just hit the highlights), then that would be a good book to go follow up with. "10 Things Your Husband Says After He Rapes You." Wow!

JESSICA: I know. It's a really bold title.

NATALIE: But you know what, it says it like it is. I think that's important.

JESSICA: It does. It will help, on Amazon, to hit the right triggers and show the people who need to see it, so I did it that way on purpose.

NATALIE: Right. Do you write from a Christian perspective or just to anybody? I'm curious.

JESSICA: This is not especially Christian. This book doesn't go into the Christian gaslighting. It mentions some of my background, but this is more about the gaslighting. I am a Christian, and I write more from my Christian perspective on my blog. But this particular book isn't that.

NATALIE: This has been a helpful podcast episode. I'm thankful that you were willing to come on here.

JESSICA: I'm so honored that you invited me on here. It was great to talk to you. Thank you so much. I am absolutely looking forward to joining Flying Higher, because I am going to hop in there. I am so excited about that.

NATALIE: Well, we would love to have you in there. It's a great group of women. By the way, Jessica and I are going to talk after we're done with this podcast about her coming into the Flying Free program and doing a workshop.

JESSICA: I'm so excited.

NATALIE: Hopefully, we'll get that up in the next three or four months. If you're interested in joining Flying Free, you would get that workshop along with many other workshops that were done by other authors and advocates. We have nothing in our archives for these women that has to do with this subject, so I think it's an important subject.

JESSICA: Nobody is talking about it. It's a huge problem, and nobody is talking about it.

NATALIE: I think it is scary. It's very scary for people. Also, it confronts... I think women must confront... A lot of us wanted to deny that there was a problem in our marriage, but you really have to confront it when you face this. I think it is a little easier to see, especially once you go through those ten things. I know there are women here who just listened to those ten things that men say and are thinking, "My husband says these things to me all the time. This is my life." Now it's like you said — you felt nauseated. It's kind of a shocker when you first realize that this is serious. But I think this will be an in-road to help women realize the other types of abuse that are going on in their marriage that are more subtle and difficult to define.

JESSICA: Right. If there is any sort of sexual abuse, it is not the only thing, I can promise you. If there is any sort of sexual abuse, it is part of a huge dynamic in your marriage where the whole marriage is built on abuse if this part is. It is that detrimental.

NATALIE: Yes, and you need help and support if that is the case. Thank you again, Jessica. Those of you who are listening, thank you for joining us. Until next time, fly free!