

WHAT YOU CAN DO WHEN YOUR CHRISTIAN HUSBAND BULLIES YOU PART ONE

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 133 of the Flying Free Podcast. One question I hear all the time on social media, on my blog, on my podcast, and in my programs is, "How do I tell the difference between an abuser and a normal person, because I sometimes yell? Sometimes I want my husband to do what I want him to do. Am I being controlling? Sometimes I get angry and annoyed. Sometimes I am critical and judgmental toward others. Maybe everyone is an abuser, and it makes me feel bad that we're all just broken people. Maybe it's better if we just keep trying to help one another and forget about labeling people. Just understand that everyone is just trying to make it in this life. If I married a mean man, maybe if I'm nicer and more empathetic, he'll change. Doesn't love change everything?" That all sounds like a beautiful story full of love and hope and pink cotton candy on a stick. If you throw in the words forgiveness and grace, you've practically got yourself a new chapter of the Bible. I can see the gears turning in your brain. You're wondering how I can explain away all these lovely things, but I'm going to do no such thing. All those lovely things are true, but it's a glass of lemonade with a tiny little mouse turd at the bottom. Sorry, Charlie, but I'm all about the lemonade; just leave out the poopies. Today I'm going to help you understand how to tell the difference between an abusive individual and a normal person with garden variety problems. We're going to keep all the pretty parts about love, forgiveness, and hope and get rid of the turd too. It'll be delicious when we're done. I promise.

Remember when you were in the fourth grade and there was that kid (or maybe even two or three kids) in your class who was naughty? They said swear words. They would make fun of kids who were littler than them or bad at sports. They would make faces behind the teacher's back and do all kinds of naughty things to other kids in such a way that they wouldn't get caught, but the other kid would get in trouble. I don't know what it was about my generation (or at least the kids in my neighborhood), but I knew a lot of kids like this growing up. Then there were the kids who were the victims of the bullies. They would try to keep their heads down and be as invisible as possible, but the bullies would spot them anyway and find something to make fun of. Then there were the kids who tried to be cool with the bullies to stay out of the line of fire. Everyone knew who was who in the zoo in the fourth grade. Then everyone's bodies changed and got bigger. Some of them grew more mature in their perspective. They grew up to see and

understand that the world is big and full of lots of people, and all those people have minds and hearts of their own. Their perspectives, stories, and lives are also valid. These kids grew up and learned to respect themselves and others. They grew up to be adults. Not only did they have adult bodies, but they were emotional adults as well.

But some kids, while getting adult bodies, did not grow up emotionally. Some bullies grew up to be bigger bullies. Their bully tactics got more sophisticated, but they could never get past age ten or eleven emotionally. Other kids grew up with programming that said they were worthless and small, and they tried to look for validation, love, and acceptance outside of themselves. They didn't have respect for themselves just for who they were, and they held the opinions of others too highly. They would try to get love and acceptance in lots of different ways through good grades, a good career, money, or popularity.

In Christian circles, if you were a wife who had a husband who was a leader (or maybe you were a leader yourself of the women's ministry), if you had the most kids or homeschooled, if you followed all the rules—being a good Christian woman according to whatever denomination you were in and their particular set of good Christian woman rules... I think some men who grew up feeling small also felt that if they had control over their family, over their wife, over their money, and over her time, attention, and body. That they would then be respected and subsequently feel like an adult. But that's not being an adult. None of that is emotional adulthood. That's emotional childhood.

I think a lot of abusive men are stuck in emotional childhood, and so are a lot of survivors. I know I was. I still am sometimes. I see the ways I react to circumstances that are part of my programming, and I see how my default is to go straight into emotional childhood. This isn't something to be ashamed of, but it is something to be aware of, to be curious about, and to observe with compassion and love. An abuser will never be able to get to the kind of self-awareness they need to overcome their emotional childhood. It's fascinating because I've watched counselors and church leaders try hard to help abusers get to emotional adulthood, but they try in vain. An abuser cannot see himself; he is blind. If you try to show him, he will try to destroy you.

But a survivor? I help survivors grow up every single day. Most survivors are all about looking at themselves and trying to figure out what they did wrong and how to do it better. That's kind of how you can tell the difference. You'll never hear an abuser say, "What if I'm the abuser?" But you hear survivors say that all the time. Survivors almost always take personal responsibility. That's why biblical counselors and church leaders put all the responsibility on them—because they take it. But the mistake the biblical

counselors and church leaders make is to also put the abuser's stuff on the woman and make her responsible for that too. Now she's responsible for herself and for her adult husband. They don't actually know who is responsible for what.

Case in point, when I decided to divorce my ex-husband, the leaders and people helpers in my church said I was in sin and rebellious. They told me if I would do what they told me to do and get back together with my husband that I could stay with them, and if I didn't, I had to be kicked out. They wanted to give me the responsibility of keeping my husband happy and my marriage intact so that we could stay together, and he wouldn't be mean to me anymore. (They made a lot of assumptions there.) But they didn't approve of my taking responsibility for just my own life. So we were in fourth grade again. They said I could stay and play in their sandbox if I would let another boy hurt me. If I didn't let him hurt me, then I couldn't play with all the other kids. See? Emotional childhood. I walked away from the sandbox and into my adult life. Man, do I love my adult life, and I love the adult people I rub shoulders with now.

The main thing about emotional childhood is, when we are operating out of emotional childhood, we're not regulating ourselves. This means that we're relying on solving for our emotional needs through someone or something else. It could be through drinking, eating, sex, shopping, sleeping, bingeing on Netflix, social media, working, or any other number of buffering activities. We all do it! Sometimes we lean on someone else to meet our emotional needs. This is how we solve for our inability to take responsibility for our own emotions and learn how to regulate ourselves.

That is the backdrop for how I want to talk about the differences between abusers and survivors. I wanted you to see how these two types of people interact with each other. To sum up, the abuser is going to view his target as his plaything. He solves for his emotional needs by laying heavy burdens of responsibility on her for all his stuff. He expects her to be whatever he says she should be. He doesn't allow her to be herself. An abuse target views herself as someone who must somehow deserve to be his plaything. She is programmed to believe that she owes this not only to her husband but to her God, that she belongs to her husband and is not her own person, or that to be her own person is selfish. So she stays in the abuser's sandbox, believing that she belongs there.

I want to talk about ten things abusive people do and why they do them. I'm also going to give you some ideas of how you can respond to his emotional childhood from a place of emotional adulthood because, while you can't grow him up, you have a golden opportunity to grow yourself up. That is what I'm talking about when I teach about going

from a caterpillar, which is the equivalent of a child, to an adult butterfly. For the rest of this episode, I will talk about five of those things, and then I'll give you the last five things in next week's part two of this episode. Then I'll wrap it all up and say a few other things too. Here we go.

1. Abusers are easily offended and take on the role of the victim, forcing their target to take on the role of the offender, even though she may try her darndest not to offend. This means when you try to give your abuser feedback he will act mortally wounded, like you've just stabbed him in the back and betrayed him to Sauron. He'll tell you how mean you are; what a nag you are; how you never listen; you are dumb; you don't get it; you don't trust God—and on and on and on. This is the equivalent of a little boy throwing sand in your eye. When you say, "Stop doing that," they pitch a fit to the teacher and tell her, "You just hurt his feelings and aren't playing nice."

What can the abuse target do? First, don't feel sorry for him. Don't buy into the movie he is creating in the universe of his brain. When you ask him to take out the trash and he says, "You're always treating me like a child," do you see his movie? In his movie, you are the mean mommy bossing him around. Your brain's programming might think, "I did a bad thing," and you might feel shame. That's what he is counting on because when you feel shame, you say you're sorry and you take out the trash yourself the next time to avoid that feeling of shame. That's because your brain is already programmed to believe that if you were a good person, everyone around you would be happy, and if they aren't, you must have done something wrong.

This is something that many children pick up on as they are growing up. They can often grow up to become card-carrying members of the people pleaser's club, always bending over backwards to make sure everyone around them is happy with them. But inside they are miserable and resentful. The real problem isn't that others are unhappy with them or are unhappy with themselves but that they themselves are unhappy with themselves.

What is the solution? Accept yourself just the way you are. You are a human who has wants and needs some help around the house. You have the right to request it just like anyone would. Your husband can refuse to help, but when you have your own back, you might set a boundary. You might say, "Hey if you don't help out with the trash, that's fine. I'll get it. But don't expect dinner tomorrow night. I'll make sure you have food to eat in the cupboards, but I don't make dinner for family members who don't help clean up." If he pitches a toddler fit, just hum a little tune, and take out the trash. Then the next night, follow up on your boundary because you've got your own back. You don't need

his approval anymore. He's a big boy. You're doing the opposite. You're treating him like the adult he is instead of a child. He can pour himself some Cheerios if he's hungry. But when you have your own back and only take responsibility for you, then you don't need to worry about other adults. God gives them the responsibility to manage their own emotions. You've got enough on your plate just to manage yours. If they need help, they can Google it and get help just like you did.

2. Abusers will love bomb their targets or others they want to be on their side until their target or the other people fail to give them what they want. Then they are quick to discard the target or the other person and launch a smear campaign of some sort. Why? Because they are like parasites who must latch onto their host and feed off them. If the blood dries up, they pitch a fit, and it's not pretty.

This is the equivalent of the little boy in the sandbox bossing everyone around and telling them what to do. He doesn't throw sand unless someone messes up and doesn't follow his rules. Then the sand starts flying. What can the abuse target do? Again, don't feel sorry for him. He's not taking personal responsibility like a big boy, so expect him to throw a temper tantrum. Don't be so surprised when that happens. Don't take it personally. You are just the Lego character in the story of his life, and you're not doing what he wanted the Lego character to do. But that doesn't mean that you are a Lego character. You get to decide what you will do, say, or how you will show up. You can be 100% yourself in full color—and you should! God loves it when you are who He made you to be, and He didn't make you a Lego person.

3. Abusers play innocent. They are convincing because most of them truly believe they are innocent. Their brain's programming says so, so it must be true. They have no self-awareness. Being abusive, controlling, manipulating, the double-speak, withholding information, sideways jabs, blaming, minimizing, and denying all comes naturally to them. They will never see how they are the ones causing the problems in the marriage—the very problems that they dislike and blame you for.

What can the abuse target do? Stop engaging with the abuser. When they spin their web, don't step into it. The abuse target tends to think if she explains things or articulates the problem clearly, surely this grown-ass man in front of her will pick up what she is putting down. My dear woman, it works that way with normal people, but you aren't married to a normal person. The sooner you accept that the sooner you will stop stepping into his web, a web he may be unaware he has created, and a web you will never convince him exists.

4. An abuser cannot see nuance. He can't see the perspectives of others and is unaware there even are other perspectives around him. He is so lost in the matrix, and he likes it there. He cannot tolerate disagreement. If you don't buy into his universe, you are bad. In fact, the way he sees life is bad and good, black and white, in and out, for and against. There is nothing in between and zero compromise. Since your religious environment may also see the world in this way, they will work together in agreement to vilify anyone and anything that presents a perspective that doesn't fit into that binary mold.

What can the abuse target do? Take the red pill and get the sam heck out of the matrix herself. There's a big, wide world out there, and it's pretty amazing. Just because your husband is stuck in elementary school doesn't mean you have to be stuck there too. Quit focusing on getting him out, and you work on extracting yourself. You are the only one you can control. Once you're free, you are free indeed.

5. Abusers can't see the layers of problematic issues around them. This is similar to number four. They refuse to revisit their own childhood traumas. They don't believe they had any, and if they did, they certainly aren't affecting their lives today. They can't see how their children are suffering in myriads of ways because of dad's blindness, lack of emotional intelligence, and lack of real love.

Abusers have rigid rules and regulations that must be followed in order to be accepted. They will smack talk anyone who doesn't follow their rules. "Son, you just swore. You wicked boy! Daughter, you are wearing shorts. You wicked girl!" Condemnation and fear regularly torment their children. The abuser will blame the kids, the culture, the schools, the teachers, the mother, and the friends. But he will never see how he himself is contributing to the emotional milieu his children are marinating in.

What can the abuse target do? She can wake up and do her own learning about the reality that surrounds her. She can put a proper name on it and speak it for what it is. She can be the voice of reason, honesty, and justice in the lives of her children. She can see them, hear them, and know their hearts even if dad doesn't. She can be a saving grace in their lives. But she will only be able to do that if she is a saving grace first in her own life. Does she align herself with what God says about her, or does she align with what her husband says about her? This will be her challenge and her opportunity. She must do it not only for her own sake but for the sake of her children. She will never be able to help them further than she is able to help herself.

Okay, I'm going to save the last five things for next week in part two. If you are new to the Flying Free Podcast, be sure to hit the subscribe button so you don't miss next week's episode. Of course, my team and I would love it if you'd take a wee bit of time to leave a rating and review so that other Christian women can find us. I've also got a public website jam packed with articles and other good things to help you. It's over at flyingfreenow.com. I want to thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free!