

BUT DIDN'T I PROMISE TO STAY IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH? WHAT ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS?

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 139 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have another listener question. I like to just dive right in, so let's hear what her question is.

QUESTION: Hi. My question is, can someone—a Christian in this situation—with unhealed trauma that they have personally experienced or something like complex-PTSD, can that appear to mimic a personality disorder like narcissism or something related? If so, does that trauma create extenuating circumstances that would need to be addressed differently than when dealing with a garden variety narcissist?

NATALIE: I think there are two ways to answer this question depending on what's being asked. I think this person is asking if someone who has abusive tendencies could be abusive because of having PTSD or C-PTSD. But she also wanted to know if PTSD or C-PTSD can mimic personality disorders. The answer to both questions is yes, but that's a short answer. End of the podcast. (Just kidding.) Before we get into this, we need to talk about what PTSD and C-PTSD are in case there are any listeners who aren't sure what that is. Then we can differentiate those from personality disorders.

PTSD stands for post-traumatic stress disorder. It can occur when a person witnesses or experiences a terrifying or traumatic event—like a bad accident of some sort, a murder, a fire, an assault—something like that. We typically hear about PTSD when it comes to veterans of war who come back. They struggle with triggers that take their bodies right back to some of the experiences they had in combat. You've probably seen shows on Netflix and on TV around this kind of topic. Now C-PTSD stands for complex post-traumatic stress disorder. According to Wikipedia, complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) is thought to occur as the result of repetitive prolonged trauma involving harm or abandonment by a caregiver or other interpersonal relationships that have an uneven power dynamic. C-PTSD is associated with sexual, emotional, or physical abuse or neglect in childhood, as well as intimate partner violence. Victims of kidnapping and hostage situations can develop C-PTSD, indentured servants, victims of slavery, sweatshop workers, prisoners of war, victims of bullying, concentration camp survivors, and defectors of cults or cult-like organizations. Situations involving captivity or entrapment, that's a situation that lacks a viable escape

route for the victim or if the victim perceives or believes that they can't get out, can lead to complex post-traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms which include prolonged feelings of terror, worthlessness, helplessness, and deformation of one's identity and sense of self. I love this definition because you can see from reading it why so many women coming out of patriarchal marriages have complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

Let's look at that. Think about a patriarchal marriage, a complementarian....

Complementarianism is often thought of as being a milder form of patriarchy. This is relevant to my audience because my audience is made up of primarily women of faith coming out of or who are still in the midst of patriarchal or complementarian theology. Complementarians assign primary headship roles to men and support roles to women based on their interpretation of certain biblical passages. One precept of complementarianism is that while women may assist in the decision-making process if the man wants her to, the ultimate authority for the decision is the male. By its very definition, there is an uneven power dynamic built into a complementarian or patriarchal system. Remember that an uneven power dynamic is one thing that you see in a person diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Please note there are many people who say they are complementarian in their beliefs, and they have perfectly fine marriages; but practically speaking, their marriages are functioning as egalitarian marriages. If you wonder what in the world that is, to be egalitarian is to believe in mutual submission of all people to one another in Christian relationships. If that sounds familiar, it's because the Bible talks about that.

When you have an uneven power dynamic in a marriage, plus you have emotional abuse and spiritual abuse (if the husband and/or church are telling the woman that she is at fault for pointing out the abuse, or they are using God or the Bible to put her in a subjugated position), and you have the teaching that divorce is wrong and that no matter what the authority or husband does to her, she is stuck in the marriage until she dies, all that makes the perfect cocktail for complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Think about it. How is this scenario any different from a prisoner of war? A wife is being brainwashed by controlling propaganda. She's being held against her will and told that it's good for her. She's put in a place of subservience with all her actions controlled by outsiders, by other people, or by her husband. She's told that her opinions are meaningless; her experiences are rubbish. Then she is dehumanized and given no way out. The woman of faith who is in an emotionally and spiritually abusive marriage has her freedom of thought, action, opinion, and choice completely stripped away. She is disrespected as a human being. She is viewed as less than simply because she doesn't have a specific type of sex organ.

Many of you listening right now may have C-PTSD symptoms. Here are some of them. Think about it and ask yourself, “Do I have these? Are these things I struggle with?”

- Persistent anxiety and unrest.
- Difficulty regulating your emotions.
- Difficulty in remembering events surrounding abusive incidents (Sometimes I’d get into altercations with my ex-husband, and I’d go up to my room and just be numb. I couldn’t remember how the whole thing started, where it went, or even how it ended. I couldn’t remember enough to write anything down.)
- Reliving experiences (I call this looping over and over again because your brain is trying to solve the problem.)
- Helplessness.
- Paralysis of initiative.
- Shame.
- Guilt.
- Self-blame.
- A sense of being different from the rest of the human race.
- Attributing total power to the perpetrator—they seem more powerful than they really are.
- Becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator (I remember even in my former church... It’s weird as I look back on it and think it was just a little church. It was a big church in the Twin Cities, but just one of a bazillion of churches all over the world. Why did I think their opinion meant anything to me or in the big scheme of things? But that’s how it is when you’re caught up in that. If you feel you are always trying to figure out your husband and focus on his emotional well-being and what his moods are like and placating those moods, figuring out what he wants and what he doesn’t want, trying to keep the kids quiet to make sure he’s always happy yet still never make him happy, and you are constantly preoccupied with that—that’s a sign.)
- Desire for revenge alternating with feelings of gratitude toward the perpetrator. (So one night you think, “I wish he was dead,” and another night you think, “I’m so grateful for this person in my life.”)
- A sense of alliance with the perpetrator and relief when buying into his belief system.
- Rationalizing the abuse you are receiving.
- Repeated, desperate search for someone to rescue you—someone who will listen and validate your experiences.
- A pervasive feeling that unless someone believes you, it must not be true.
- A repeated failure to protect yourself.

- A loss of sustaining faith that borders on despair.
- A disconnection that alternates with feelings of terror and confusion.

(By the way, this list also came from Wikipedia, and I just tweaked it.)

You also experience physical health problems because of all the emotional dysregulation as well. Here are some physical problems you might have.

- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Chronic fatigue syndrome.
- Back and neck problems.
- Chronic headaches.
- Vision problems.
- Nerve twitches.
- Insomnia.
- Gastro-intestinal issues.
- Heart palpitations.
- Panic attacks.
- Asthma.
- Stress.
- Immune system breakdown.
- Endocrine system breakdown.
- Unbalanced hormones,
- Brain fog.

Those are just a few. Over a long period of time, a person with C-PTSD can have their health breakdown permanently. This is why I continue to insist that emotional abuse is physical abuse. It is. C-PTSD is situational. It's something a person suffers from as a result of repeated trauma over time. With therapy, symptoms can subside and go away, even go away completely, and the person can live a normal life.

Personality disorders are different. They are not temporary or situational. A person with a personality disorder is going to grapple with symptoms for the rest of their lives. With treatment, they can learn skills to manage their symptoms and live fulfilling lives, but their symptoms result from a personality disorder and not a result of a situational experience. That said, I do believe that people can or do develop a personality disorder if their genetics lean toward susceptibility of that—so a genetic predisposition to developing a personality disorder in combination with early childhood trauma. But once that disorder that is in the DNA of the person is triggered in the brain and body, then it

is something that becomes part of the makeup of that person, and it's very difficult to override permanently.

Here's the other interesting thing to note that I learned back when I was going through my separation and divorce. I was diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, and I learned at the time that symptoms of C-PTSD overlap with some symptoms of borderline personality disorder. The reason I found out is that my ex-husband was saying that I had BPD. So I looked it up and found out that there are symptoms that overlap. According to the Optimum Performance Institute, "There is also a large and intricate overlap in the symptoms experienced in both BPD (or borderline personality disorder) and PTSD. Some of these are: increased anxiety; emotional arousal or dysregulation; suicidal thoughts and feelings; feelings of guilt, shame, or self-blame; or avoidance and numbing." I say that because I'm not the only one I've heard of who has been accused of BPD when trying to get out of an abusive marriage and you actually have C-PTSD. This is a thing, and I know many women who have C-PTSD who are accused of having BPD. But I want to give you hope. My C-PTSD symptoms, I hardly have any of them anymore. I don't have BPD. So there's hope for you. You will not be in this place for the rest of your life.

I've had women ask me, and I think this might be what this listener was asking, "If my husband has a personality disorder like BPD or narcissistic personality disorder, isn't that a mental illness? He can't help it then if he's abusive. Shouldn't I stick by him in sickness and in health?" My answer to that is that it's your choice. This is your life, and you get to choose. I'm not going to should you or shouldn't you because we don't do that to fellow adults. You can stick by him if you want to. If it's killing you, then I'd encourage you to recognize that there are two people in that scenario that need help. One of those two people does not want help, and the other one does. One of those two people is not your responsibility, and the other one is. You get to decide which one you are going to save, but you can't save both—not in this kind of situation. Many Christian women have all the compassion in the world for the one who doesn't want help and who isn't her responsibility—namely, her husband. But these same women will stand at the ready to throw the one who wants help and the one who is her responsibility—namely, herself—under the bus. How does that make any sense at all? It makes little sense. What it does is keep one partner under bondage—herself. It enables the other one to continue being oppressive without the natural consequences and accountability that would naturally come into his life as a result of his behaviors in the real world.

Check out Flying Free episode 129 for a great story about how this works. To find that episode, you can either find it in the Apple Podcasts app or you can go to

flyingfreenow.com/129 and the episode is there.

Remember, we can love and support someone without exposing ourselves to their abuse. Jan Silvious, the author of *Foolproofing Your Life*, calls this “feeding someone with a long-handled spoon.” I love that. Jesus didn’t chase after people to save them. He threw them a lifeline, and if they didn’t take it, then they didn’t take it. Lots of people walked away from Jesus and did not accept His invitation. But He still took responsibility for His own life and ministry, and He lived His life well. He also constrained Himself to building into twelve people in a more focused way. Was He being picky or playing favorites or being unloving for doing that? No. He was just being human. I’m sorry, but human beings have limited time, limited resources, and limited energy to expend. He was modeling how to be like the Creator under these kinds of limitations of humanity. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter why your partner is abusing you. He could be abusive because he’s a narcissist. He could be abusive because he has borderline personality disorder or because he has PTSD. Maybe he was raised to be a misogynist. He could be abusive because he thinks God thinks it’s okay, because he’s just a cranky man, or because he’s an entitled you-know-what. It doesn’t matter why. What matters is what it is doing to you. You can get C-PTSD from living with a personality disordered individual for a length of time. It can happen to anyone put in those circumstances. I don’t care what your original personality is. I don’t care what your strengths are, your intelligence level, your emotional intelligence, your skill set, your will to survive or problem solve, or whatever. It can happen to anyone.

Emotional and spiritual abuse are an epidemic in our religious circles that have misogynistic beliefs about women. Sadly, some versions of Christianity fall into that category. When I am trying to reach out to new people, I will run Facebook ads. All I do is put out a small ad that says, “Are you a Christian woman in a confusing and painful marriage?” Do you know that 80% of the women who see that ad...? I’ll say, “Put this ad in front of women who are listening to Christian contemporary music.” That is all I will say to Facebook, and Facebook will do that. 80% of the women who see that ad will sign up to get a free chapter of my book and workbook. Unbelievable! I’m in a class where they are teaching us how to find the people who need to hear our message on Facebook. They said they’ve never seen a high percentage like that. A high percentage they see in other businesses is maybe 40% of people. That’s a high and amazing percentage. My percentage is double that. What in the world does that tell you about Christian marriages? It’s absolutely tragic! I should be able to put that ad out and get a low... If the world made sense, I’d get a low number of Christian women who would click on that ad and say, “That’s me,” and maybe a high number of people who don’t believe in Jesus or don’t follow any kind of religion, right? That’s how you’d think it would be. The

reason it is that way is that many versions of Christianity and other religions that are misogynistic in their theology will naturally create marriages that are abusive. That is just the way it is. Until Christians can stand up and be different from the rest of the world, I'll continue to get an 80% click and sign-up rate on Facebook. I think it's absolutely pathetic.

So what do we do about this? First, we educate ourselves. We read and learn all we can about this problem. We listen to ourselves. We listen to other survivors. We examine our own beliefs about women and how they line up with how Jesus viewed women. We figure out why we think that a body part—a body part for crying out loud—makes some people authority figures over other people. Then we figure out where our faith traditions have strayed from what the Bible teaches about humanity—both men and women. Second, we speak the truth out loud even if it makes people mad. People get a bit upset about this. We learn to tolerate the disapproval of men in order to gain the approval of our heavenly Father. We start to see people as small. We love them, but they are small compared to God when we see God as being big. Third, if we're a survivor, we get help for ourselves. We don't wait around for a rescuer because no one is coming to rescue you. That is your responsibility. We grab hold of Jesus Christ, we learn, and we grow strong—strong enough to break free if we want to. We get therapy. We don't talk to a Bible counselor who knows nothing about emotional abuse, but we talk to a trained therapist. There are many wonderful, beautiful Christians who are also counselors, but they are also licensed and are educated in these areas. We don't just talk to someone who went through a Bible class and has read their Bible to help us with this stuff. So we talk to a trained therapist who can diagnose us with C-PTSD if we have it. I had some EMDR therapy, which is another proven therapy for sufferers of C-PTSD. We can find a community of women who know the unique dynamic of abuse, especially emotional and spiritual abuse in the context of faith, such as the Flying Free Support group that I developed five years ago. You can learn more about that at joinflyingfree.com. Fourth, we tell our stories. We empathize with abuse targets. We call a spade a spade. We get out of our legalistic prisons and find hope and freedom through Jesus.

If you think that you may have complex post-traumatic stress disorder, you may benefit from my private Flying Free community support group. We have a course inside that group called "Healing from C-PTSD," and it goes into a deep dive into this subject. We'd love to have you join us in learning the skills you need to become spiritually strong and emotionally healthy again. My program is a beautiful program to take alongside getting therapy from a licensed counselor who specializes in helping people heal from complex post-traumatic stress disorder. There are so many women in my group who have come to my group because they've been referred by their counselor. I encourage people in

the group who are suffering in these profound ways to not just join my group and get the benefit from being in a support group but also... We do have a lot of training, but I do think you also need to have therapy on the side to help yourself heal from that.

There are two books I would recommend for some more information on this whole thing. One is called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk. The other one is called *How He Gets into Her Head* by Don Hennessy. We have a book study of that in the Flying Free program you can take if you decide to apply for that program and get in.

That's all I have for you today. Thank you so much for asking that question. We need some more questions. Go to flyingfreenow.com/139. There is a link in the show notes (and a transcript of this) that will take you to a place where you can leave your question. You can record your question and leave it there, then I will answer your question. I don't answer all of them, but I answer most of them in an upcoming podcast. I'd love to find out from you what is burning in your heart. That's it. Thanks for listening. Until next time, fly free!