

I DON'T WANT TO LOOK LIKE A BAD CHRISTIAN IF I LEAVE MY ABUSIVE MARRIAGE

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 175 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to answer two listener questions. One is about whether or not the abusive partner ever leaves first, or does it always have to be the abuse victim who initiates leaving if they're going to separate or get a divorce, and then the second question is about the abuse victim's behaviors and how those behaviors may sometimes appear to be abusive, and how to tell the difference.

So let's listen to the first question.

LISTENER: So my question is actually for the listeners of your podcast. I'm just wanting to know, I am married to a narcissistic person, was raised in a church exactly the way that you describe the churches that are breeding grounds for narcissists. We have a ton of children, and what happens is, he goes through these moods, so I'm actually logging them now, and it's the same week, almost like a woman would have PMS. He's having these emotional shutdowns where he'll be like, on a high, and then mellow out to a silent treatment type personality until I know what he's wanting from me: He's wanting sex from me. If I act on that, he lightens up. But anyway, it's every month for a few days he does this, and now that I'm charting it, it happens to be almost the same day.

Bottom line question is, so I'm actually, like, praying that maybe he'll get sick of me and that he'll walk away. I want to know if any listeners out there have had this happen. I've read it before in books that sometimes a narcissist, when you figure them out, will get so fed up with you that they'll leave, and I just want to know if this has happened to any of your listeners. Has their husband just said, "You know, I'm not getting what I want here anymore," and left? Thank you.

NATALIE: Thank you for submitting this question. Now, the nature of a podcast is that it isn't live, and we can't interact with the listeners live. I wish we could — wouldn't that be awesome? So you get little old me to answer this question. The good news is that I am in a private forum interacting with hundreds of other survivors every single day, and I am reading the conversations that they're having and the issues that they're dealing with. So I can answer your question based on my five years of experience coaching and interacting closely with women in these situations.

Now, if you want to get feedback directly from others in your boat, I highly recommend joining the Flying Free Sisterhood. You'll get access to our private forum for 24/7 conversations and feedback and written coaching from myself and four other certified coaches, and not only that, but you'll also get weekly live coaching, courses... We've got several courses in our program: "Divorce Basics," "Healing Your Relationship with God," "Basic Boundaries," we've got a parenting course, "Detach and Detox," "Healing from Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," and more. You'll get expert workshops from pastors and counselors and authors and advocates. You'll get Butterfly Stories — there's dozens of testimonies from Christian women who have gone through the same things that you're going through and found a way out. You'll give a live Q&A every month, and you'll be able to join our small groups.

It's hundreds of dollars worth of material and resources and ongoing help, and it's only \$29 a month. Now, that is a huge bargain compared to what many of you are probably paying for counseling. Not that this program needs to replace the role of counseling in your life. Although, I will say, for some, it is a very good alternative that will save you a lot of money. But it is a program that can enhance any counseling that you're getting, and indeed, many counselors actually refer their clients to this program to help augment and enhance and jumpstart their progress. You can learn more about this program by going to joinflyingfree.com. It's changed the lives of over three thousand women so far. Why not let it help you change yours?

So let's get back to the question: Do husbands ever leave first? Well, yes, they do, actually, but it is rare. Why is it rare? Because of the nature of the problem. Abuse is all about control and keeping the wife, and the perception that all is well is very important to an abuser. They believe that they have you between a rock and a hard place because they know that you're never going to file, so you'll have to capitulate, eventually, to their desires and demands. In Christian circles, if you're in a "Christian marriage," nobody cares about the abuse, and they care deeply about a divorce. You will hear, "God hates divorce," over and over again, but you will rarely, if ever, hear, "God hates abuse." So if you want to leave, you will most likely have to be the one to file.

Now, to the church who has no wisdom or insight or experience to understand the nuances and the dynamics of domestic abuse, this will cause them, now, to believe that your husband is the godly, obedient partner/victim, and they will think that you are the ungodly one who is disobeying God and "sliding down the slippery slope to perdition. And may the good Lord have mercy upon your soul." They will promise to pray for you. If I had a nickel for every pious promise of prayer, I'd probably have maybe \$1.75, but maybe it's all their faithful prayers that have made me such a happy woman, right? Anyway, if they offer to pray for you, just tell them that you're counting on it, and move

along.

Now the more concerning thing is that women wait for their partner to file, thinking that this is what God wants. And I want you to know that this idea is just that: It's an idea. It's just an assumption that our brains offer us based on our religious programming. And you can totally keep that thought, but what it does is gives your personal responsibility for your life, which God actually gave solely to you and to you alone, and it gives that responsibility over to your abusive partner. So we're saying, "I will not take control of my life. I think I'll let my partner do it, and I certainly hope he does what I want and divorces me."

Now we could actually make that choice from a place of choice in order to feel more empowered, but essentially, that would sound more like this: "I have a choice to stay or leave, and I choose to stay." Okay? But from that place, there would not be any manipulating or hoping or arguing or convincing or even trying to make life miserable for our partner or doing things otherwise that would convince our husband to either change or divorce us. Because again, instead of relying on another person for our life and well-being, we would be taking responsibility for our own choice regardless of what he chooses. And part of taking responsibility — adult responsibility — for our lives is owning our own choice and not blaming someone else for it.

But here's what I see women doing. They choose to stay for whatever reason, usually because they believe that God hates divorce more than abuse, because that's what a bunch of men told them, but then they don't own their choice. They will blame their husband for why they're stuck. They will blame the church for why they're stuck. They will blame God for why they're stuck. And all of this blaming leads to feeling absolutely horrific about our lives. It leads to us sitting back and feeling utterly victimized and paralyzed. And what do we do when we feel paralyzed or victimized in our bodies? We shut down. We don't take initiative. We don't take responsibility for our lives because we believe someone else should.

Ladies, God did not give responsibility for our lives to somebody else. Now hear me very, very clearly. I am not talking about situations where there are no choices — where the woman literally cannot divorce her husband. Or where the timing is not right for a divorce. But not divorcing because you're afraid your church would kick you out (and why in the world do we give churches like that any credibility in the first place? That's a topic for another episode) and not divorcing because we're afraid our husbands will kill us or our kids, those are two very different things and require two very different approaches to freedom.

To the woman who's afraid of being rejected by her family or her church or having to leave her home or get a job or have kids who are going to get mad at her, I would say, "I get it." I was terrified of those things too, and you can 100% avoid all of the above by staying and just keeping your mouth shut. And that actually is a very valid option. I don't want to minimize the fact that that's a valid option. But all I'm saying is own it. Own that choice. Own that option as being the option that you're selecting. Take your power back and say, "I choose this for me, and I like my reasons for choosing this." Now, the reasons may not be that great, but if you like your reasons for choosing that, then have your own back. This is adulthood. Leaning into this adulthood is how you will begin to feel strong and able to take control of your own life. These feelings will help you to gain confidence so that one day, you might be able to follow through with a different choice if you change your mind later on, okay?

Now, to the woman who is afraid that her husband will hurt her or her kids, I would say that you are doing what you can to survive. And you can own that as well. You can say, "I am biding my time. I will figure this out. One day there may be an opportunity, and I will be waiting and ready for it, and I will take that opportunity when it comes." That's how I would choose to frame it. And then, if I was in that situation, I might do some research, maybe go to the local library and do research on a computer so it couldn't be traced, and then I would do what you're doing and I would listen to podcasts in private, and I would try to grow and learn as much as I could. I may have to utilize free resources because I might know that my paying for a program or something might get traced or tracked, so I might not want to join a program or be able to do that. But there's so many free resources out there. I might even go visit a local domestic violence shelter to see if they have any ideas for me. But I know that you're a powerful woman doing what you can to keep yourself and your children safe, and it will take time and resourcefulness and patience to get out eventually. I believe you can do it, but I'll just tell you right now that your husband is not likely to change, nor is he likely to give up control of his property, which is you and your kids, by divorcing you on his own.

Now, the exceptions to this that I've usually seen involves an affair, in which he is transferring his focus onto a new abuse target, and you are no longer necessary to his life. He's basically found a new host, and he's discarding the old one.

Here is the power of the mind. Twenty years ago, I thought divorced women had failed in some way. I did not admire divorced Christian women. I judged them. And I was glad to be able to say, even though I was living in this horrible marriage, I was never going to be like them. I was a faithful woman. I was persevering. And I was going to stay that way no matter what happened. Now, twenty years later and a nasty divorce later, I think divorced women... I believe this, like, this belief has permeated the fabric of my

being. I can't even fathom believing the other way; the way I used to believe is so far from what I think right now. But I truly believe that divorced women are resilient badasses who have taken personal responsibility for their lives and courageously gone through one of the worst human experiences that you can go through next to losing a child. And when I think about that old version of me and what a judgy asshole I was, I cringe. But then I also drop into compassion for her because, you know what? She was just operating with the software program that had been downloaded into her psyche for most of her life.

LISTENER: The Flying Free program is centered on giving women of faith the tools to deal with emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships. Hi, this is Nicole, and I've been a member of Flying Free for around eight months now. Natalie and her team's wisdom and experience shine through each interaction with the members. Natalie's coaching will make you think deeply, soothe your anxiety, yet something she says might shock you. And of course, her wonderful humor may make you burst out laughing. You must know deep down that what you've tried in the past hasn't worked, and that's why you're looking for something new. This program is well worth it. You may not agree with everything, but I can assure you that it will bring you closer to peace, freedom, and more importantly, restore your faith in the One who came to heal the brokenhearted and set the captives free.

NATALIE: Okay, let's listen to our second question.

LISTENER: How do I know if I'm the abuser? More and more as I read the character traits of abusers and narcissists, I see them in myself. I'm wanting to emotionally and mentally be rescued, and just having to distance myself from hurtful behavior makes me feel so mean, and I get more and more depressed. How do I get out of the pit and see things realistically?

NATALIE: This is one of the most common questions I get from survivors in our private forum, in DMs on social media, and via email. Which, by the way, I just want to say a little bit of something about emails: I love reading your emails. So if you're on my mailing list and you ever want to hit the reply button on anything, don't hesitate to do it. Now, I can't answer all of them, but I do have a community support director — who also happens to be my adult daughter — and she reads through all of the emails and responds to all of them, and then she passes them onto me so I can read them too. And I do. I read every single one. I'm not able to answer emails anymore because I, along with all of us, only have a limited amount of resources as far as time is concerned, and I've intentionally chosen to spend my time and energy in the private forum with the women in my program. So I answer their questions in the forum, and

they can private message me on the backend and get my attention that way as well, any day. Now, if you would like this kind of support, again, I talked about this a little bit at the beginning of this episode, but consider joining the Flying Free Sisterhood program. It's joinflyingfree.com.

So anyway, I get this question a lot, and I've even addressed this in some other episodes, but I think it's worth answering again since it's such a common concern and it just comes up over and over. Don't you find it fascinating that abuse victims wonder if they are the abuser? Did you know that abusers never wonder if they're the abuser? The very nature of abuse excludes this possibility. An abuser believes he hasn't done anything wrong, so how could he be an abuser? You, on the other hand, are constantly thinking you've done something wrong and that there is something wrong with you on a fundamental level. Therefore, when you first learn about abuse, of course you'll wonder if you are also an abuser. You will wonder if you should add that to your long list of issues to feel guilt and shame about.

When I was a little girl in the fourth grade, my teacher made an announcement at the beginning of the school day one day saying that someone had stolen something off his desk. Now I don't remember what the thing was, but I do remember the heat washing over my face and my brain scrambling for evidence that I may have been the one to blame. Was I the guilty one? A feeling of guilt permeated my body, but I could not recall taking anything off of Mr. Bellrose's desk. Maybe I just didn't remember it.

As an adult looking back at this reaction and other times I remember reacting this way, I know now that when I was a child, I was blamed and gaslit on a regular basis. So it's natural that my brain would immediately second-guess my reality and offer me the default thought that I had been programmed with, which was, "I'm a naughty girl. It must be my fault." Now, I wasn't actually a naughty girl. I mean, I was probably a very normal child who went through the normal stages of childhood development. We don't really remember what we were like when we were babies or two-year-olds or three-year-olds, right? But those normal things that babies and toddlers and preschoolers do, like say "no" or have a temper tantrum or don't want to take a nap — all of those normal things, those may have been interpreted by my mom to mean that I was a terrible child in that moment, and then she would let me know that with words and sometimes blows. So I learned how to be very careful. I learned how to be very good, how to sit still, how to say the right things and look the right way.

But even those efforts were not always successful. I might not hang the towel as correctly as it was expected or I might leave a crumb on the floor or I might not put the piano books away as neatly as was desired. And if I protested or defended myself, I was

told that I was making things up in my head. This was a very common theme in my formative years. So my brain was wired with this belief that I was the kind of person who had something wrong with her, and also the kind of person who made things up in her head that weren't real. So is it any wonder that I would immediately be awash with guilt and shame when something bad happened outside of myself? I totally assumed it must be my fault somehow, and I was eager to make it right so that people would like me and accept me again.

I would say I was sorry about everything. I've only become aware of this annoying habit when I met Tom. Now, Tom and I will celebrate our fifth year of marriage this year, and I have learned in this healing, normal, healthy relationship that I do not have to be sorry for everything that goes wrong with anything in our home. I do not need to grovel and fawn for love and acceptance. I don't need to believe everything is my fault or my responsibility. Tom is an emotional adult, and if he is responsible for a mistake or something that goes wrong around here, he owns it and apologizes. He does not put that on me or the kids.

I can count on one hand the number of times my mom apologized for anything or my ex apologized for anything. Again, why don't abusive people apologize? Because they don't believe they've done anything wrong. They project what they've done onto you and make it all about you. Now, if you're a person who thinks that you are amazeballs and you don't do anything wrong, and if you're a person who never has to say you're sorry, because why would you say you're sorry if you didn't do anything wrong? And if you never have self-doubt or second-guess the way you treat other people or ever wonder why they might be hurting around you, then you may want to get some help for that. Because you're probably hurting everyone around you.

But most of the people listening to this podcast are listening because they don't think they are amazeballs. They are riddled with shame and guilt and fear and sadness and confusion, and if that's you, you also need help, but a very different kind of help than an abuser needs. And by the way, abusers hate therapy and counseling unless they can use it to further manipulate the situation and gaslight their partner. Counseling is just one more tool of torture that they can deploy. But otherwise, beyond that, they're going to go kicking and screaming to counseling, if they go at all.

You guys, it's so fascinating to watch the same story play itself out over and over again, but once the Christian wife divorces her husband who is going through the counseling hoop to appease everyone around them and make himself look like a humble saint, once they're divorced, he will quit counseling. Why? Because the game is over. The ruse is no longer necessary. He lost, and there is no reason for counseling for him, because

his reason is now gone. But the woman? She will often continue counseling in order to heal from the years of being cut with an emotional razor a million times. Her emotional well-being has been compromised and she's dying, so she will view counseling like checking herself into the ICU for treatment. She knows she needs it. But the abuser doesn't need counseling. He's all good.

So I want to talk to you survivors now, those of you who are the abuser targets. Because you are feeling guilt and shame for your behavior, and you can point to specific behaviors that you're not proud of, right? You may have yelled at your husband, called him names, given him the silent treatment, lied, manipulated to get your way, and so on. Why? Well, it's because you want your husband to see you. You want him to hear you. You want him to be a husband. You want him to acknowledge your existence and your worth and your value to his life. You are counting on his validation and care to make you feel good, to make you feel loved, to make you feel connected and worthy, to give you purpose and meaning in life. And when he doesn't do any of those things, then you act out in an attempt to get him to be someone he is not. So do we say that you're abusive just like your husband? No. We do not.

Let me illustrate. If a big dog attacks a little dog and the little dog fights back, do we say, "Oh, that little dog is so mean and abusive." Or do we say, "Both of those dogs are dangerous. They should be put down." Or do we use our common sense and recognize what's really going on here and address the big dog's behavior issues? Because once the big dog is no longer attacking the little dog, all you've got left is a little dog with PTSD who might need some dog therapy to reacclimate to a life that doesn't carry a threat of attack at any minute. That little dog will eventually recover and be a good dog once she is no longer in close proximity with the attack-dog.

Or here's another illustration. What about this: Let's say that someone tries to mug you in a parking lot, and you have mace on you and you spray it on your attacker. And let's say that someone sees this, calls the police, and they catch the guy. Do the police say, "Well now, we need to take you both down to the station and fingerprint you, because you are both attackers." No. You might need some therapy for any PTSD you have suffered for being attacked, but you are not in the wrong to fight back. In fact, the anger and the adrenaline that humans get when they are being attacked is a gift from God, meant to give us the motivation and the energy that we need to get away from our attacker. This is one of the ways He intentionally created humans to protect us.

Now here's the issue: You're not a dog, and this isn't just a one-time attack. You are being targeted and attacked either in overt or covert ways or both on a regular basis. And the reason that you are reacting and attacking back is because you believe you are

stuck in a parking lot with your attacker. Your church tells you that you can't leave the parking lot or you'll go to hell. Your church tells you that your attacker is really a nice guy if you would just calm down and stop making up the attacks in your head. Do you see the gaslighting here? And your brain's programming is telling you that you're a rotten little bitch for protecting yourself. Do you see this? So if you stay in the parking lot fighting your attacker day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, where do you end up?

Alright, I want you to get serious with yourself and ask yourself, "Why? Why am I doing this?" You have other options. I can think of two. One, you could get in your car and just drive away. There are other places to shop. There are other places to live and work and go to church and build a life. There are other people in this world. Not all of them are attacking other people, and you're never going to know those nice people as long as you continue to engage in warfare with your attacker. I would never have met Tom and spent the last six years in an amazing relationship if I hadn't decided to get in my car and drive away. I don't have to fight anyone anymore. I get to use all the energy that I used to use for fighting to do more creative and missional things with my life.

Now, another option is to stay in the parking lot if you want to, but stop engaging with your attacker. Get in your car. You could turn on your music, you could focus on something else. Of course he's still going to be out there raging and pounding on the windows (make sure you lock the door), and you may eventually still decide to drive away at some point. Because that's going to get really old. But if you're not ready to drive away yet, at least create some distance or some boundaries or some space between you and your attacker so you can get a little peace.

Now this means that you don't have to pull out the mace anymore. You've got the car to protect you, right? You don't need to yell, you don't need to give him feedback, you don't need to cry to get him to see how much you're hurting, you don't need to beg people at church to help you or make him go to counseling, you don't have to lie or call him out or manipulate the situation. We only do those things if we think they're going to make a difference, if we believe that those things will make our attacker turn into Prince Charming if we just do it enough. That's totally magical thinking. It's Cinderella thinking — it's fairytale beliefs.

But this is what we've believed since childhood, right? That if we could just be good enough, our parents would love us. If we were just cool enough, the cool kids would stop calling us names on the bus. If we would just try hard enough, we would be worthy of acceptance and love. We would get them to understand. We would get them to see us. All of these are childish ways of thinking. They are beliefs that did help us survive

when we were kids, but they are no longer useful for our adult lives. You are already worthy. You are already totally cool. You are already accepted and loved. And all of those things have nothing to do with your attacker or your church leaders or your family or your friends or your careers or your children or anything outside of you. Those things are just reality.

And we can lean into that reality if we are willing to step away from the fairytale that our attacker will change via something that we do, whether that something is to be as good and as perfect as we can, or whether that something is that we fight back and try to force him to change that way. We have to accept that this is who the abuser wants to be. They will have free will just like we do, and we're crossing their boundaries and stealing their autonomy away from them when we try to make them change. If they're doing something illegal, by the way, we need to report that to the police for the sake of other humans who are being harmed by their illegal activities. We accept that someone wants to steal or hurt others, yes, but then we also apply consequences for those choices, right? So we accept the abuser the way he is, and then we accept ourselves. Who are we? Let's focus on our own emotional, adult development and our own choices in life and our own futures. Let's use all that amazing energy that we've been wasting on fighting someone else, and let's use it to blossom into the woman that God made us to be.

And that's exactly what I help Christian women to do in the Flying Free program. These podcast episodes are just a little taste of what I offer in my program. Check out the details at joinflyingfree.com. And if this podcast episode was helpful or eye-opening or life-changing in any way, would you do me a favor and leave a rating and review on your podcast app? Those reviews especially are golden, and the more there are, the more the apps are going to recommend this podcast to others in the same demographic. This is how you can help spread the word. And of course, if you know of someone in a painful and confusing marriage, why not recommend this resource to them? It's free and could ultimately save their lives or the lives of their kids. And then finally, if you are new to this podcast, be sure to subscribe so that you're the first to get notified when our weekly episode drops. I want this episode to be your little dose of validation, comfort, and motivation each week to take care of the woman who has your name. She needs you, and you are loved.

Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.