

HOW YOU AND YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY GOD HOODWINKED BY AN ABUSER

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 177 of the Flying Free Podcast. In this particular episode, I want to read to you an article that I wrote several years ago and that I actually just recently, not that long ago, put on YouTube. I recorded me talking on YouTube. I'm starting to do that. I've got over a hundred articles, I've got all these podcast episodes, I've got all this content, and I have done stuff on YouTube, but if you go to my channel, it's very spastic over there. So I thought, "You know, I should start putting some of this content over there too for people who like video. I guess video's pretty popular now, so let's jump in and do that as well, right?"

As I was thinking about this, though, I thought, "I really should put this particular article on my podcast as well, because it is so good and there's so much helpful information here." I'm just going to start reading it, because I'll explain how I got this information and what I did with it as I read the article, because I introduce the article that way. So, without any further ado, here we go. The article's called, "How Abuser's Groom Their Victims and Everyone Else."

Have you ever wanted to pull your ever-loving hairs straight out of their follicles? (I get a little dramatic sometimes, right?) I know that feeling. I get it every time I hear another story of how a courageous victim finally gets up the nerve to expose her abuser, and instead of getting the help and hope she dreams of, she gets put on the rack and grilled. She tries to get away from the abuse only to find herself being abused by her larger community. She tries to tell the truth only to be told to shut her mouth and go back to living a lie. This is because her abuser hasn't just been grooming his victim, he's been grooming everyone else, too.

I recently watched Wade Mullen give a presentation. And by the way, this presentation, I will link to it in the show notes, okay? This presentation was on how to spot spiritual abuse. Wade did his doctoral research on the subject of how evangelical organizations manage the impressions others are forming of them in the wake of an image-threatening event. In this presentation, he beautifully lays out the patterns he discovered.

While Wade focuses on spiritual abuse, I'd like to take the patterns he researched and

apply them to victims of emotional and spiritual abuse in a marriage. I think some women may hear a presentation like this, like Wade's, and see the similarities, but they don't believe it applies to them because of this perception that emotional abuse isn't as bad as other types of abuse. But it is. And emotional abuse is an integral part of every other kind of abuse. It's the longest-lasting type of abuse, and it leaves the longest-lasting scars on the brain, the spirit, the personality, and the internal organs of the victim. So I think it's worth taking a closer look at this and drawing some comparisons.

Wade begins by talking about the fact that abuse always involves deception. The abuser is a thief, and their goal is to steal the personhood of their victim. To erase them or objectify them. Now, how I would put this is that everyone has their own universe between their ears, (That's our brain, right?) but the abuser believes his universe is the only one that exists, and everyone else is in his universe. This is the equivalent of making himself out to be like a god. To be "like God." The sin of the devil. The first sin in the garden of Eden — to be "like God, knowing good and evil." The abuser defines good and evil according to his universe. His manual for life is the only manual that counts. Anyone with a different manual is "bad" and discardable.

This means for him to define his wife in terms of "a good Christian woman," she must reflect him and his values, opinions, beliefs, preferences, desires, and goals. And to the degree that she expresses her own individuality, she is vilified with various religious labels like "Jezebel," "rebellious woman," "dripping faucet," and so on and so forth. So she is shamed for being herself. If she wants to have a good marriage and a happy husband, she will need to disappear so only he remains. Basically, she is enfolded into him. This is essentially psychological murder, you guys. So how does he get a woman to give up her own universe, her own agency, perspective, unique personhood, to be swallowed up in his universe? And how in the world does he get everyone around him to agree that he has the right to do that, and she has no right to resist?

Jeremiah 5:26 says, "Among my people are wicked men..." Did you catch that? "Among my people are wicked men..." They're not out there. They're in here, among my people: "...who lie in wait for victims like a hunter hiding in a blind. They continually set traps to catch people."

So Wade talks about two types of evil language abusers use to trap their prey. One type of evil language is ingratiation, and the other is dismantling. Let's talk about ingratiation first. He says that ingratiation means to bring oneself into favor with someone by flattering or trying to please them. Abusers use ingratiation to get their victims to do what they want them to do. Wade exposes four types of ingratiation: Flattery, favors, helping, and alliances.

So an example of flattery would be, "You are special. One-of-a-kind. You are perfect for this vision of mine. God created you just for this. You and I will make the perfect ministry team. We will do this awesome thing for God together." These are the kinds of things a victim will hear, and it distracts her from the abuser's real agenda, which is to enfold her into his own universe and use her for his own purposes. Do you notice the theme of the abuser's deception and the victim's annihilation?

But the victim doesn't see it unless she is equipped with this kind of understanding. That's why I'm sharing this and breaking it down for you. I want every Christian female, both young and old, to know these tactics inside, outside, and upside down so they can smell an abuser a mile away and run. So they can smell an abusive church a mile away and run. A flattered victim will feel the compulsive emotional and psychological pull to approve of the abuser and do what he wants her to do, including offering him flattery in return.

This is something I experienced with an abusive pastor who groomed me in my early 20's. He would flatter his favorites and make us feel extra special while blatantly ignoring people who weren't in "his special inner circle of disciples." I instinctively knew that in order to remain in his good graces (and I wanted to), I had to make sure I ingratiated myself to him. There was no room to disagree. And later on, when I dared to disagree, I found out that I was right.

As Wade puts it, when you walk into their trap, they are pleased. But when you don't, they can get quite upset. And watch them freak when you blow the whistle. This is what happens to women when they wake up to emotional abuse in their marriage and begin to speak the truth out loud. When they begin to come to the relationship as a real human being with a separate universe from his. That's a serious no-no in an abusive relationship, and the woman pays the price for showing up. The other issue Wade draws attention to, and I've seen this first hand as well, is that this flattery tactic creates an environment of flattery to the point where flattery is expected while constructive criticism or "truth-telling" is viewed as rebellious, negative, and bad. And I found out in the last church I was part of that if the community didn't like the truth you were telling, they would just eliminate you altogether. But we'll get to that in a minute.

The next ingratiating tactic they often use is doing favors for their target. Because what do humans tend to do when someone does us a favor that improves our life? We feel grateful to them, and it is also human nature to feel an obligation to them. So when they ask us to do something, we feel compelled to comply because of "all they've done for us."

The women I work with in the private Flying Free Sisterhood are constantly dealing with this. As soon as they make a move to stand up for themselves, their husband will start doing nice things for them. They'll come to the private forum and they'll talk about this. We see it over and over again. Everyday I see someone making a comment like this. And what emotion does this invoke for these women? They feel guilty. It's just a natural response, and their husbands instinctively know this. Sisters, this is a deceptive tactic, and they're using it because it works.

Abusers want to isolate you from the outside world. From context. They want you to believe that what you're experiencing in your marriage is normal. One of the ways they do this is by brainwashing you to believe they are everything you need. You become dependent on them and you stop believing you can survive without them. If you test the waters on your own, they'll remind you of all the ways you'll be destroyed if you try to get help anywhere else or on your own. And these threats are just further evidence of their true character.

Alliances: Wade says the abuser will highlight what you have in common, such as your shared opinions and experiences. "We are in this together. We can make it together." Later they will use this tactic of alliances to separate you from the pack and attack you in that vulnerable position. They will form alliances with your family, your friends, your church, your neighbors, or anyone else that might have the potential to support you and help you get out. They will get those people to collude with them or to agree with them and then turn on you.

You may even find yourself triangulating with him against others that you actually CAN trust. You may do it because you want so much for him to approve of you. You want so much to be a team. And it feels good and provides this temporary sense of relief and security. And of course, he loves this, because if he can get you to believe that you are the instigator of the distrust, then he knows you will be less likely to give up those beliefs. You guys, I hope you can see how twisted all of this can get. Emotional abuse is an evil, twisted experience that is very difficult to extricate yourself from.

Alright, so, dismantling. This is taking something apart. This is another evil abuse tactic. While the abuser is ingratiating his victim to him, he is simultaneously dismantling her external and her internal universe. He is annihilating her. His goal is to cut the victim off from her external support while dishonoring and demoralizing her inner world. He gets her to distrust everything else while creating a world for her and telling her that HIS world is the only trustworthy world. So she gives her universe over to him, and he swallows it up in his. And now she belongs to him.

So he attacks. How does he do this? First of all, he attacks her inner world. He exploits her trust by attacking her identity. He draws attention to and exaggerates her negative attributes by teasing her, calling her names, and bullying her. Her sense of self-worth and respect are demolished over time, and her autonomy is stripped away from her. One of the things he attacks is her ability to make choices for herself. She comes to the belief that she can't. She needs permission and approval from others before she can make any movement in her life. Her life gets smaller and smaller until she is a trapped bird in a very small cage. She can't even flap her wings without being criticized.

Something Wade said struck me. He said that laughter was a key indicator of this debasement of another human being. I remember my ex laughing at me and my children for things he disapproved of. Even worse, I remember when a friend told me that she overheard the elders of my former church laughing in a parking lot about how my ex was treating me. She was shocked. Now, by that time, I wasn't shocked. While they put on a spiritual show outwardly to the sheep, I knew their character behind the scenes. I didn't want to believe pastors and elders could be like this, and yet sometimes they are. That's just the reality of the situation. The Bible talks about mockers in Proverbs. They exist, right in our midst.

Deceiving and annihilating the personhood of another for their own gain: This is the abuser's agenda. This is why it is so hard for her to leave, because her identity is no longer her own. It is woven into his. So he attacks her inner world, but then he attacks her external world as well. An abuser wants his victim to be alone without any help or support, and he's going to do this in one of two ways. Or he'll do it in both ways. One way is by brainwashing her to believe the outside world is dangerous and out to manipulate and destroy her. They will "corrupt and contaminate" her. So he will get her to distrust health care workers, social workers, her family of origin, therapists, law enforcement, journalists, the legal system, and anyone else that she may think she can reach out to for help.

And at the same time that he is feeding her these messages, he is working himself to create those alliances I mentioned earlier with these same people. He is setting it all up so that if she ever attempts to get out or expose his abuse, he will have the snare already set to ruin her. This is the constant, unspoken threat that hangs over her head every minute of every day. And she sees him in public. She sees how kind and helpful he is to everyone. He would give the shirt off his back to anyone outside the family who asked. He'd drop anything to go help someone in need. He's generous with his money outside of the family.

And then on top of that, he brings God into the abuse. He brainwashes her to believe

that he is only upholding God's agenda. "God wants you to do X, Y, and Z." And if she says "no" to the abuser, that means that she is saying "no" to God, Himself. This is terrifying for a Christian woman who loves God and wants to obey Him. She's basically set up in a trap meant to destroy her no matter which way she steps.

Abusers eliminate boundaries. Boundaries are what separate our personhood from the personhood of someone else. In a healthy relationship, both partners respect that boundary line and appreciate and respect the full wholeness of the other person as a separate person. In an abusive relationship, one partner eliminates that boundary and engulfs the victim. Abusive churches will do the same thing. They will see people as commodities, and some people are dehumanized depending on their gender or race or age or socioeconomic status. In patriarchal communities, women are the abuse targets, and women aren't allowed to have boundaries or agency of their own. This matters, because when a woman sees the abuse in her home, she will often reach out to her church community for help. And if their theology has an undercurrent of patriarchy, she is doomed from the beginning.

And this is where I start to pull my hair out, because I see this over and over again, and I experienced the horror of this firsthand, when the community colludes with or agrees with the abuser. This was, by far, the worst experience of my life so far. It was worse than losing my firstborn baby, it was worse than losing my dad, it was worse than losing my marriage. And my church, my church did it to me. Now, I don't know if they had any clue that their actions were gutting the heart of a woman, but they were. And when I tried to tell them, they ignored me. They simply did not care. I was worth less than nothing to them. I was just a woman. I was my ex's target, and then I became their target.

It takes Herculean courage and strength to go against everything you've ever believed or wanted or strived to achieve or worked for, and tell the truth about your marriage. For so long, a victim truly believes that the abuse is "normal." That's what she has been brainwashed to believe. So there may even still be some cognitive dissonance inside of her mind as she awakens to more context and more reality and more truth about her situation.

I admire women who tell the truth. And instead of the shame I originally felt, I now feel proud of the woman that I was. I was scared to death of what could happen to me if I did — and yet, eventually, I was willing to risk everything to bring myself back into alignment with my core values and with what I believed was true about Jesus Christ.

An abuse victim gets to the place where she wants to tell the truth out of a desire for

relief as well as a desire for others not to have to go through the same things she did. So I laid it all out on the table for the elders and pastors of my church to see, and instead of the help and love that I so desperately craved and thought I would get, I was sentenced to the death of my friendships, my reputation, my marriage, my family, and my church home. My husband had been annihilating me for two decades, and the church proudly and piously finished the job and sent me packing.

This is the pattern Wade also discovered in his research. In an abusive ecosystem, there is no place for a truth-teller. She is a threat to their way of life, to their theology and the way they've always done things. When she goes for help, they're going to turn on her and require her to give an account of every strategy she used to resist the abuse of her husband. Wade says, "They are prepared to take her through the same process of abuse." She finally tells her family secrets, and her church not only refuses to believe her, but they give her new secrets to keep. They cooperate with her abuser in working toward keeping her silent and afraid.

What a blow to the survivor. There is such a horrific sense of injustice as her abuser is praised and supported for "putting up with her." She is often accused of being the abuser herself. I was accused of having a personality disorder and of having an affair. There was no evidence of my abuser's accusations, and yet he was trusted and believed.

By the way, I write and teach classes and coach women every day of every week, and I have for over six years. I rarely talk about my personal experience, and I've never shared my whole story online. And yet sometimes I'm accused of being an angry, bitter woman simply for mentioning my experience in public. That's simply not true. Am I angry? Yeah. I pray God will always give me a portion of His holy anger over abuse and injustice and deception that destroys His precious creation of men, women, and children.

But bitter? Not on your life. I don't have time for that. I love life and people too much. And I forgive my former church and I forgive my ex for their abuse of me, though they have never repented of any of it. But I will never pretend it didn't happen just so people will say nice things about me or think that I'm a good Christian girl. I don't need that anymore. I'm not a good Christian girl. I'm a warrior, and I train warriors to set captives free. And at night I go to bed with a smile on my face and say, "Thank you, Jesus, for this honor." That's not bitter — that's purpose and peace, my friends. And I would love to see that for all of you.

Wade tells a story that perfectly illustrates the madness of this type of injustice done in

the name of Jesus. He says it's like a lion who is hurting a lamb in the bushes. They hear the voices of the shepherds coming to look for the lamb. So the lion quickly puts on a lamb's skin and goes out to meet them crying, "Help! Help! A lion is hurting me!" And the shepherds care for him and cuddle him while the real lamb hides in the shadows. Flipping the narrative so that they are the victim works for many abusers in religious environments. But if that doesn't work, they will try other tactics.

They will try to discredit the woman's testimony by claiming she is confused or mentally unstable or bitter or out for revenge or making things up in her head or fallen away from God. They'll make excuses for their behavior and place the blame on someone or something out of their control. They'll claim that the victim is making a big deal out of nothing, and emotional abuse isn't even a real thing. They'll use scripture to back up their claims so they sound like the one who has God on their side. If the community wants an apology, they'll give one. Wade points out that you can always tell a fake apology. They are short, packaged in defensive language, and self-promoting.

And then finally, abusers and abusive communities will do what my church, Bethlehem Baptist, did in the wake of abusing women. They will dive into prosocial behavior which they hope will dilute their abuses by showing just how much good they are doing. Bethlehem Baptist wrote their own abuse protocol manual and began to go public with their own "fight against the abuse of women," all while continuing to abuse people behind the scenes who were protesting their behavior. And many years later, to this day, I am still hearing from people who are coming out of this church who are saying the exact things. Nothing has changed. Why do they do this? They do it because they can. They do it because it works. Did this just happen to me? No. My story is just a drop in the ocean of stories in our culture today and all throughout history. The pain and the devastation is tremendous. But as so many of us have found, there is healing on the other side.

So I'm going to close this by talking about what you need to heal. Women coming out of emotional and spiritual abuse need:

- To recognize their experience as abusive and the annihilating effect that abuse has on their minds, spirits, and bodies is real. This involves coming out of denial and brainwashing and accepting reality as it is.
- They need validation. They need someone to accurately reflect back to them what is true and real about themselves as human beings created in the image of God.
- They need help to unravel the twisted labyrinth of toxic shame downloaded like software into their brains.
- They need a loving, accepting community who will support them in becoming the

- autonomous adult women they are.
- They need unconditional love and freedom to learn and grow and make their own choices and their own mistakes.
- They need time to vent. To rage. To weep. To grieve. To process. To tell their stories. To heal. To forgive. To find new life.

Who will give this to them? Very few churches will give this to them. But there are churches who will, and there are many resources available now. I highlight these resources, and I interview experts and survivors every week right here on the Flying Free Podcast. And if you're interested in diving deeper into this healing process, the Flying Free Podcast is just the little tip of the iceberg of what we do inside of the Flying Free program. And you can learn more about that and apply at joinflyingfree.com. So if you're one of those women who have been listening to the podcast for a while now and you are interested in taking the next step into your own personal transformation and growth, I highly recommend that you join us inside of that work.

And then I just want to close by asking you to do me a favor. If you have not yet left a rating and review for the Flying Free Podcast and if you have enjoyed it or benefited from it in any way, would you just take a couple of minutes to do that right now? You can do that anonymously. This is the one place where people can actually leave anonymous reviews and you don't have to tell your name. People leave very interesting names on the reviews — it's totally fine. But what that does is it lets Apple iTunes know that this podcast is helping people and that people like it. And then they will show it to other people just like you.

On the back end... I don't know how it works, but there's a little bit of magic that happens on the back end, and they're able to see what kinds of people are listening to this podcast, and then they basically show it to more people like you. And so that's how you can spread the word, and all you have to do is leave a rating and review, and Apple iTunes will do the rest. Plus, my team and I... I was counting all the people on our team — there are twelve people that work inside of the Flying Free Program to produce this podcast and to do the program and to run the membership site and the public site and all of the things. And that team of people, they love reading the reviews too. It encourages all of us. So thank you so much for doing that, and that's all I have for you today. Until next time, fly free.