

HOW TO KNOW IF YOUR CHRISTIAN DATING RELATIONSHIP IS TOXIC

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 185 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, I'm doing something a little bit different. Several years ago, I wrote an article on my blog that ended up being the... I'm actually going to explain this in the recording that I'm going to play for you, so I guess I shouldn't do it right now. I have this blog article, okay? It's called "Seven Deal Breakers in Christian Dating Relationships," and it's pretty popular. It's the most read blog article on my website. And I decided to make a video, a Youtube video, of me basically reading through it. I add a few little things in there.

And then I thought, "You know what, I'm going to actually publish this on my podcast too," because this article was written many years ago. There are way more people on my mailing list now, people who have never heard of this blog post. I decided that I was going to make a video on YouTube, and a lot of people don't like videos. They actually prefer audio. So I'm actually going to give it to you guys too! It's about twenty-six minutes long — it's the perfect amount of time for a podcast episode. So without any further ado, here's the recording from the video on YouTube that I have, as well as the article on my blog called "Seven Deal Breakers in Christian Dating relationships." But I'm going to call this episode, "How to Know If Your Christian Relationship is Toxic."

Hi! I'm Natalie Hoffman. I'm an author, educator, and advocate for Christian women in abusive relationships. Several years ago, I got a question from an unmarried Christian woman who was concerned about some of the things that I was writing about abuse, and she wanted to know how she could avoid getting into an abusive relationship herself. Now, many years later, I'm working with divorced Christian women in my Flying Higher program, and they're asking the same question. They just got out of their abusive marriage, and they don't want to just end up in another abusive relationship now that they're free.

So I wrote an article on my website called "Seven Deal Breakers in Christian Dating Relationships," and it has been the number one read article on my website for many years now. Today, I'm going to share those seven things with you in this video. Now please note that my work is with Christian women, so I will be addressing abuse in terms of the female victim and the male perpetrator. If you are listening to this video and you are a male victim and you still want to watch or read my content, you are

certainly welcome to do so. But keep in mind that you'll need to switch the gender terminology. If you want help specifically for male victims, I like to recommend shrink4men.com. So you can head over there.

Okay, so how do you know if your Christian relationship is toxic? This is an important question. Sometimes women will see red flags, but very few people are willing to acknowledge that their potential future spouse, if they are thinking that they are dating to get married, might be a narcissist when passions are involved.

Now, we've experienced this either in our own Christian relationship or as we've observed the relationships of other people. It's all about the feelings and the romance and the dream and the excitement. There are oodles of hormones activated in our bodies that are clouding our understanding of reality. And during this honeymoon period of a new relationship, which is usually around six to twelve months on average (that's average, okay? Some people, the honeymoon stage lasts longer, some figure it out sooner than that), during that stage, nobody really wants to be practical and think about uncomfortable things that ruin all of our good feelings.

But here's the problem. If a person refuses to look carefully at the other person from all angles and take the time that's necessary to observe them objectively in many different kinds of situations, especially uncomfortable and inconvenient situations, then she may find herself making all of these important discoveries after the marriage rather than before.

Now, I'm not talking about this normal transition that everyone goes through from the honeymoon phase to basically the daily grind. Everyone goes through that transition and grows through that. I'm talking about when you wake up and realize with horror that you are married to a toxic, controlling, Christian narcissist.

So how can you avoid this? A Christian narcissist is not going to come up to you and say, "Oh hi - it's nice to meet you. I'd like to take you on a whirlwind romance, sweep you off your feet, marry you, and then abuse you until death do us part." No ma'am. They enter your world more like an angel of light. An attractive, charming, love-bomber. They're a Christian, for crying out loud. They might be super-duper nice, like Barney. They might worship the ground you walk on. They might be very religious and read their Bible everyday and go to church every Sunday. They might even be a pastor. They might tell you that you complete them. (Watch out with that one, because it might mean that they're a parasite looking for a host.)

They might do good deeds like Mother Teresa. They might be charming and attractive

and kind and thoughtful and spiritual. You might find them in leadership positions or maybe jockeying for leadership positions. They might be confident and charismatic, or they could be quiet and shy. They might live generously (maybe recklessly), or they might be kind of stingy. Here's the thing: Time is your friend. Take advantage of time in order to see what your date is like under pressure. Pay close attention to these seven deal breakers.

Deal breaker number one: A toxic, Christian narcissist cannot accept negative feedback. Feedback is a Christian narcissist's kryptonite. (And by the way, I am aware that the word "Christian narcissist" — those two words don't go together, okay? I understand that, but we're putting them together for the sake of our information here.) At the beginning of the relationship, you might just see a man like this shut down a bit if you give him some negative feedback. He might grow a little cold or silent. But as the relationship progresses, you're going to see and experience his powerful energy of anger, whether it is overt anger and explosive and way out here, or it could be covert, passive-aggressive anger.

Now, what does overt anger look like in relationships? Some abusers will express their anger with words and shouting. Others may even use physical violence if they feel that you already "belong" to them. If anyone ever (even just once!) touches you in a violent way or threatens you with violence — and this can include just grabbing your arm or pushing you a little bit or maybe blocking your pathway — get out of that relationship immediately. If you aren't even married yet and they are already doing that, you will be the target of increased physical abuse once the knot is tied. When a physical abuser "owns" you, he will stop at nothing to control you. Don't think that just because someone calls himself a Christian that he's going to grow out of it. I personally know women who believed that and lived to regret it. The church is one of the best hiding places for narcissists because they know that Christians are often the most gullible people about stuff like this.

What about covert aggression? How do you identify that? So some abusers may express their anger in passive, covert ways. This is called covert (passive) aggression. It's a manipulative technique meant to make you feel guilty for calling them out on their behavior and get you to actually believe that you are the guilty party.

Here's how Dr. George Simon puts it. He says this: "Covert-aggression is at the heart of most interpersonal manipulation. What the artful, subtle fighter knows is that if they can get you to doubt yourself, feel like you have to explain yourself, and question your perceptions and judgment, there's a good chance they can get you to back down, back-off, or better still, cave-in. Covert fighters count on the fact that you won't trust your gut

instincts or pass simple judgment on their character or the true character of their actions. They count on you being far too conscientious for that. And they know that if they don't come across as openly out to defy the generally accepted rules for civil behavior, exploit your good nature, and get the better of you, you'll ignore that feeling in your gut that tells you you're simply being played."

Covert aggression is probably the most common type of abuse found in Christian relationships. It's deceptive, it's hard to detect, and it destroys entire families in a slow, methodical way. It's like carbon monoxide poisoning in your house. You can't see it or smell it, but it will kill you. You may be living with it and you don't even know it yet. You just know that something is horribly wrong, and you can't seem to fix it no matter how hard you try.

So ask yourself this: Does your partner respond humbly to the negative feedback you give him if you have to give him some negative feedback? If your answer is "rarely" or "never," you are probably dealing with a Christian narcissist. And narcissism is on a spectrum, okay? I'm not saying that he's a flaming narcissist or a psychopath or anything like that. I'm just saying that this is their kind of behavior, alright? A healthy person with a healthy personality will accept negative feedback. They won't be comfortable with it because no one likes negative feedback, right? But they will accept it and they will learn and grow from it. They're interested in hearing what your feedback is even if it's negative.

Now, if the person you are dating appreciates the feedback you give him and if you actually see him implementing the change in his life, you may have found a healthy Christian man. The Bible calls this quality "humility," and humility makes for a healthy, wonderful Christian relationship.

Alright, here's **deal breaker number two**: Your partner has very little or no empathy. Although I will give this caveat: They can fake it quite nicely when necessary. So what is empathy? Empathy is identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives.

A Christian narcissist is unable to put themselves in another person's shoes. If you lose someone or something you love, the Christian narcissist can't relate. They want you to get over it. They're not thinking about what that must feel like to have lost a loved one. If you are sick, that's going to cramp their style because you are no longer able to meet their needs, and it annoys them. It's all about them, remember? If you are sad about something or mad about something or even glad about something, a Christian narcissist is not able to enter into your sorrow, angst, or joy. In other words, when the

Bible says to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep,” they’re not able to do that, because life is about them, not about you.

So how should empathy be expressed in a healthy, godly relationship? In a godly dating relationship, your partner would demonstrate empathy and concern for the needs of others. Not just your needs, but the needs of the server at the restaurant or the needs of the Uber driver. They’re interested in being kind and considerate and respectful of everybody’s needs. As far as their relationship with you, they’re interested in your life. They’re interested in your thoughts and your hopes and what makes you tick. They want to learn more about you, and you fascinate them, not because of what you offer to their existence, but because of who you are as part of God’s creation — just by virtue of the fact that you exist in the world. You mean something and are valuable to them.

Alright, **deal breaker number three:** Your partner has to have his way. This is where the teaching that the man gets to have his way in all things, and the woman is godly insofar as she gives it to him, comes into play. Christian narcissists have been teaching this since time began, and they cling to this teaching tenaciously and they use it to feed their flesh. The Bible calls this selfishness, and selfishness destroys relationships.

Now sometimes the guy will let you have your way if it doesn’t really matter much to him. He’ll make a big show of it to make sure that you’ve taken note that he is a magnanimous, unselfish person. But if you try pressing him on something that really matters to him, you’ll see what ends up coming out.

In a healthy Christian relationship, your partner is willing to compromise and negotiate. He is willing to let you have your way when he knows it’s important to you. It’s respecting and honoring the desires of others and taking them into consideration because it delights you to do so. Healthy boundaries make healthy relationships.

Alright, **deal breaker number four:** A Christian narcissist uses passive-aggressive communication tactics to control you. Now, does he come right out and say what he means, or does your potential future spouse use passive-aggressive, manipulative communication tactics? Here are just a few:

1. Does he tell jokes that clue you in on what he believes about things? Like racial jokes, sexual jokes, dumb blonde jokes, etc? Or maybe he just says something off the wall, and when you ask him about it, he says, “Gee whiz. I was just joking.”
2. Does he avoid giving straight answers?
3. Does he use guilt to try to get you to do what he wants?
4. Does he want you and others to pity him, feel sorry for him?

5. Do you feel intimidated by him?
6. Do you feel like he doesn't care to understand you?
7. Does he expect you to read his mind?
8. Does he blame you every time something goes wrong in the relationship?
9. Does he say negative things about your family or your friends or your job or your clothes or the things that you like?
10. Is he constantly correcting you?
11. Is he critical of you, even if it's in small ways? You know how people can just nit-pick away.
12. Does he tell you how to wear your hair, what type of clothing he likes, how he wants you to act, look, or behave?
13. Have you ever caught him in a lie, a half-lie, or a lie by omission? (That means where they leave out some information about something so you don't have the full picture.) If he lies at all, you know what he is? He's a liar, and you are in for a life of never knowing what the truth is with him, never knowing what's up or what's down. That's a life of total confusion and chaos. Lying is one of the biggest deal breakers, and it's a relationship killer.
14. Does he go out of his way to tell you that he would never look at porn? He would never cheat on you, lie to you, or drink? Ladies, only men who are hiding something will say those kinds of things even though you've never asked. Think about it. Someone who's not doing those things is not going to have those things on their mind. It's not going to cross their mind. My second husband never brought any of those things up because he just doesn't do any of those things, and he never has. I've never caught him doing any of those things. But if your guy is bringing those things up out of the blue and talking about them and reassuring you that he's never going to do them, I can almost guarantee that he's already doing them. He wants to throw you off the scent. That should actually put you right on the scent, okay?

Alright, **deal breaker number five**: He prioritizes his own interests. He lives in a pretend world where he is the center of the universe. And you're just a little satellite in his orbit. So here are some things to ask yourself: Is he chronically late to everything? This indicates he cares little for the time of others and feels entitled to show up any time he darn well pleases. It's a control thing. Now, I'm talking about consistent lateness combined with other red flags, okay? There are certain personalities who tend to be late for things, and I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about someone who's showing all these other signs plus he's always late, and if you confront him on it and say, "You were late again," or "Why are you so late?" he will defend himself, say that it's not true, justify himself, minimize it, and do that with it rather than just owning it. People who have a personality that they're just kind of late all the time, they know that. Those kinds of people will be like, "I know. I just have such a hard time being on time." Maybe they

have ADHD or something. That's different, okay?

Does he want to control your time and get jealous when you spend time with other people or when you cultivate other relationships? Is he constantly changing jobs because he was mistreated or unappreciated at work? Get out now. He is unable to take responsibility for his behaviors. There may be a good reason that others are ending their relationships with him. How does he treat other people? Don't consider just how he treats you. How does he treat his family members? How does he treat the servers at restaurants? How does he treat people in traffic? Is he honoring and patient, or not?

Here's another question: Is he open and honest about his past, or is it like pulling teeth to get him to open up and share something with you? If he is vague or reluctant to share private things from his past, then he is hiding something from you. This is totally fine at the beginning of a relationship. When you're first getting to know someone, we're not going to pull all of our skeletons out of the closet and stick them out. We might want to, but most people don't do that. But I would say never tie the knot with someone who always has something to hide. If there is shame or something that he hasn't dealt with, he's going to deal with it at your expense through abuse.

Another question: Is he a good steward of his money, time, gifts, and resources? If not, do you really think he'll be a good steward of his future wife and family? And finally, does he respect your boundaries? Or does he feel entitled to invade them and eradicate them from your life? This is a big deal breaker, in my opinion. No respect now equals no respect later.

Alright, **deal breaker number six**: A Christian narcissist can't take personal responsibility for his behavior, which we've already touched on. And this is really the crux of all of it, alright? Does this person take responsibility for his behavior? Here are a few questions that will help you see if your partner is capable of taking responsibility:

1. Does he say he's sorry when he hurts you or others? If he does, does a change in behavior follow that apology? Or is he just saying sorry to get you off his back temporarily?
2. Does he make excuses for his behavior or shift the blame to you or to someone else?
3. Does he want to get to the bottom of things and take responsibility for his part in the conflict, or does he prefer to minimize it and sweep it under the rug? Does he say things like, "Well, you just need to forgive and forget. Come on. You're just holding a grudge"? Red flag.
4. Is he good at taking responsibility for any outcomes of his own personal choices?

5. Do you feel that after a conflict has occurred and been dealt with, that there is closure and a feeling of well-being for both of you? Or do you feel confused and sick and believe that there are loose ends flapping in the breeze? This is a very bad sign. Conflicts are actually good and they should bring you closer together — not make you feel guilt-ridden and bewildered.

In a healthy relationship, you should both be able to take ownership over your own behavior, not the other person's, and resolve conflict in a way that feels good for both of you.

Deal breaker number seven — this is our last deal breaker: A Christian narcissist devours his target. And here's what I mean. When you are in a healthy, long-term relationship, both you and your partner are invested in encouraging the other one to be all they were created to be, to be able to live to their fullest potential. But in a toxic, manipulative dating relationship with a Christian narcissist, the target is swallowed up in the interests of feeding the bottomless pit of the narcissist's need. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do you feel like you need to fix him (complete him or rescue him) and that he is helpless without you? Do you have to make excuses for him and cover things up for him, and does he expect you to do this?
2. Does he have lifelong friendships? Many narcissists are unable to hang on to good friends. What are his friends like? Are they honest and kind and emotionally mature? What do they say about him?
3. Where are you at? Are you desperate to get remarried or married for the first time? Do you feel unworthy of a good man or unworthy of love? If so, you may be a magnet for a narcissist. You will want to get personally healthy. Now, that doesn't mean "get perfect." But you are worthy of love, and you definitely are worth a good partner. Don't settle for a Christian narcissist just to be able to say that you belong to someone or that you're married. You are not chattel. You are a treasure. You are a beloved child of the King. Raise your head, and don't accept anything less than a good (not perfect — but humble), honest, healthy partner.

So what if your "godly" relationship only has a few of these signs? No one person is going to have all of these traits of a narcissist, okay? You may only observe a few. What you want to look for are patterns of behavior that are controlling or manipulative. And learn how to trust your gut. Have your own back. Give yourself some credibility, okay?

I was always told by people outside of me that I was deceiving myself. Now of course that can happen, but honestly, if your gut is telling you that something isn't quite right, something's probably not quite right, and you might want to give it more time. Waiting

is never a bad idea. Even then, the abuse may be so subtle that it is difficult to detect for a while. The most common indicator of narcissistic abuse is when the other person doesn't take responsibility for his behavior.

Now if you identified several of these red flags present in your relationship and you want to learn more, I would love to give you the first chapter of my book. It's called "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage." And I'll also give you the first chapter of the companion workbook to my book for free. I'll also send you some ongoing help, validation, and support, other goodies, when you hop on my mailing list. All you have to do is go to flyingfreenow.com, and within a few seconds, a pop-up box will appear where you can tell me the best email address to send your free chapters to.

And I will also provide links to the Flying Free Podcast, which has been downloaded almost a million times over the past three years. Over there on that podcast, I show up every week with a new episode, and I teach Christian women in destructive relationships the skills they need to show up for themselves and their lives aligned with who they are in Christ. I also do have a paid program. It's \$29 per month. I'm not even going to go into the details of it because it's so jam-packed with good stuff. There are over a thousand women in that program whose lives are changing. You can learn more about that and fill out an application to join us by going to joinflyingfree.com. All the details are over there. Until next time, fly free.