

HOW MANY YEARS DOES A CHRISTIAN WIFE OWE HER ABUSIVE HUSBAND?

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: Hello, beautiful butterfly. Welcome to Episode 199 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have a couple of really good listener questions, and actually, this first one offers some excellent examples of what covert abuse looks like, and I want you to hear what she says, and then I'll expound on a few things. So let's have a listen.

LISTENER: Hi there. I got married about two months ago after a very short engagement. We wanted a short engagement because we both knew that we wanted to be married again, and we both came from Christian backgrounds — had both been hurt before. We didn't think that either of us would hurt each other again and that we would have a wonderful relationship. We also didn't want to move in together or have intimacy before marriage, which I thought was an amazing quality. I thought it was a gift from God, because I always had hoped for that but didn't know how to ask a man for that in a relationship. So when he said that, I thought this was a relationship from God.

And so now I'm kind of seeing... I wonder if it was because he didn't want me to see how we would interact under the same roof, and being married, there would be no way to get out of the relationship. I have a couple good examples of covert abuse — of what I feel is covert abuse, anyway. I'm not a really touchy-feely person. I've asked him repeatedly to, "Let's take it down a couple notches." I don't want to constantly be touching, especially when I'm upset with him.

We've gone through a lot of problems in the short period of time. One of the things is that he would just throw away my things without telling me or asking. And I find that this was very destructive and disturbing in the first few weeks of our marriage under the same roof. So starting from there I was still hurt, because we really haven't resolved that problem. He still wants to throw things away.

So, anyway, after being hurt and disturbed by all of that, I haven't really wanted to be close. And so I've asked him for some space. And I believe that when I ask for that, he throws a temper tantrum. Not outwardly, but he'll give me the silent treatment for two days or longer, he blames me, like, "Oh, what kind of wife asks her husband not to touch her," and stuff like that.

And I brought it up again the other day because he woke me up at 6:00 in the morning by touching my feet with his feet. And he knows I wake right up, you know? And I believe this is their way of getting under your skin or getting at you when you've asked them and set healthy boundaries... I still needed more sleep. I haven't been sleeping the greatest — he knows that. He hasn't either, but he was up and getting ready for work and felt the need to wake me up. And so I texted him later and said, "You know, I don't know why you woke me up this morning, but I will be sleeping in the other room. I just need some sleep," and then he freaked out. So that's one example.

The other day he was just being really touchy-feely and I was sitting there on the couch, and he went to touch me again and wanted to hold my hand, and I kind of just collapsed onto myself and my hands went down, my head slumped and my back went down, and I folded in upon myself and I said, "I don't always want to touch," and literally he just got up and went outside and was mad at me, and he said I was mean. So that's another thing — he redirected it back to me and said I'm mean.

So I guess I don't have a question necessarily, but I just wanted to give some good examples of what covert abuse looks like in my relationship. I don't know what to do with the relationship this early on. I mean, we all believe that we can help our spouse. He didn't initially want to go see a counselor, but he's finally agreed to see a counselor. Whether or not we actually get there is another story. I've pretty much given him that ultimatum, that if we don't go talk to a counselor, then the relationship is done. Our discussions are horrible as well. There's no winning with these people. So I guess God bless you, and thank you so much for your podcast. It's very valuable information. I'm just absorbing all of it that I can. Thank you. Take care.

NATALIE: I want to start by saying thank you to this woman for sharing these examples. These are great examples of how an abuser is wrapped up in his own universe, and his wife is just an extension of himself in his mind. She isn't a person in her own right in his brain. She exists for one purpose only, and that's to satisfy his needs and desires and imagination. So when she shows up as a human being with a mind of her own and needs and desires of her own, this breaks his imaginary screenplay in which he is the center of the universe and he falls apart, much like a small child who doesn't have the capacity to emotionally regulate himself or the understanding that other humans have different perspectives and deserve equal respect and honor.

So this second husband of hers has made it clear who he is right out of the gate. He's an abusive man-child. It doesn't sound like she's quite ready to leave him yet since she said that she doesn't know what to do about the relationship this early on. But I actually want to challenge her to examine the underlying belief here. Somewhere in her brain's

programming, she believes that — and this is so typical of brains, too. They say out loud these generalized things, but deep down inside it's because somewhere, her brain believes that there's a certain amount of time that has to go by before you can call it a day on abuse, you know? That's why she used the terminology, "this early on."

So I wonder what that amount of time is for her? And this is something, if I was coaching her, I'd ask her to dig into this. Do you think that it's a month? Do you think it's a year? Is it two years? Five years? I promise you that whatever amount of time it is, we're just making it up. There is no set amount of time, okay? She said herself too, "There's no winning with these people."

So let's just go into our imagination a little bit and say that we're playing a game. Let's just say we are playing a game where someone at the table keeps cheating. They cheated on the first day we were playing the game together, and then on the second day, and then maybe not on the third and fourth day, but they did on the fifth day, and then on the tenth day and so on and so forth. What are they telling you about themselves? They're letting you know they're a cheater. The only question you really need to be answering is this one: "Do I want to play this game with a cheater, and how long do I want to play this game with a cheater? Do I want to spend a day playing a game with a cheater? Do I want to spend a year playing games with a cheater? Or two years? How much time do I think that I should spend of my precious life with a cheater?" I love this question too: "How much time would I want my daughter to spend with a cheater, or my best friend?"

If you don't have any little girls, then find a picture of yourself when you were a little girl. Look at that picture and then just try saying this: "Hey little me, you're gonna live for about seventy-five years," (You'll probably live longer, hopefully, but we'll just say seventy-five) "and I think that you should really spend five of those years with a cheater. Why? Because those are the random rules that I have selected for you."

Do you see this? We need to be on to our brains, okay? This is just the human brain. We just need to be on to it a little bit. Do you know what I've told all of my kids, whom I love with all my heart? This is what I've told them all: "If you walk down that aisle and you realize at any point following that moment — it could be the day after, it could be the hour after — if you realize that your partner is abusive, you have the freedom to file for divorce immediately, as soon as you know. The sooner, the better. You are not required by this universe to waste one more precious day of your brief life that is absolutely necessary in an abusive relationship." That's what I've told my kids. Now, I didn't tell them that years ago when I didn't know anything, but I do tell them that.

Now, I also want to touch on the topic of dating relationships and remarriage just for a minute here. I do work more closely with over two-hundred and fifty divorced women in the Flying Higher program, and one of the things that I coach these women on quite often is dating. The most important thing that we can bring to the table when we decide to begin dating again is a self that is madly in love with someone already. What? That's right. We need to bring a self to the table who is already madly in love with our self before we are going to be able to hold our own in any new relationships, whether they are dating relationships or even relationships with new friends.

If we are still struggling with caring for our own inner parts and not giving them permission to be who they are without judgment, and if we are allowing those parts inside of us to loathe each other and be critical of each other inside, then guess what? Well, two things can happen. First of all, we aren't going to be able to give other people permission to be who they are. If we can't do it to our self, we can't do it to other people, and we're going to tend to want to either imagine them to be someone they are not, or we will try to change them into a person that we want them to be.

But here's another thing that happens when we're not loving our self, and that's that we will throw our self under the bus when push comes to shove. When another entitled person comes along, we're going to give them credibility in our lives over giving ourselves credibility, and when they want things, we will compromise our own standards or our own beliefs or our own boundaries in order to keep them, believing that their perspective is more credible than our own. We won't have our own back. And we will have a high likelihood of discarding ourselves in favor of the new abuser.

Now, the fix for this is to work on self-love, and being someone who was immersed in conservative Christian culture for over forty years, I know what the thought is about self-love. The typical Christian thought about self-love is that it's stupid, selfish, and unbiblical. "Oh, that's psychobabble." I can almost hear my mom's voice. And I used to drink that Kool-Aid. I get it. You know what, if you want to keep that belief, you totally can. "Self-love is dorky." Okay. Keep it. But when you finally get exhausted from people driving their cars over your almost dead body because you're not allowed to love it, you may want to revisit this stupid, selfish, unbiblical thought.

And by the way, I actually believe self-love is not only 100% biblical, it's also just common sense. I think we have to seriously gaslight ourselves and wallow in shame and condemnation to not see this. I hope that you will look for evidence that God not only wants us to love the person He created us to be, but He also requires this in order for us to spread His love.

How does this work? You guys, love does not spill out of shut-down, shame-filled human beings. Do you want to change the world? You're going to need to be someone who deeply loves, and it will always start inside yourself. If you want help with this, go to joinflyingfree.com. I'd love to help you with this. Let's listen to the second question now.

LISTENER: I was in an emotionally, mentally, and by definition then, a physically abusive relationship, since the emotional, mental toll has caused me chronic pain and chronic inflammation and GI distress that it did not have prior to the marriage. I've been separated for over two years and the divorce was finalized this past May. However, I still struggle with the fallout of that relationship since to everybody else, he was this very nice, friendly, kind, and very helpful individual. So when I listen to podcasts such as this or read articles about emotional abuse, I want others to understand what I've gone through, as they see me as the bad person or they see me as the one who left the marriage. They see him as the victim and actually me as the abuser.

I've refrained from ever reposting or sharing because I feel like others would just see it as me being still the crazy one. So I do share it with a few of my close family members who kind of understand and a few friends. But even then, I feel like there's really no new true understanding, and I feel like I suffer then alone. So my question is this: Is there ever a time or place in which to repost or share, or do I just continue to keep these things to myself?

NATALIE: I totally understand this desperate desire for people to know. I was 100% hooked into this for a long time, and it really kept me from moving forward because it requires us to rely on people outside of ourselves and their thinking or beliefs in order for us to find peace and happiness. Yikes, right? Whenever we rely on other people for our well-being, we are going to be tossed up and down and back and forth in every which way. I don't like living that kind of powerless existence. I think we first need to look at why we want so badly for others to believe us and understand. There's nothing wrong with it, by the way. It's a perfectly human thing for us to want that. It's a perfectly good desire, actually. It's just that it's not possible. So I think it's important to understand why we need them to think that we are good people, why we need them to know that our abuser is not the victim that he pretends to be.

So I like to think of this in terms of kids in a sandbox. And I've used this illustration before, but as children, we were very limited as to who we could play with. We were limited by our neighborhood and our neighborhood school, and even then, we were limited by the class we were in and the kids who were in that class. So when we went out to play at recess, we were limited by the sandbox that was available to us as well.

One sandbox. Not that big. Maybe you had more sandboxes in your playground, but we didn't. Now, if we lived in a neighborhood with a lot of bullies like I did, then we were out of luck. That sandbox wasn't much fun. But as kids, we didn't really have any other options.

Sometimes I think that we are stuck in that trauma as adults, believing that the world is still a small place only made up of the people who go to our particular church and live in our particular city. But is this really true? If you went to an abusive church and you grew up in an abusive home and you married an abusive man — all of which is very common for the women I work with — then your brain has been programmed to believe that your survival depends upon getting these abusive individuals and systems to like you and give you credibility. But it's important to see that this is just very young parts of our self deep inside, okay? And our adult self actually has unlimited options and opportunities to explore a world beyond this particular sandbox.

Now, I experienced this firsthand when the people in my sandbox, my adult sandbox, excommunicated me. At first, it was devastating. I had no sandbox. I had no friends. I could come back if I would just let my bully keep shoving sand in my face. Then they would all love me. But I decided it was safer if I simply left that box behind, and I launched out on my own to explore some other options. And what I discovered is that there's a whole world of sandboxes. And even better, there are beaches and oceans and mountains. And now when I think about those adult kids in that sandbox, I kind of feel bad for them. Do I need them to believe me so that I feel better about myself? Not really. I mean, I can understand why they don't believe me. They're playing in a sandbox, for Pete's sake. So let's let them play.

But we have so many beautiful things to explore and amazing people to meet. And one of those amazing people or persons is the one that has your name. She really does deserve to be heard and believed and understood. And do you know who she needs the most to hear and believe and understand her? You. You're the one. You don't have to suffer alone because you have your Creator and you also have yourself, and you also have a world of people who live beyond your familiar sandbox, and those people will be interested in knowing you.

Now, let's talk about posting on Facebook, because I have my own experience with that. Not a history that I'm particularly proud of, but when I was figuring things out and desperately wanting the kids in my sandbox to understand, I was posting a lot of things on Facebook. Now, I grew up in a dysfunctional family, and a few years ago, my little sister cut me off when I divorced my ex. You're not allowed to divorce in my family of origin, so this was a big no-no. And then she... I think she was the one who got my

nephew not to invite me to his wedding. The whole family just kind of discarded me and my family. Now, this was a really big deal to me at the time, because our kids had grown up together. I thought that we were family. I thought that we were close. I thought we loved each other. I did not realize that my divorce was going to put this wedge in the family, and I was deeply, deeply hurt.

I think I've talked about this in other podcast episodes, but I was devastated. I was also tired of being yanked around by people who looked good on the outside, looked like amazing family folks, but continued to do passive-aggressive things behind the scenes. So guess what I did? I wrote about it on my Facebook wall. And shortly following that point, my mom and then my other sister cut me off. My dad died, and so he wasn't involved in this whole thing. But my mom and my other sister cut me off and nobody in that family has spoken to me since.

So I did the one thing that you do not do when you are in an abusive family system. And in some ways this was validating for me, because I was starting to realize there were a lot of abusive components to my family, and this is how you know: When you stand up and you do something that's not allowed in the family, that is when you get cut off. That's like evidence that it's an abusive family system. You do not under any circumstances expose any kind of abuse in a family, or you will be kicked out. If the people in the system are invested in keeping it going, then they will kick the one out who's pulling the card out of the house of cards. I talk about this a little bit more in my book.

So do I regret this? Yeah, part of me did at first regret this. The little Natalie inside was devastated to lose my family this way, and I was upset with myself. There was a part of me that was like, "Why did you do that? You knew that would happen. Now you've lost your family. You moron." But you know what? There was another part of me that was actually glad I popped that zit. It was a zit that needed to be popped.

So what's my point here? I mean, go ahead and post things on Facebook, but don't do it so that people will hear you and understand and love you for it. That's not gonna happen. You need to have a better reason. So here are some possible reasons that you might like. Some of you might like these reasons and some of you might not, but these are just ideas. Post if you want to help others who are hurting so that they know that they're not alone. Post if you want to be a voice that exposes domestic abuse and you're willing to be burned at the stake for it, because you will get flack for it. Post if you want to have your day in the court of public opinion and you are okay with the fact that some people are going to judge you as unfit or stupid or unbiblical or rebellious or whatever the case might be.

But if you post thinking that you're going to make friends and you won't be lonely anymore, I'm going to tell you right now — that is not going to happen. If you want to make friends, then you need to find the beautiful spaces in this world where your people are hanging out. Now, are there places like that on Facebook? I think there are. I think there are groups on Facebook where you can hang out and find your people. And then you can post in those groups and you know that you're going to be safe. People in those groups are going to hold space for you.

Now, this particular person who wrote this question is divorced, so I can tell you that one beautiful place that you'll find your people is in the Flying Higher group. Plus, we have a private forum where anything you post can and will be used to encourage, validate, and support you on your journey, and you can learn more about that program by going to joinflyinghigher.com.

You guys, that's all I have for you today. If you like this podcast, be sure to subscribe. Or you can leave a rating and review or you can share it with a friend or family member or do all of the above, but just don't share it with your abuser. They don't like it. Until next time, my beautiful butterflies, fly free.