

A MAN WHO ADMITS TO BEING ABUSIVE ASKS "HOW DO I FIGHT FOR MY WIFE?"

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 210 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm going to answer a listener question, but this is a bit of a twist, because the listener is a man who confesses to being emotionally abusive to his wife. Now, every once in a great while, I will get a man who leaves a question for me. But their questions are usually full of attitude and subtle baiting, so I just delete them. I'm not going to waste my time or your time answering someone who just wants to stir the pot and doesn't really want any honest feedback.

But this one was a little bit different, and I think this one genuinely wants to know what would be his next best course of action. I think he is open to learning and changing. Now, that doesn't mean he will — only time will tell that story. But right now I think he has opened the door of his inner world just a crack, and I have some hope that this one may do the hard work necessary to build a new life for himself. So here's the question:

LISTENER: Hi Natalie. This is going to be one of the more interesting sound bites that you've received I'm sure, but I'm just going to let it rip. I've been married for eight years. My wife and I have been separated for two to three months now. During the course of that time, I've realized that the marriage had turned into a very abusive and toxic relationship. And the reason this call is interesting is because I realized that the person responsible was myself. And after doing tons of research and listening to podcasts and reading articles, including yours, I've just come to the realization that I was terrible towards my wife and didn't realize it — that I was blind and lost in various sins, and a lot of my actions align with covert narcissism. So I've studied that and I've done all the work that I could possibly think to do for myself and am continuing to do so.

And I know that I'm not in control of whether my wife takes me back or not. I know she wants to leave right now, and I've gotten to the point where I almost feel as though, because I feel so terrible, that I should just let her go, because that's what she wants right now. But at the same time, I love her dearly and I want to fight for her however that looks like during the course of this time.

So I hear a lot of sarcasm and bitterness and caution in these podcasts and articles from various sources towards abusive husbands, and I understand that I deserve all of

that and I accept all of it and repent from all of it. But my question is, should I continue to hold out hope? Should I fight for my wife? And what, in your opinion, does that look like? Thank you.

NATALIE: Okay, now, I can only go by what he's saying in this short clip, and always remember that words are cheap compared to actions, okay? And I know that many abuse survivors get drawn in and pulled in by a good story and by words. And they could be genuine or they might not be. We don't really know. But I'm going to take his words at face value. You can definitely hear emotion in his voice. You can hear that this matters to him, okay? I'm going to say that there are some good things going on here, but I don't know for sure. So I would need more time with this person talking to them to get a better read on what's going on here. But we're only going to take what he has said and analyze that, all right?

So first of all, I do hear him taking responsibility. I didn't hear him saying anything about how his wife needs to do better, I didn't hear him mutualizing the abuse or minimizing it or making excuses for it, all right? Now again, there's this part of me that's going, "Well, if he's listened to a lot of podcasts and read a lot of material, then maybe he knows that those are the kinds of things that we're going to be looking for, and so he is not going to put them in there."

But the other good thing that I'm seeing is that he is doing his own work. It sounds like he is doing lots of research, he's exposing himself to podcasts and articles, including mine, and typically we don't see abusers doing much of that, mainly because it's very difficult for someone who's got more of an entitled attitude to be able to handle anything that might imply that they are wrong in any way. That triggers deep shame in them and they aren't able to go there, and this guy is going there for some reason. Now why, we're not really sure, but he is going there.

So it is possible that he's going there as a challenge to educate himself on the nuances of how an abuse target handles the abuse, what she's being told, maybe, out there in the advocacy world, and so forth. If someone is a highly intelligent covert narcissist, they could use this information to their advantage. It can be seen like a big chess game in which exploring the opponent's psyche increases the covert narcissist's ability to continue to abuse in extremely subtle ways. Now, if that's what this person is doing, he did a pretty good job of covering it.

But there is one tell that he gives away, and that's when he exposes his belief that abuse survivors and advocates are offering "sarcasm and bitterness and caution." Those were his words. So he's interpreting the articles and podcast episodes in that

light. When he reads a sentence or he hears something on a podcast, he's thinking some version of the thought, "Hey, that is sarcastic," or "Hey, that is bitter," and that shifts the weight of responsibility off of him a bit, right? His brain can grab hold of that idea: "Yeah, maybe I've got problems, but look at — they're sarcastic," or "Look at — they're bitter. They've got problems too." And he might be right. I mean, everyone's got problems, but that is not the point.

So creating satire and using sarcasm is very effective at exposing abuse and helping victims unhook from the abuser's universe. You see this in literature all the time. People like Charles Dickens or Jane Austen use a lot of satire and sarcasm in their books. They weave it in there to expose cultural abuse. So this is very common. Is it bad? No. It's actually really, really effective. And I try to use it as much as possible, and there's a reason for that, because when I use satire or sarcasm, abusers don't like that, but victims use that to unhook. They start seeing the abuse for what it is. We want to take the hook of abuse out of them so that they can be set free.

And also, encouraging victims to exercise caution and to set healthy boundaries with their abusers also sets victims free, but it does trigger abusers. Now, if he was a victim, he would appreciate the sarcasm, the satire, and the caution, because it would be setting him free. He would feel seen, he would feel validated, he would experience a deep sense of relief. And those of you who are listening to this who are true victims of pathological, long-term covert abuse, you know exactly what I'm talking about. But if he is a perpetrator of abuse or if he has an entitled mentality or if he... I don't like to just say, "Oh, they're all narcissists," because they're not all diagnosed narcissists, but they do have narcissistic behaviors — but if he was a narcissist, he is going to naturally react to those kinds of strategies because he feels exposed by those.

And then also, using the word "bitter" to describe a victim, it's a tell. I'm sorry, but it reveals his mindset towards how his victim or other victims should be reacting to abuse. "They shouldn't be bitter. Why? Because it's not that bad. It's not really that bad that would cause them to be greatly bitter."

If you read the book of Proverbs, you will see that abuse actually causes people to want to hit other people. Read the book of Proverbs. There are so many verses in Proverbs that describe... Wherever it talks about a fool, it's talking about an abuser. And so read what it says about fools, read what it says about their mindset, and then read what it says about their victims, all right? Your mind is going to be blown.

So anyway, an abusive mindset is thinking, "Well, the victim is making such a big deal out of it," that they're so bitter — shame on them. And now I can relieve myself of my

own inner shame because I've placed it back on the victim," where the abuser believes that it belongs. So in my experience, though — I just want to say this — it's not the victims who are genuinely bitter. It's actually the perps, and that's why they abuse. Victims have every reason to be bitter because they have been experiencing chronic, long-term, pathological abuse. And true advocates are going to cut victims some slack on this because they know that it is a natural result — if they are a normal human being, having normal, human-being reactions to abuse — it is natural for them after being beaten down emotionally and spiritually over the course of many years to potentially get bitter about it.

Even so, in my experience, victims are usually the first in line to forgive. That's why they stay so long. I could do a whole podcast on how forgiving and leaving can both be true at the same time. I'm not going to do that here. But a lot of victims think that, "If I'm going to forgive, I want to forgive, I want to love this person, I want to give this person five-hundred-million-bazillion chances, so I have to stay." So I just want to say right here, you can forgive the person who's abused you and also walk away. Those two things can go hand in hand. They can be true at the same time. "I forgive you for being my abuser for twenty-five years, and also I am leaving you because I want to spend the next twenty-five years of my life abuse-free." I think that's a very healthy response.

But let's just go to his question now, because at the end of the day, it really doesn't matter what his motives are for abusing. I could be totally wrong you guys, okay? And it doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter why he spent those years abusing his wife, why he is now researching what covert abuse is, or why he's even asking a question on this podcast. His motives and reasons are his business, and nobody has control or more insight into all of that than he does. That belongs to his universe, and we're going to let him have his universe. Just like whoever's listening, you have your universe and I have my universe. And by universe, when I say that, I'm referring to your mind. Our brains are like little miniature universes. So we're going to let him have his own mind on that.

He asked me a question and so I want to answer it, but I'm answering this question on this podcast not to help him, although I do truly hope that he is helped by my answer. I think there is some genuineness in his question, and I really do hope that my answer helps. But the main reason why I wanted to answer it on this podcast is because my priority and my goal and my passion is to help victims of abuse. And by answering this man's question, I think it may also offer some help to victims as well. And that's who this podcast is for.

So his question was, "Should I continue to hold out hope? Should I fight for my wife, and what does that look like?" So if I were coaching this man, I would ask him, first of

all, what is he putting his hope in? Are we putting our hope in being married and having a marriage? Are we putting our hope in our wife responding the way we want her to respond? Are we putting our hope in getting what we want at the end of the day, which is to get back together with our wife?

So if we're putting our hope in any of those things or any version of those things, then I would say, "No, don't continue to hold out hope for those things." Why? Because those things are all out of your control. So your hope and your wellbeing is resting in whether or not someone or something outside of you does what you want them to do. That's what motivates you to abuse in the first place. Abuse is trying to control another human being and taking power over them, okay? And love, which is the opposite of that, is giving someone freedom to be who they are and to have their own opinions and their own feelings and their own choices and to define who they are for themselves.

Again, it's letting them have their own universe. Stop making her a little Lego character in your universe that you can move around and make her say and do the things you want her to say like my little boys who play Legos do, and let her be an adult human being outside of yourself who's just like you, on the same plane as you are, and she has her own universe. She's not in yours. She is standing next to you in her own universe — she has her own brain.

And then also just want to say, you use the words "fight for my wife." So I guess I'm just wondering if you're meaning that you want to fight to keep her — should I fight for my wife, like, fight to keep my wife — or are you saying that you want to fight to set her free to be who she is and choose the life she wants for herself? One fight, the first fight, is abusive, and the second fight is love. So you'd need to clarify which fight you're talking about, and I think you might need to clarify that for yourself too.

If you're talking about the fight to keep your wife and your marriage, then what you're asking me is, "How can I be better at controlling this other woman, this other person in my life?" Basically, "How can I be more clever and undercover in my abuse so that it doesn't look like abuse to most folks, including her?" And I'm not going to tell you how to do that. I don't recommend that. That's not really going to make you happy in the long run.

But if you want advice on how to fight for your wife's right to be her own person and control her own life, then I'm all in. Think about it. If she's her own person and in control of her own life and she chooses you, wouldn't that be better for you in the long run to be chosen by someone who chose you of her own accord and said, "Yes, this is the kind of human being that I want to spend the rest of my life with," not "This is the

person that I am being forced to spend the rest of my life with because I can't get a divorce and he won't let me go, and he just wants to keep manipulating me"? Like, really? Which version of that person do you really want to be with if you wanted to be with a version of your wife?

So when you're asking, "How can I fight for my wife's right to be her own person and control her own life," I'm going to be all in on that, because in that case you're asking, "How can I love this woman well," and I think that's a question worth asking.

In my book, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," chapter two talks about what a healthy marriage looks like, and the secret ingredient, I believe, is mutuality. A healthy marriage is going to have mutual love, mutual respect, mutual honesty, mutual vulnerability, mutual responsibility, and mutual submission. That means that both partners are offering one another all of these important ingredients. The opposite of mutuality is when one person takes a power-over position in the relationship, and this is abusive, and this is not what Jesus Christ modeled. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be great must be the servant of all."

So how can you love her well — how can you do this? Offer her freedom, offer her respect, love, honesty, vulnerability, and submission. Allow her space to choose her own path, even if that doesn't include you anymore. Love does not control. Love lets go.

So where is your power? Because this is the golden question. You do have power. Your power is not over another human being. You can try. You can keep trying to make it that way, but you will end up alone, because people were not created to be powered-over by other people. People don't like that. It's unhealthy and it destroys relationships. Your power does not lie in what your wife chooses. Your power lies in your choices, in how you choose to show up in this circumstance. So your wife is a circumstance in your life. A circumstance is just a fact — something that's just a fact in your life. "There's this woman, she is your wife. She is in your life." But her choices don't belong to you. Only your choices belong to you.

So who do you want to be in light of the fact that your wife has left you? Do you want to be the guy who tries to regain the control that you've lost? Do you want to resist and fight reality and say, "No, it should not be this way," and create all kinds of dirty pain for yourself and your loved ones? By the way, that never works. It never, ever works. It might work short-term. You might be able to manipulate someone to stick around for short-term, but many men lose... And women. Because I'm not saying that it's only men who abuse. I know women who are abusers. I have up close and personally

experienced that. So whether you're a man or you're a woman, if you fight and resist, you're going to create dirty pain for yourself and the people around you.

Or alternatively, you could be a man who has the wisdom to accept that you can't control the universe outside of you, nor are you supposed to. But the good news is that you can control one human on this planet, one incredible human being on this planet, and that is yourself. You have 100% control over you. You don't have control over your circumstances, but you do have control over what you believe, over your thoughts, over how you feel, and over what you do. And ultimately, if you are taking control of your thoughts and your beliefs, that's going to impact your feelings and your behaviors. And then that in turn will impact the results that you get in your life. And that's how we change our lives and control our lives — not other people, just ourselves.

So what happens if she decides to file for divorce? Someone once told me when I was married to my first husband that if my husband was not an abuser... Because I was going back and forth: "Well, maybe he's not." (It was very covert.) "Maybe he's not. Maybe it's me. Maybe I am the abuser." And if he was the amazing man he claimed to be, he would give me an amazing divorce. That's what this person told me, and I never forgot that. So mine did not give me an amazing divorce, not by a long shot. And I've told so many women the same thing, and they all come back and they're like, 'Yeah, I didn't get that amazing divorce.'

But here's what I'd offer to you. Here's a guy asking me, "What should I do?" Give her an amazing divorce if that's what she wants. Support her. Don't try to cheat her out of her fair share. Don't manipulate the kids if you have kids. Get your own help. Get your own therapy. Get your own support group and encourage her to get hers, okay? Do that for you. Do that for your future. Your future belongs to you. Her future belongs to her. Let her move forward into her own future and you worry about yours.

Now, is this going to win her back? I don't know. Maybe. Probably not, but it could. But that's not the point, and that's not why you're doing it. You would be doing that because love. Because you love her, you love God, and you want her to be safe and happy and free. And then the amazing thing is that you would be able to move into your next relationship, hopefully with a better grip on what it takes to be a man who can offer a relationship, all of those healthy things, that I talked about in chapter two of my book.

And speaking of my book, you can get it on amazon.com. It comes in Kindle format, paperback, or Audible. And I'll just give you a little quick rundown of the chapters. Chapter one you can actually get for free if you sign up to get on my mailing list. I will

send you the new episode of the podcast each week, and sometimes I send out other little things too if you're on my mailing list. But I will for sure send you the first chapter of my book. And I also have a companion workbook that is extremely powerful. If you go through the workbook with the book, you're going to get so many light-bulb moments as you write down answers to certain questions. I give you questions that will get you really thinking about your relationship and your life and what your beliefs are, and it's going to give you so many insights. You're just going to be completely blown away.

But chapter one, I'll give you the first chapter for free and the first chapter of the companion workbook for free if you go to my website, flyingfreenow.com. You'll see a little pop up, and then you just give me your name and email and I'll send you that free chapter.

So chapter one is just basically, "Is this your marriage? Does this sound like you? What is covert abuse?" And then chapter two, we talk about what a normal marriage looks like. Chapter three, we talk about the propaganda machine that a lot of Christian women have been immersed in for many, many years, and how the propaganda, the beliefs that you've been taught about men, women, marriage, and hierarchy, are really quite unbiblical, actually. And what does the Bible really say about men, women, and marriage?

Chapter four, we talk about your husband's role in the marriage and what he's doing. What are his beliefs? What does he believe about himself? What does he believe about women in marriage? What does he believe about you? What are the consequences of his beliefs? And can he change? That's all chapter four. Chapter five, we talk about you and your role. We talk about who you are, what's your identity, how you choose to cope, what are the consequences to your life.

In chapter six, we talk about the roles of everybody else around you. We talk about re-abuse, how you can be re-used by counselors and therapists, how you can be re-abused.... I shouldn't say that. I mean, there are counselors and therapists who don't get it, but I talk mostly about biblical counselors who are not licensed, because a lot of those folks, unfortunately, are misinformed and not trained, and they end up re-abusing victims. We talk about the church and friends and family and the voices of others that are just kind of living in our heads.

And then chapter seven, we talk about God's role in your life and in your marriage. What's God's view of women? What is God's view of you? What is God's view of abuse? What is God's view of marriage? What is God's view of divorce? That's all chapter seven.

Chapter eight, we talk about changing your role. How do you do that? What are your options? How do you set healthy boundaries? Who is your authority? What is your responsibility to choose? How can you discover your true identity? How can you go from feeling helpless to being an adult?

Chapter nine: House of Cards. Guess what that chapter's about? What to expect if you do set healthy boundaries: The house of cards is going to fall. I don't sugarcoat anything, you guys. We go right into the pain. What does the abuser do when you pull your card out from the house of cards? What does the church do when you do that? How does the church re-abuse victims? What do your friends and family do when you do that?

In chapter 10, we talk about the key to your future. What are the six stages of healing? How do you take care of yourself? How do you advocate for yourself? How do you replace lies with the truth? How do you deal with anger? Where does forgiveness come into play? And chapter 11 is what comes next. Basically it's all about climbing out of that pit and finding victory in your life and what the next steps for that are going to be.

So if you haven't read my book yet or worked through the companion workbook, I encourage you to get that on Amazon. There are actually a couple of other ways that you can get the book. One is that we do book groups, book study groups, three times a year, and those have already started now for the spring. The spring groups have already started even though it's February, but we will do another one in the summer. [After this episode was recorded, we decided to not do a summer book group. Feel free to join the waiting list to see when our next book group will happen!] But you can get on the waiting list for that by going to flyingfreesisterhood.com/book-group and you can hop on the waiting list for the next round.

So if you join the book study groups, they take eleven weeks and go through each chapter, one chapter a week, and they spend two hours together on Zoom. And you will get a copy... You won't get a traditional copy of the book or workbook, but what you'll get is every week you'll get the chapter of the week of the book and the coordinating chapter of the companion workbook. So basically you'll get eleven PDF downloads with each chapter and coordinating companion workbook chapter. So that's another way of getting the book if you don't want to buy it on Amazon and you want a PDF download. You'd have to join a book group.

But the third way of getting it would be to join the Flying Free Sisterhood program. And when you join for a year, you get free digital download copies of both the book and the companion workbook. And I think people, especially women who it's not safe for them

to maybe let their husband know that they're reading a book like this, they don't really want to have a physical copy laying around. So if they have a digital copy, sometimes it's safer for them. They can read it on their phone or their tablet or a laptop or something like that. So that's only if you join for a whole year. And the cost for one year in Flying Free Sisterhood is \$290 for a whole year. If you don't care about the book and you just want to join, I do want to let you know you can join on a monthly basis as well for \$29 a month, and you can learn more about that by going to joinflyingfree.com.

So that's all I have for you for this week. I hope you have a great rest of your week, and thank you so much for coming and listening and hanging out with me today, and we'll see you next week. Until next time, fly free.