

UNDERSTANDING REACTIVE ABUSE AND REABUSE: INTERVIEW WITH ANNETTE OLTMANS

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 214 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Annette Oltmans. She's the founder and CEO of The M3ND Project, which is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating survivors, therapists, faith leaders, and other responders specifically on the subjects of hidden emotional abuse and double abuse. Annette has developed training curricula, tools, and resources to address these topics, and I've invited her onto the Flying Free Podcast to talk with us about reactive abuse and reabuse. So thank you so much for being with us, Annette, and welcome to the Flying Free Podcast.

ANNETTE: Oh, Natalie, thank you so much for having me. It's really an honor to be here.

NATALIE: Well, first of all, I just want to thank you for your work in covering this topic, because while there is a lot of growing awareness surrounding sexual and physical abuse in our culture today — thank goodness, right? — but when it comes to hidden covert abuse, it's mostly crickets, and I think it's largely because it's very difficult to prove or wrap your brain around.

And what makes it even more confounding is what we're going to be talking about today, which is how a victim eventually decides to rise up and resist this kind of abuse and what that looks like and how it muddies the waters in many ways, in the ways that she might be reacting to the abuse, often making her appear to be the abusive one while giving her covert, abusive partner more ammunition to destroy her. So tell us, first of all, what is reactive abuse, and do we even want to call it that? Talk about that a little bit.

ANNETTE: Okay. Well, it's kind of a long answer because I think, first off, what is it and then what causes it? I think it's really important to get into the causation. There's been a lot of talk around reactive abuse. Reactive abuse occurs when a victim reacts sometimes violently to the abuse that they're experiencing. They may scream, verbally attack the abuser, or even lash out physically. And in response, as you mentioned in your opening, the abuser often then tells a victim that the victim is the real abuser, and onlookers may label the victim as an abuser as well.

But in fact, when a victim acts out in this way, it's usually after much time has passed during which they've experienced significant psychological, maybe physical, sexual, financial, or other forms of abuse, and they're severely traumatized. And the reality is that they're acting in self-defense.

And that's why I don't like the term "reactive abuse," because there's plenty of data out there to show that there are not two victims and two abusers. So I like to call this "reactive defense." But it's not the proper term that's being circulated in professional circles, and in fact, in professional circles, most of them don't even know about the term "reactive abuse." So they still are viewing the couple as two abusers and two victims.

Reactive abuse is, I just want to emphasize that it's an involuntary reaction of self-defense that the victim in an abusive relationship displays stemming from their trauma. And I'm sure so many of your listeners have been in these what I call prolonged states of stressful confusion or what are known as "trauma states," because they haven't been able to yet identify that what they are experiencing is in fact abuse, and they aren't yet ready or understanding that they are a victim of abuse.

And so what happens is many therapists, first responders, and court personnel don't realize how confusing it is to the person on the inside of the relationship who's being abused. And usually it takes a significant amount of time and even intervention for the victim to be able to define the abuse in the relationship or to identify as a victim. And by the time the victim acts out in self-defense, they've experienced so much pain and confusion that they don't even realize that what they're experiencing is abuse, so they blame themselves for reacting in ways that are contrary to their normal character. And so that exacerbates their confusion and they feel a lot of shame, and they wonder truly if they are abusive as well.

NATALIE: Yes. We get that question a lot in the private forum that I work with. They will ask, "Am I the abuser?" That's a very common question. And I think when I think about my own situation, every time that I would try to point out something that was harming me, I was then accused of being this bad person. So almost like pointing out the problem made me the problem. And then I would stuff it down and stuff it down and stuff it down, and then, especially towards the end of my marriage, I was exploding a lot, yelling, and trying to get him to listen to me. "Why can't you just have a rational conversation with me?" And then, of course, that's not a Christian thing to do to be yelling, to be disrespecting your husband, to be making demands that he listen to you. Not a Christian thing to do. So now all of a sudden, yeah, I felt like I was the abusive one.

ANNETTE: You felt like that, and that just demonstrates that you're more empathic because you're willing to self-reflect. And most victims are in that same situation. They're willing to analyze their conduct. They're willing to accept responsibility.

NATALIE: And say they're sorry.

ANNETTE: And say they're sorry.

NATALIE: They're the ones that are saying they're sorry all the time.

ANNETTE: Exactly. No, you're so right.

NATALIE: Not the abuser.

ANNETTE: And the abuser will say and do just about anything to avoid accepting responsibility. So there's the victim willing to accept responsibility and the abuser pushing the responsibility onto her. And so often, onlookers — therapists, pastors, and first responders — are willing to not dig deeper to say what led up to this situation. They focus strictly on the reaction and label the victim “abusive.”

And so maybe this is a good time that I really, really recommend that victims... They can access it on our website. We have terms and definitions to describe covert, emotionally abusive behaviors — all those confusing, manipulative behaviors — and I think it's so important that they take that first step of really being able to identify the types of abuses that they're experiencing, because clarity that that list provides is the counterforce to confusion. And that will help dissipate some of their trauma and some of those involuntary reactions that they have if they can identify what's happening.

So often what happens, like, let's say an abuser is raging at a victim and he's blocked her in a corner, so maybe he hasn't physically assaulted her, but she cannot move. His toes are almost touching her toes and spit is flying out of his face and it's landing on her, and she pushes him away. If he calls the police, she's going to be arrested because she physically assaulted him. And it's so important for victims who oftentimes, because of their trauma, they have fragmented thinking and they have compromised memory. They're so traumatized, they have a hard time remembering what started an argument.

But if they can really gain clarity about the types of abusive ploys that are being enacted against them, they can then get to a place where they can better advocate for themselves and really communicate, “No, he did not let me leave the room.” They can articulate, “Before that he was arguing about this, that, or whatever, trying to control

me, trying to oppress me,” and they can communicate those things better to paint a more accurate picture. They can better advocate for themselves is my point.

NATALIE: Yeah, so important. So that reminds me, and I want to mention the book that you sent. So Annette sent me a book that was just published last year, I think, right? 2022?

ANNETTE: Yeah.

NATALIE: And it's called “Created to Thrive: Cultivating Abuse-Free Faith Communities.” So The M3ND project — that's her nonprofit — will go into churches and help educate churches on covert abuse and reactive abuse. And this book was put together by several different authors, it looks like. But there's this one chapter that is called “Covert Emotional Abuse.” And it is the most comprehensive exposé on covert emotional abuse that I have ever read. And I think what you're telling us, Annette, is that you also will include a lot of things that are in that chapter in that PDF download on your website. Is that true?

ANNETTE: That's right.

NATALIE: Okay. So I will put the link to that, to both the book and to that PDF on her website in the show notes for people to look at. So can you talk a little bit about mutual abuse, then? I mean, is that a thing? Are there times when there is a couple that might be mutually abusive, and what would that look like so that people can know who are listening? I'd like to reassure most of the people who are listening that they're not in situations where there's mutual abuse going on, I guess.

ANNETTE: Yes. Well, I mean, okay — there is such a thing called “situational abuse” where there's not this dynamic of abuse where there's one person who's powering over another or who's using covert emotional abuse or other manipulative tactics. They drank too much, they got... You know, there's situational abuse. That's different. We're not talking about that. Mutual abuse is actually addressed by the National Domestic Violence Hotline. They published a statement about mutual abuse to dispel this often-used term, and the title is called “The Myth of Mutual Abuse.” So they're already saying it is a myth, and it's posted on hotline.org. And if you need proof, if you're out there and you need proof, you can access this to demonstrate to your therapist or your pastor that it is a myth. It is not a thing.

It is a term that so many therapists that I've interviewed... You know, I've interviewed hundreds of therapists and pastors over the years and law enforcement. I was

conducting a training, and there was a former police chief and his wife who are counseling first responder couples in trouble, in toxic marriages, and they actually confronted me and said, "Well, there's always two abusers and two victims. Why aren't you talking about what you did to abuse your husband?"

The reason I'm raising this is because I just want you to know that people that have been practicing in this field for years really believe that there's two victims and two abusers in most cases just because they see a reaction. They're not able to identify covert emotional abuse. And that's another reason why victims should access the terms and definitions so they can advocate for themselves, because their therapist may not understand it, or any helper. There's a little bit of an education process that needs to take place first in order to really advocate for yourself.

I wanted to just talk a little bit about what goes on in the mind of somebody who is reacting in this way, just to reassure victims that this is something that is not your fault. Trauma and abuse on the brain signals the body to respond in protective ways. That's just what it does. So abuse conditions and actually rewires the brain, and basically the brain experiences trauma that's intense, has duration, and is repeated. And so when that is happening, a new neural pathway is formed. With repetition of that intensity and duration, the new neural pathway significantly deepens, fostering traumatically conditioned responses.

And when a victim's mind or body is overwhelmed and, let's face it, most victims that I've talked to that haven't yet gained clarity about their situation are extremely overwhelmed, and when they're overwhelmed, only limited solutions become available. So their body can either protectively separate from the overwhelming feelings, which is dissociation, which then would end the experience or feeling because they literally numb out and they just put themselves in another situation like they're a third party in the room and they're not interfacing with it directly themselves. It's this dissociation, involuntary reaction, that happens.

But if they don't do that, then the individual becomes flooded, all too aware of what's happening, and yet they're helpless to intervene because they've tried everything and they can't make it change. And so based on a number of variables like basic temperament, environmental, nurture or neglect, age of the individual, their gender and/or historical life of the person, the experience becomes intolerable when it becomes too much for the mind and body to organize and integrate by a person's now fragmented and overwhelmed thinking, and PTSD does cause fragmented and overwhelmed thinking.

And the sad thing is that the victim becomes confused and full of shame for reacting in ways that do not accurately represent their character. And the abuser will often goad the victim into conflict and a reaction so they can shift the blame onto them and place the responsibility for the conflict on the victim. The abuser plays the victim and then the victim will freely admit to wrongdoing even when police are called because they're more willing to accept fault, they're more self-reflective, as we mentioned, and willing to accept responsibility.

But they don't have the mindset of an abuser. Their reactions are never motivated out of wanting to control or power-over or manipulate. Their motivation is to seek a healthy attachment, to resolve conflict with mutual respect. And so you can't look at these two people and say there's mutual abuse, because they both are operating out of an entirely different worldview, an entirely different playbook.

NATALIE: Yeah. It's interesting, though. That described me for most of my marriage and trying to get help many, many times — always taking the blame, always saying I was sorry. Towards the end, when I finally did get a lot of clarity, I was reading some good books, there was new material out there available that wasn't available during most of my marriage, and I started putting words to what was happening, at that point I realized, "I need to stop taking responsibility and I need to hold him accountable with other people." So even with people that I was trying to get help from — therapists, people at church — I was no longer taking responsibility. And so fascinatingly enough, though, then they came after me for that.

ANNETTE: That happened to me too!

NATALIE: It's like you're damned if you do, damned if you don't, right? And that was very traumatic too, because I would say, "Actually, I've got journals, twenty-one years worth of journals, where I am self-deprecating and saying it's all my fault and saying I'm a bad person and I'm so sorry and I don't deserve to live, and now I'm standing up and going, 'You know what? I am not going to take responsibility for this anymore. This is not a me problem. This is an abuser/victim problem. And now we're going to shift our focus to the person who's actually wreaking all this havoc in our family,'" and they just went crazy. They could not wrap their brains around that either. And I don't know what that is.

ANNETTE: Well, I think it's because there's this attitude in therapeutic circles and in faith-based circles as well that, "It takes two to tango." You know, "If there's a problem, you have to both look at your part."

NATALIE: Yeah. "You're both sinners."

ANNETTE: Yes, "You're both sinners."

NATALIE: "So what's your sin?"

ANNETTE: "So what's your part in this?"

NATALIE: "How are you contributing?"

ANNETTE: And so when a victim finally gets to that place where they're no longer willing to accept responsibility, I remember that my husband used to tell people, "Well, the last I heard, it takes two people to cause marital problems, and all she wants to do is focus on my part." And it portrayed me — just like you're explaining — to others as though I was unwilling to self-reflect when I had been self-reflecting over a decade. It's just unfortunately an error in thinking in therapeutic circles that they need to treat... That's why couples therapy, when any form of abuse is present, is contraindicated, meaning it's really not recommended, because therapists will treat... Particularly untrained therapists.

You need to find someone who is an expert in the field of domestic violence if you're going to experience a good therapeutic situation. But they just look at the problem as though it's mutual and they want to therapeutically align with both parties, which then retraumatizes the victim, because the therapist isn't able to identify all of the covert behaviors that are being employed during sessions. I remember experiencing false accusations, and I was on the hot seat having to prove that this was a false accusation. It wasn't a true accusation. And the entire therapy session was wasted on me defending something that had made no sense. Anyways.

NATALIE: Yes. I can relate to all of this. Oh, it's so frustrating. It's so frustrating. Frustrating is not even the word for it. It is traumatic.

ANNETTE: It's so traumatic.

NATALIE: It's so traumatic. Yes.

ANNETTE: But that's why victims or those who are experiencing harm, while they may go to others to help rescue them, to intervene, to solve the problems, to save their relationship, it's so important that they really recognize that these are just other adults that have their own beliefs, and oftentimes those beliefs are incorrect. And so they

need to equip themselves to best advocate for themselves to be able to really articulate what's happening, because when they're confused, they're not getting the point across, and no one's going to understand until they're able to either write... It might be too difficult for them to write down their story, but to just write a few examples of the covert abuse and use terms and definitions or the ones in the book to help them put a concise explanation together of what they're experiencing. It's so critical for them.

NATALIE: Yeah. And they have to get to the place where they don't need someone else to validate their reality. They can validate it all on their own. Just because someone on the outside, even if it's your pastor, someone that you really respect, says that, "No, it can't be that way," or "It can't be as bad as that," or "You don't really understand what you're talking about," or "You also have sin that you're not being held accountable for," just because someone says that doesn't mean that it's true, that that's a fact, or that that person knows what they're talking about.

ANNETTE: Or that they need to submit to that or they need to comply.

NATALIE: Exactly. I got to the point where I, in my head, when someone would say something like that, in my head I would say to myself (not out loud to them), I would say, "Well, until you've had sex with my partner for twenty-five years also and done his laundry and made his dinner and raised his kids and done all the things that I have for twenty-five years, then you can tell me what your opinion is, and I might find it to be credible. But until that time, my opinion and my expertise after observing my husband and experiencing him for twenty-five years is the one I'm going to pay attention to."

ANNETTE: Oh, that's so right. It's so powerful that you were able to get to that place. It's so important, but unfortunately, so often victims aren't in that place yet. There was this phrase that came out in the seventies that says, "Don't give your power away," which I find so unhelpful, because people take power from you. So if you go to your pastor who doesn't support you or believe you or understand — and like in your case, Natalie, you were excommunicated from your church. I mean, I can't imagine how traumatizing that was — you are vulnerable to people taking your power away. Your therapist may take your power away.

You have to get to a place where you're fully autonomous and can make decisions for yourself and find safe people in your life that you can confide in, and you may not find someone. And that makes me really sad, because I think that victims have a really hard time healing in isolation. It's so valuable if they could just have one or two people in their lives that will say, "I believe you. I understand you."

NATALIE: Absolutely. No, you're right, they do. They all need that. We definitely need that validation. There's certain kinds of people out there that are not going to give that to you, and it's not you. It's that person and their belief system. That is why they're not able to give that validation to you, not because you haven't experienced that or don't deserve to have that validation. It's because that person doesn't have the capacity or the understanding or the experience to be able to offer that to you.

ANNETTE: And they may be willfully ignorant.

NATALIE: Right. That's true. For sure.

ANNETTE: This kind of leads us into the double abuse that happens, that so often when somebody who's experiencing this kind of harm finally finds the courage to speak up and/or reach out for help, and instead of being believed... And they might be believed, but... So double abuse has several different ways that it can manifest. It can be that they're not believed, it can be that they're criticized.

And what happened to me is the male leader of my couple's Bible study group that we had been part of for fourteen years told me that if I did not reenter couple's therapy within ninety days, I would never be invited back to the group again. And we had traveled the world together, broken bread hundreds of times, and I stepped out of couple's therapy because I could tell how harmful and destructive it was. And I was so sick from autoimmune illnesses from my trauma, I had to just take care of myself. I was so depleted and skinny and just really this... I was a hot mess.

And he imposed this ultimatum — so that's another form of double abuse — so impose ultimatums. Or they'll say, "If you don't stay, I can't talk to you anymore," or "If you don't leave, I can't talk to you anymore," or "Have you tried this?" They start giving them instructions. "Have you tried that? Have you tried this? I bet..." as though there's anything the victim can do when they've already tried everything under the sun. Or they may ask them pointed and leading questions like an interrogating form and interrupt the victim's flow of conversation.

All of these things are double abuse. They're highly traumatic. When a victim's trying to share what they're experiencing, they need a safe amount of space and safety and time to be able to process out loud what they're experiencing with someone who's not going to be interrupting them, redirecting them, interrogating, criticizing, and all the other things that they so often do. Even the seemingly benign expression of apathy can be really traumatizing for a victim.

NATALIE: Can I just jump in and say something here?

ANNETTE: Yes.

NATALIE: One of the most traumatic things that kept happening over and over to me is when I would write an email to someone, because I had different people that were in my church at one point that were trying to help me and were offering supports in different ways. And so I was being held accountable by them and my husband was and all that. So I would send them an email and they just wouldn't respond. I felt so stupid, for one thing. I felt like, "Well, did I write something dumb that it was just... Maybe I offended them." And I would comb through it to figure out what I might have said that would've offended them, and maybe they didn't like me anymore and wouldn't help me anymore if I offended them.

And a couple times I would ask them in person what happened, and they would tell me they were. They would get offended by little tiny things in there, mainly, I think, bringing their own insecurities into the situation or projecting their own life experiences or their own... People would get in the way of themselves of being able to just look at... And none of these people... Well, I shouldn't say that. There were a couple of licensed therapists, but most of these people were just elders, women volunteers — just people who had zero training. In fact, the men who were helping me were all patriarchal kind of types and also had problems in their own marriages, interestingly enough. I didn't really connect any of those dots at the time until I got out. And then I was like, "Wait a minute. That was a cesspool of problematic problems that I was in the middle of," and I'm not the only one. I've heard this story. My story is basically just a cookie cutter story. I've heard it over and over and over again.

ANNETTE: So have I.

NATALIE: Yeah. But the ghosting you with the emails or even just not calling you back or whatever. Yeah. I totally relate to that.

ANNETTE: One couple stood up for me, but the majority of the women in the Bible study said that I had disparaged my husband, and so they weren't going to talk to me anymore. I did not comply and go back to couple's therapy. They never picked up the phone and called me again. Never. I never heard of them again. They've never called me.

NATALIE: So you were condemned for pointing out a problem, but then it's perfectly fine for them to just cut you off and never talk to you again. That's totally fine. That's

Christian.

ANNETTE: I mean, when you think about it, we talk about silencing victims. I mean, they literally silenced me. "If you talk about this, we will not talk to you."

NATALIE: Yep. Oh my gosh. That is so abusive. So abusive on every level.

ANNETTE: And double abuse is... I want to mention this because while yes, it's important for victims to get to a place that they can not be so affected by what other people say or think or believe, but if they're still in a state of confusion and they've reached out with all their vulnerability to someone who they had a reasonable expectation would be a safe person, someone who would love them and care for them, when the opposite occurs, it actually exacerbates their trauma.

And so many people with PTSD after double abuse develop complex-PTSD. And Dr. Judith Herman talks about how there's a loss of identity. And so if you think about it, when you're doubly abused, the apathy that you received — and when you asked them about it, they said they were offended — they're mischaracterizing you. And you were excommunicated from your church. You're totally mischaracterized. So the identity that you thought you had securely attached to people who you thought loved you in your church community are now redefining you and saying that your identity as you know it does not exist. And so this loss of identity is what causes complex post-traumatic stress.

It leads the person to a sense of hopelessness and despair, and it's such a devastating and sad experience for someone to go through, and it's why I like to write about it a lot and it's why I felt that this phenomenon had to have a name. And so I trademarked the term "double abuse" because I've heard so many other descriptions like "victim blaming," but that doesn't cover everything, or "secondary abuse," which has multiple meanings. And I just felt like this thing that could be apathy or could be ultimatums, could be criticism or not believing, silencing — whatever it is it, is so traumatizing. And victims need to be aware of this so that they can guard their hearts and really anticipate what potentially could happen so they can protect themselves from developing complex post-traumatic stress by just being aware. It had to have a name if we were going to stop it or raise awareness about it.

NATALIE: Oh yeah. I love the name. You know what it really is? It's a murder of sorts, because you are being annihilated. It's almost like if you were killed by someone and then you had to live around them or be around them knowing that they had killed you, that they hated you that much or had that kind of lack of regard for your humanity that

you deserved to be annihilated in that way. And then that it's someone that you trusted, loved, broke bread with, had meals with, were in a small group together with for years and years and years — there are no words to describe the pain that that causes in people's lives.

ANNETTE: It completely eliminates who you thought you were and your standing in the community. And then, in my situation, they went out and gossiped to other people too and told them not to talk to me. "Don't talk to her, because we want to drive her back into couple's therapy."

NATALIE: How can people call themselves Christians? I want to know. How can you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ, who literally laid down His life for all of the marginalized, hurting, lonely, sorrowful, oppressed peoples? How can you call yourself a follower of Him and do this kind of... This is totally satanic. It's satanic, what this is.

ANNETTE: It is. Looking back, I can clearly see now how patriarchal all those marriages were in that couple's group and how women didn't have a voice, and they were just as much the enforcers as the men were.

NATALIE: Yep. Because they've all been programmed with that thinking.

ANNETTE: They've all been programmed. That's the system, and I'm so thankful to be out of that and to be in another Bible study where everybody is willing to be transparent and supportive. There's no judgment. Because there should be no condemnation in our faith circles. It's okay to be compassionately confronted about something, giving you the space to respond, but whenever it leads into condemnation, it is not of God. It is definitely a more satanic driving force behind it.

NATALIE: Yep. Okay, so let's shift our focus back to the survivor. There are two questions here, but they kind of are related. What can survivors or victims do to avoid reacting in those ways that they might later regret? And then I think this also goes along with the idea of how would you advise women to help them avoid that double abuse? So how can we basically defend ourselves against these common traps that we find ourselves in when we're in this dynamic around us?

ANNETTE: Well, first I would say to avoid reactive abuse, it's so critical... I love the work that you're doing walking victims through in your Flying Free and Flying Higher programs — really walking them through the healing process where they can begin to love themselves again and not believe the negative messaging that either came from their family of origin or from their abusive spouse or from others.

It could be their microculture, their neighborhood, like your church group that you were in or the church group that I was in — these microcultures where there's negative messaging about yourself. And it's getting to a place where they can clearly articulate what has been happening to them and realize they play no part in it — that they're dealing with a person who has an entirely different worldview about how relationships should operate, and separate themselves from this earnest desire to seek attachment and connection with the person who's harming them.

NATALIE: Yes. Oh gosh — that's hard, though.

ANNETTE: If they can get to a place where they can emotionally detach or even better, physically separate so they can have some space to heal, but if they can't physically separate... Emotionally detaching never worked for me, but I also didn't have the clarity that I gained later. But if they can get to a place where they can just recognize the behaviors and instead of reacting to them say, "Well, that's blame shifting. That's false accusation. That's a deflection. That's lying," and just label them in their mind — "I'm not going to respond." Or they can choose to say, "You're lying," or "You're just blame shifting." They can call out those behaviors but not actually engage in this abusive dynamic. That is the first way to protect themselves from doing or saying things that maybe will get them in trouble or that's going to make them feel shame for the way they reacted.

There's fight, flight, freeze, and appease reactions. I had used the flight, I'd used the freeze, I had used the appease a thousand times involuntarily in me, and then I came to a point where my reaction was more to fight back. And I remember one time slapping my husband across the face after a barrage of covert behaviors. And I guess if the police had been called, I would've been the one arrested, but it would've been not an accurate depiction of what was actually going on. I remember calling him jerk or an effing jerk, and then I felt so bad that I name-called. He wasn't a name-caller — he was a covert abuser. But I would feel like I was responsible.

And they need to get to a place where they understand reactive abuse, reactive defense — my better name — is not their fault, identify what they're experiencing so they can respond rather than react, and give themselves a lot of grace. They are traumatized. Trauma is real and it's not your fault, and abuse is a choice that your spouse is choosing. Nothing you can say or do can stop that. That is their choice. It is not your fault. And give yourself that grace and start working on strengthening your clarity. I think by really becoming more clear about their situation is the best way to avoid reactive abuse.

So in double abuse, I think it's just so important that it's the same thing that a child would do. A child is not just going to blurt out and tell you, "Uncle or aunt so-and-so molested me." They're going to start with something little like, "I don't like uncle so-and-so," or "I don't like auntie so-and-so." And so often as parents we'll say, "Well, all you have to do is give them a hug at the holidays and you can sit at the other end of the table." We don't sit down and say, "Well, why don't you like..." You know?

And I think that a victim should just tell a little bit of their story to test the waters if the person is going to be safe. Don't blurt out everything. You might have a best friend you've had for twenty-five years and then you realize they're really more of a superficial friend because you may have never really come to discuss things that require a certain emotional IQ to understand and respond compassionately. So you need to size up who you're actually dealing with and what knowledge they have.

Or if you go to a therapist, I shopped for thirteen therapists before I selected one. I kept asking certain questions, and we have a blog that talks about how to interview a therapist. But they kept coming back with the wrong answer, that I knew they really weren't trained and wouldn't be able to help me without retraumatizing me. So it's perfectly okay to ask questions and to test the waters and to choose somebody who's really going to be truly a safe person for them, and to not under any circumstances risk communicating with someone who's not safe unless, let's say law enforcement has been called and you have to communicate, to be as articulate and calm as possible to explain, "I have PTSD, and so give me just a minute to collect my thoughts." Take a time out, prepare your answer.

So often we just feel so on the defensive. We're so used to self-loathing, being self-critical, and taking on all this responsibility. We need to get to a place of empowerment and self-advocacy, and so give yourself some grace and recognize that is your role. You don't have to take on guilt or shame that somebody may be saying to you. It's important to articulate what's actually happening from as calm a place as you can. And this comes up — it makes me so sad — in courtrooms where the abuser will just throw out all kinds of chaotic statements and false accusations that hijack the process. And then she has to, without being traumatized, answer these things.

So it's so critical to learn to not react, and it's so hard — like I said, it's involuntary. But you can get to the place where you have enough clarity to be able to control some of your responses. Let's say you have a clue — you're going to look at the palm of your hand. You're going to count your fingers, you're going to look at all ten fingers, you're going to count them. Or you're going to find a focal point in the room and you're going to give yourself ten seconds to do some deep breathing. Do something to recognize,

"I'm in a trauma state. I need to get back to a place where I can respond instead of react." And it's so hard. I'm not trying to make this sound easy. But the more clarity and self-love that she's able to obtain about her situation and the love for herself, the more she'll be able to control her responses and choose wise people.

NATALIE: Yes, yes. That's the crux of what I'm trying to help the women with in the programs, is to get to that place where they have that clarity about themselves. Because the abusers and their abusive system that they've been swimming in has a mind-mapped their view of that victim onto her, where she thinks now that she is that person that they're projecting onto her.

ANNETTE: So sad.

NATALIE: And it's finding herself again. And we give those people credibility. We give them credibility. So we have to take away their credibility in our own minds, give ourselves credibility, and then find out, "Who am I really?" and then standing in that reality — that's going to help us to calm down and see ourselves as... When you can see everything the way it really is, it's like going from an upside down world. When you can get everything upside right, that's when you can actually ratchet down... Trust me, I was a freaked out person. I didn't ever slap my husband, but I threw a teacup.... I didn't throw it at him. I threw it at a wall, and I did it twice in my marriage. And they were really precious teacups. I collected them.

ANNETTE: Oh, darn.

NATALIE: I know, but I think I was trying to show him, "This is how serious I am that you need to hear what I'm trying to tell you. You need to stop doing this to me. I am going to actually take one of my precious teacups and smash it against the wall for emphasis." But yeah, so much shame in that. And of course he would bring that up all the time, how abusive I was that I threw a teacup against the wall and whatever. Anyway, I'm laughing at it now, but at the time it was pretty horrific. But okay, we'll close out here. There is definitely going to be a lot of links in this one. Do you have a class or something that you're offering right around the time of this podcast, which is mid-March?

ANNETTE: Yeah, so at The M3ND Project we operate different cohorts where sometimes we focus on survivors — victims or survivors — and other times the emphasis is on the responders. And then we have another class that's for therapists where they can receive continuing education units, and I teach that class with Dr. David Hawkins. So they can come to our website and see the survivor cohort. And what it is is

we take you through a curriculum, you will be so informed, and there's a live session with me once a week for a couple of hours where we go deeper into the topic and process through what the written curriculum said. So we have the survivor, the responder, and for therapists who want continuing education units. Anybody can take the continuing education unit class. They just wouldn't receive continuing education units.

NATALIE: Right, right. I know we do have people who are in those people-helper roles. There are a lot of therapists and counselors that listen to this podcast, so they would be interested in all of this too. So I'm just curious for the survivors out there, what is your main focus in that particular class?

ANNETTE: So what we don't do that you do so well is you take significant time to walk them through the healing process, because it takes a lot of time to reprogram yourself. What we do is we provide clarity about a lot of different issues, so we go into each abusive behavior and tactic, their responses. We talk a lot about the mindset of an abuser so they can really understand how they are dealing with someone in a separate reality. They're never going to be empathic or respond in ways that the victim would respond in a healing and securely attached manner. But we found that it really helps to dissect that and explain why so.

And we provide a lot of tools that help victims advocate for themselves and just understand the broader issue and walk them to the place where they can love themselves again and recognize that the journey that they need to embark on next is one where they get out of that self-love deficit disorder and into one where they really love themselves the way Jesus loves them — that it doesn't require other people to speak into them. So it's very comprehensive.

NATALIE: It sounds amazing. I know for me, when I was in the middle of trying to figure it all out, and even when I was starting to realize, "I think I'm in an abusive relationship," I didn't want to. I remember actually thinking, "I do not want to believe that. Please God, don't let that be what's really going on here." And yet part of me wanted it to be what was going on just because then it would provide an answer. It would be a relief to know what all of this was about, what I had been experiencing for over two decades.

But I needed to hear the same things explained to me in lots of different ways. And that's why I read lots of different books from lots of different authors, and even as an advocate who's actually teaching people now I take trainings. I'm going to come and take one of your trainings, just because every person has a way of communicating the truth and reframing it in a way that sheds more light on it, more light on what it is that

we're grappling with here.

ANNETTE: Especially when you're so unsuspecting that you're dealing with someone who has an entirely different view of the world. It's the last thing anyone would ever suspect. We don't talk about that. So we're blindsided by that reality. And we all need to get to that place where we finally do understand that. That's a new kind of trauma, because now you have to know, "Shoot, what am I going to do now that I have this information? I have some serious decisions to make for my life, because what I've been doing isn't working. It's never going to work." And that's a hard reality. It's a hard place. But it's a more accurate stress response than the trauma from confusion — from prolonged states of confusion. At least they have clarity of what it is.

Before we go, Natalie, I wanted to mention something about double abuse that I forgot to mention. And I think it's important, because there's a book that is out there by Belleruth Naparstek. It's called "Invisible Heroes," where there was a meta-analysis done of seventy different studies of war veterans, and the study was to determine who developed PTSD and who didn't develop PTSD. And several of these war veteran groups never developed PTSD even though they had the same medical illnesses and tragedy and trauma in the situation.

And what this meta-analysis showed was that the individuals post-trauma social support was more of a predictor of whether they were going to develop trauma than their pre-trauma social support. So if a victim can get good social support, someone really safe — maybe they have to go to a different church and completely disassociate with the last one if they think they'll experience trauma at that church — that post-trauma support is so powerful. They found that in these groups, these war veteran groups that didn't develop trauma, they were praised, they were respected. In many cases, they were even exalted as heroes. And so there was no shame.

And our Vietnam War veterans, for example, were called "baby killers," and there was this outrage in society against war veterans who fought in the Vietnam War. They were even changing as they were being discharged, they were changing their uniforms in the airport so they wouldn't be seen as a service person. And so many Vietnam War veterans have complex post-traumatic stress, because here they had been in this situation serving their country and having so much trauma in that experience, but then they were blamed.

So their identity, just like your identity at your church, just like mine in my Bible study — which seems so much smaller than what they went through — but their complete identity was they were mischaracterized and they lost their sense of identity. They lost

their support. They lost their community. And so I just thought that by mentioning something a little bit out of context, it might help people understand more how imperative it is to have social support and to really guard yourself against those that aren't going to provide that for you.

NATALIE: Yeah. That reminds me of a quote from Peter Levine. He said, "Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness." And that's exactly what you just described.

ANNETTE: That's a fantastic quote.

NATALIE: Yeah. I use that quote all the time now, because it perfectly describes what these kinds of women are actually experiencing in their relationships. They are being gaslit into believing that their experience is the opposite of what it actually is — that they are actually the bad person, bad Christian woman, for not submitting, for not being a good girl. And they're actually a victim of abuse, not just in their home, but they're a victim of abuse in their church, too, in many cases.

ANNETTE: I remember feeling, "I must not be lovable. Something must be intrinsically wrong with me, or I don't know how to articulate my argument or my points clearly. There must be something I didn't learn about communication." I just felt something was wrong with me. "That's why I'm experiencing this." And then when other people basically tell you something's wrong with you, then it's easy to believe that. So I really admire the work that you do, Natalie, to bring these individuals who have been so harmed through the process of really finding themselves again and finding their self-worth. It's so important.

NATALIE: Well, and I think, too, it's important for people to see that you can take... Both Annette and I have been through this, and every single one of you that's listening, there's a butterfly there. There's an amazing human being that has not realized your full potential and your full development of who you could be because someone's got you in a cage. Someone's got a rock over you and won't let you get out, won't let you get up. But no — there's nothing wrong with you. You are just in a situation right now, and helping you get free is Annette's passion and my passion, and there's a growing ground swell of people — therapists, other advocates, leaders — who are wanting to also help you get free.

ANNETTE: Yeah, to validate you and set you free. And hopefully they'll get to a point at some point like I am now where I can say, "Gosh, it was the worst thing I ever went through in my life," but now I can look at it and say, "It's the best thing that ever

happened to me." My emotional IQ has grown exponentially. I know myself. I used to be a people pleaser and I was more superficial, so I was more vulnerable to being overpowered by others. And now I really have this internal confidence that doesn't need to be overbearing, but I just truly know who I am and I know that God loves me. And yes, I'm imperfect and I have faults, but those don't overwhelm me with shame. It's just something to work on, unlike how I was mischaracterized and believed the lies in the past. So you can get to that place, and that's my hope and wish for all of your listeners.

NATALIE: So I have a question for you. Do you know what your Myers-Briggs letters are by any chance?

ANNETTE: I don't. I'm sorry.

NATALIE: Okay, that's okay. I was just curious. You should go take the Myers-Briggs test and just see what your letters are.

ANNETTE: Okay, all right.

NATALIE: I bet we're pretty close. I bet we'd fall right along the same letters.

ANNETTE: All right, I'll take it. Now you've given me a challenge.

NATALIE: I love Myers-Briggs. There's the Enneagram also, which for some reason I've just never been able to get into that one. But I love Myers-Briggs, and I've learned so much about myself and about my kids, even. I've had some of my kids do it, my older kids. And it's been fascinating just to learn about their personalities. That is part of the journey, though, is kind of learning. Once you come alive and realize, "Oh, they didn't really kill me. I'm actually alive. I actually have a personality. I can have a meaningful life," it's fun to just explore who you are and how God wired you. And you find out that there are things about us that did actually contribute to hooking us into, or being easy prey, maybe, for that hook.

ANNETTE: Vulnerable to that. Yes.

NATALIE: But also I like to think of the phoenix rising out of the fire. We're also being a phoenix and being able to come out of that fire and be transformed. And I think a lot of survivors, it's important for us to get to know who we are.

ANNETTE: Oh, it's so important. Thank you for mentioning that. And there's a beautiful

butterfly in there, as you said. They just need to find it.

NATALIE: Well, thanks, Annette, for being with us. This was a great conversation and I appreciate your time. And thank you so much to everyone who is listening, and until next time, fly free.