

UNRAVELING PURITY CULTURE'S EFFECTS ON YOUR MARRIAGE: INTERVIEW WITH DR. CAMDEN MORGANTE

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 221 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we are going to have a conversation about purity culture with Dr. Camden Morgante. Dr. Camden is a licensed clinical psychologist and former college professor. She writes and speaks about relationships, sexuality, and faith, and she's a regular contributor to Mutuality, which is a blog published by Christians for Biblical Equality. She's currently writing a book on the myths of purity culture, and she also provides coaching services for purity culture recovery, egalitarianism, and faith reconstruction. So welcome, Dr. Camden!

DR. CAMDEN: Thank you, Natalie. Thanks for having me.

NATALIE: So I'm really curious: Before we get into some of our questions about purity culture, I'm wondering if you can tell us why this subject in particular is a passion for you personally.

DR. CAMDEN: It's a passion for me personally because this is what I grew up with. I'm thirty-six now, and purity culture was at its height in the late 90s and early 2000s, which is when I was a teenager. And I read all the books like "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" and I had a purity ring and made a "True Love Waits" pledge and really tried to abide by the rules, and just saw that it did not work out the way that purity culture promised me it would. So then that really affected my faith. I saw myself go through a faith deconstruction in my twenties largely because of the effects of purity culture. I was single much longer than I expected to be, and it just really affected me emotionally.

And so after getting married — I was almost thirty when I got married — and then I had become a psychologist, and then I started seeing how this is really negatively affecting people. I used to be a huge proponent of it, of purity culture, really big believer in it, and now I can still believe in the biblical morals or the views on sexuality but with a much more holistic view and much more expansive view of how this can be harmful, too. So just seeing how it harmed myself and my friends and my clients in therapy really helped me to realize that it wasn't all good.

NATALIE: Okay, so I can't wait to get into this conversation, because this is something that I was also raised in and then raised children in myself. I'm twice as old as you. No,

not twice as old as you. I'm twenty years older than you. So I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about, first of all, what is "purity culture" for people who maybe don't know what that term is, and then secondly, you said it impacts women and you've seen that in the therapy room. In what ways are you seeing it impact people long-term?

DR. CAMDEN: So purity culture, there's not one clear definition of it, but my definition of it is that it was this largely evangelical movement in the 90s and 2000s that attempted to persuade young people to abstain from sex before marriage through all of these extra, outside-of-the-Bible beliefs and teachings and through cultural movements like pledges and rings and purity rallies. And they had displays of purity pledge cards on the Washington DC Mall and a big rally in DC for that and father/daughter purity balls. And there was just a lot of extra stuff that went along with it because it's a countercultural belief or practice to abstain from sex until marriage. And so in an effort to try to convince young people to do that, purity culture offered a lot of false promises, a lot of myths that I now talk about, and just a lot of shame-based and fear-based teachings.

So the way that I see that affecting people now in my therapy practice is really in three main areas, and these are the areas that I have focused my work on: faith, sexuality, and relationships. So people have a lot of spiritual disillusionment, which can lead to faith deconstruction like I've gone through. Just a lot of doubts in their faith of, "I was promised this fairytale spouse and this fairytale marriage, and it has not turned out that way. Where's my reward for following the rules?" And that was kind of how I felt being single for much longer than I expected. I thought I was going to meet someone, fall in love in college. And I did, and I thought I was going to marry him and that by following the rules, I was guaranteeing a good outcome for myself. And then we broke up after three years of dating and I was just devastated. And it not only just devastated me emotionally because I was in love and thought I was going to be with him, but also my faith — it devastated my faith. So that is the first area. And then I said sexuality.

NATALIE: Can I just interrupt you really quick? Tell me how it impacted your faith.

DR. CAMDEN: Well, just the disillusionment of, "Where is the reward for following the rules?" Purity culture has been called the sexual prosperity gospel. So you've heard of the prosperity gospel, probably, which is, "Oh, give money to the church, tithe, serve God, and you'll have health, wealth, and happiness." The sexual prosperity gospel is, "Follow the rules by staying pure, avoiding casual dating, maintaining these strict emotional and physical boundaries. Do A, B, and C and D. Tons of rules. Follow all of them," (and I did), "and then you will be spared from emotional heartbreak," (which I was not). "You will have an early and happy marriage. You won't get your heart broken,

you won't have to deal with some of the physical consequences of early sexual activity." But just this, "What's the point of following the rules if I'm not going to get the reward that I was promised?" That's how I felt.

NATALIE: So following the rules was tied into, "I'm being a good Christian and God is approving of me and He cares about me. He's going to take care of me and bless me if I walk in His ways."

DR. CAMDEN: Yes, exactly. So I call part of this "The Fairytale Myth," that God will give me a fairytale marriage if I stay pure, but what you're referring to, I call "The Spiritual Barometer Myth," that you're a better Christian and you're more spiritually mature if you follow the rules and stay pure and are abstinent. So I totally believed that. And that led to a lot of pride, really ugly pride in me, and jealousy when I saw friends who weren't following the rules but who were getting married. So a lot of jealousy and a lot of anger towards God, because again, it was like, "Well, I'm being a good Christian. Look at all that I'm doing for You, and where's my reward?" So a very selfish and self-serving attitude.

NATALIE: That's fascinating. I remember I used to think the same thing. I used to look at people who got married who had had premarital sex, and their marriages and their families were really healthy. And it really had nothing to do with whether or not they had sex before marriage. But still, I remember thinking, "Man, I tried to follow all the rules. It looks like they are the ones being blessed and they broke the rules. So I don't understand how it all fits together." Yeah, I can totally see that. Okay, so let's see. You said there were three things. One was in the area of faith, and then what was the next one?

DR. CAMDEN: Sexuality. So people who grow up in purity culture usually lack appropriate sex education. They go into marriage with what I call "The Flipped Switch Myth," this idea that, "Once I'm married, I'm going to flip a switch and sex is going to go from sinful, bad, and dirty and off-limits to suddenly pleasurable, fun, holy, pure, this good thing, especially pleasurable for my husband. And we don't need any preparation or any education to get us there." And as a psychologist, I know that that's not true. I know that sex takes a lot of work, communication between the couple, and preparation to have a good sex life. It doesn't happen automatically.

So people often struggle with sexual shame even after they're married. A lot of my clients say, "It still feels dirty, even though I know it's not. My body still feels like this is wrong." I hear a lot of anxiety about sex and negative beliefs about sex, like, "Well, it's only for him. It's for his pleasure, not for mine. And my needs don't really matter." And

then sexual pain — it can lead to an increase in vaginismus, which is a sexual pain disorder for women that can make intercourse either extremely painful or even impossible because there's so much anxiety and tension around sex that the vaginal muscles are tensing up and making intercourse really painful or impossible. So it does not lead to an automatically great sex life just because you waited.

NATALIE: Right, okay. And then what's the third one?

DR. CAMDEN: The third area is relationships. So I see this affecting people's relationship with the opposite sex, so women's relationship with men, especially their husband. Again, thinking like, "Sex is just for him. That's all he thinks about. That's all he wants. I have to give him sex or else he'll cheat or look at porn." These are all beliefs that we actually heard in sermons and in Christian books from the purity culture era and sometimes even now. That's still around. So it affects the marriage relationship.

It can even affect platonic friendships with the opposite sex. I've had coaching clients who just haven't been able to have healthy interactions with men because they think, "Well, he's just going to sexually objectify me. He's not safe to be around. I might be leading him on or giving him the wrong idea." There's so much warped teachings about men, so it affects the way they feel around men. And then it also affects our relationship with ourselves, like not being comfortable in our own body and feeling a lot of body image shame, feeling disconnected from our bodies. And then sometimes I even see an increase in depression and anxiety from purity culture, and especially if that was paired with these very black and white religious beliefs, too.

NATALIE: This is a lot. This is huge in people's lives.

DR. CAMDEN: Yeah, it's a lot to unpack and it affects so many areas of someone's life, too. Sometimes my coaching clients will say, "I mean, I don't want to invest that much time or money into my sex life. It's not that important." But it's really more than that. It's more than just your sex life with your husband. It's how you feel about yourself as a sexual being, how you feel about your relationship with God. It's just so much more.

NATALIE: Yes. Okay, so how would you talk about the purity culture and patriarchy? How do those two things intersect?

DR. CAMDEN: Yeah, those two go hand-in-hand. I think patriarchy is the foundation of purity culture. I think that many of the people who gave these purity culture teachings had good intentions of probably wanting young people to avoid some of the consequences of early sexual activity, so I do give them that credit that they had good

intentions, but some probably didn't. And a lot of that, I think, is rooted in patriarchy and wanting to control and subdue women's sexuality. And that's been done for centuries in various different ways, that women's sexuality has been controlled, and this was one area of doing that, because virginity was much more emphasized as a virtue for women than men.

Men of my generation will say they heard purity culture too. It affected them too. And so I love hearing from them and just like learning how we got slightly different messages or how it affected us in slightly different ways. But the message of, "Your virginity is tied into your virtue or your desirability as a mate and even as a Christian" — that was much more given to girls than to boys, that message.

NATALIE: What are some of the things that the guys have said to you?

DR. CAMDEN: There's actually a book coming out, I think in April, called "Non-Toxic Masculinity," written by Zachary Wagner, and I interviewed him on my Instagram. And it's the male perspective on purity culture, and it's a great book. I got to read it early and really love what he shares, because he says that purity culture dehumanized women's bodies and dehumanized men's minds, that their minds were like, "They couldn't not think about sex. They couldn't see a woman without undressing her in their mind. They're going to want sex all the time. And then once you're married, your wife is going to give you sex all the time, and that's your outlet for these urges that you can't control." So it's a really good read, really well-written, and really fascinating to look at the male perspective and then see how that affects the male/female relationships, then.

NATALIE: Yeah. We were talking before the podcast started about how so many marriage books actually give you instructions on how to have an emotionally and spiritually abusive marriage. So they're not how to have a Christian marriage. They call it "Christian," but really, these are handbooks for emotional and spiritual abuse to foster their instructions for the women, how the women are supposed to think and feel or not, and then instructions for the men. It kind of gives them sort of an entitlement mentality. But also, I'm really excited about that book for guys. Do you think guys will read it?

DR. CAMDEN: I hope so. I hope that women will read it to understand the men in their life more and to understand the flip side of, "If it affected men this way, here's how it then affected me and vice versa." It just really helps you understand the dynamics. But yeah, I do hope men will read it, and it really calls you to a more godly view of men's sexuality and that men's sexuality is not a sinful thing. It's a God-given gift. So it is a

really good book.

NATALIE: Okay, so I'm curious, because I know what people are going to be thinking if they're anything like me. They're going to be thinking, "Okay, if we're not going to teach purity culture, we see that that's over the top and it's creating harm," (and I want to get into more of the trauma aspect of it) "but what is the alternative, then?" I've had a couple of kids go swing the opposite... I had nine children, so I had a couple of kids swing the opposite direction and shack up with whoever they want to. And I'm just like, "Wait a minute. I didn't raise you to think that it was okay just to..." I'm talking about casual sleeping.... It's like, instead of going out on a date, you go and hook up.

DR. CAMDEN: Yeah. I think that's what I am seeing in the purity culture books now. The books critiquing purity culture that are coming out now have swung the opposite direction to something that, to me, is just as black and white as purity culture was. And now they're saying all we need is an ethic of consent. "As long as there's consent, as long as you're not harming the other person or yourself, then anything goes." And I'm, as you read in my bio, I'm working on writing a book on healing from the myths of purity culture. And in it I still say that I, and just myself, personally, still believe in premarital abstinence for Christians. I still think that is what God asks of followers of Jesus. So I think an ethic of consent is just not enough. That's not a robust enough sexual ethic for a devoted Christian, I believe.

So I believe we have to have more nuanced reasons that we give our kids if we're going to teach them the value of waiting until marriage. And those are much more nuanced conversations and a lot harder than just giving these black and white, "You'll get rewards" or "You'll be damaged goods if you have sex" — like the rewards and punishment kind of model. So it is harder to have more nuanced conversations, but ultimately it's going to lead them to greater critical thinking and more internalization of these values rather than doing it for extrinsic reward or approval.

So that is what I hope to strive for with my kids, is that they will think about faith more critically. And this is just one part of our beliefs, our values, our morals that we want to teach our kids. It's not the totality of their identity as a Christian. And that's really how it seemed when I was growing up, that your virginity is your whole spirituality.

NATALIE: Yeah. Well, and I think a missing piece in purity culture was just how you value yourself. I mean, it also went along with the whole Christian milieu of "We don't belong to ourselves." They kind of teach us to disconnect from ourselves. "We are selfish, our bodies are bad," all of that. Whereas I feel like when you talk about nuanced conversations, our bodies are actually good, we actually are wise, God, He's resourced

us, and we need to learn how to love and care for ourselves and our own inner wisdom rather than dismiss it. And if we are truly loving ourselves and invested in our own personal growth and in caring for our bodies, then we're going to be a little more careful about what we do with those bodies and when we do it, right?

When you were talking about all those three different areas, and it felt so heavy to me just to think about all these areas where we've been damaged as far as our thinking, because we've been fed a bunch of lies and gaslit and manipulated, really. So this is going to cause trauma. So can you talk to that point a little bit?

DR. CAMDEN: I think some people coming out of this faith background experience religious trauma, where anything of a religious nature can be triggering to them, to their bodies. When you were talking about the view that our bodies are bad and sinful and we should kind of squash any desires, I hear a lot of the verse of, "The heart is wicked and deceitful." I hear that. And then how I see that in my practice is that there's a complete divorce between mind and body in my clients. Even when they'll say, "Well, I know in my mind that sex is supposed to be for me and for my husband. It's not just for him, but yet my body doesn't know it," or "I know that sex is not dirty anymore now that I'm married, but my body doesn't respond that way." So the very thing we were taught to do growing up of divorcing our mind and body continues and gets people into trouble once they're married that they're not able to enjoy sex or they're not able to even really be connected to their own bodies and sexuality. And they don't trust their emotions or heart, either.

So my overarching goal in my coaching practice for purity culture recovery is helping people get their mind, body, and heart aligned so that your beliefs, your actions, and your emotions all line up. And when you can experience that integration, that alignment, that takes away the trauma symptoms and the trauma response in the body. When the body can experience sex as good and safe within the context of a safe marriage and a mutual, loving marriage, then people can really make the belief shift, the mind shift, rather than just stating the belief but the body doesn't catch up. Does that make sense?

NATALIE: Yeah, it makes total sense. You mentioned that it can lead to emotional and spiritual abuse. Can you tell us, what's the connection?

DR. CAMDEN: I think the connection is through patriarchy like we were talking about. I think because there's so many patriarchal gender roles in purity culture of things like we've talked about, like, "Your husband is always going to think about sex, always going to want sex — you have to give it to him, or he may look at porn. It's your fault then if

he does," just all of that is abusive — that's spiritually abusive. And then that can be emotionally abusive because women are not paying attention to their own desires and they never feel like they can say "no."

So sometimes I have my clients as an experiment — again, in a healthy marriage with a loving and supportive spouse — say "no" to sex in a gracious way and experience that as okay and safe. And that's really powerful for them to be able to see, "I'm allowed to say 'no.'" And then also another homework exercise might be to initiate sex when you want it, and experience that as good and safe and that's acceptable. So just going against those really false teachings can break down some of the effects of that emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Well, and something that I've run into myself in talking with people and even in my own life is that not all men are horn-dogs. Some men just don't have a high sex drive. And then I feel like I came into marriage thinking that they were going to, and then they didn't. And then I was like, "What's wrong? What's wrong with him? What's wrong with me? Am I not desirable?" I've heard that many, many times from women too.

DR. CAMDEN: I've heard that too. "He must not be attracted to me because he doesn't want sex all the time." But then I also see where men, sometimes that's the only way they know how to connect because it emphasized so much in church, and Christian culture was like, "Your men are hypersexual," and so that's the only way they really know how to feel close to their wife. And so some of the work that I do is helping them expand their definition of intimacy, see how you can feel close through emotional intimacy and through spiritual intimacy, through conversations and time together and just doing activities together — things like that so it's not just so focused on just sex. That's only one way to connect and feel intimate.

NATALIE: Yeah, I love that. So what are some ways, while we're wrapping this up, that women could begin to find healing from purity culture?

DR. CAMDEN: Start with recognizing what the myths are that you have been believing and start to recognize how those are affecting you. That's one of the first exercises I have my coaching clients do is, "Write down the false belief and then write down how it's affecting you. How do you notice that showing up? And then you might start deconstructing that belief by looking at what are the facts? What's the evidence that this is true and what's the evidence that this is false?" So looking at breaking that down and seeing the lies that made up that belief.

And then we work on identifying, "How can you act opposite to that false belief?" So those would be some of the things I told you, like, "Experience saying 'no' to sex with your husband. Experience that as safe. You're acting opposite to that belief that, 'I'm not allowed to say "no."' Or have a sexual intimacy experience with your husband where it is focused on you and experience that is good and as appropriate at times." So just living out those new beliefs in your behavior and your actions is really what helps to make the total change.

NATALIE: Now, you talk about the myths, and I went on your website and you have a quiz that women can take... And men can take it too, right?

DR. CAMDEN: Of course!

NATALIE: Do you work with both men and women?

DR. CAMDEN: I work with men usually just in the context of their marriage and women individually. But yeah, definitely men follow me on social media or have taken the quiz, too.

NATALIE: Okay. So why don't you tell them about the quiz?

DR. CAMDEN: Okay. It's called, "Which Purity Culture Myth Affects You?" And so I've named and identified five myths we talked about — I think most of them — in our conversation. One is called "The Damaged Goods Myth," and I referenced that. And then one is called "The Gatekeeper's Myth," that women are the gatekeepers of sexuality — sexual boundaries before marriage and constantly giving sex after marriage. So you can go on and answer twenty-five questions — if you agree, if you disagree, or if you're neutral — and then you'll see a breakdown of your scores for each of the myths to see, the higher your score is, the more you still believe that myth. And that just, again, helps start creating that awareness of, "I still have these beliefs. They're still hanging around even ten, twenty, thirty years after I grew up in purity culture. And maybe there's still some work here I can do to see how this is affecting me, and what belief I want to put in its place."

NATALIE: Yes. So good. And then if you take the quiz, you can, which I just did this morning, by the way. And I took it as if I was back in my early wife days when I was just starting to have children and was really, deeply embedded in purity culture. And I scored a ten on everything. So that's where I'm coming out of now. I didn't take it again. I've heard that some people can take it twice and you can take it from your different perspectives. So I'm going to take it again now when we get off here, because I'm

curious to know where I would fall now on my beliefs.

But when you take the quiz, I notice that she takes you to some resources — just more information so you can learn more about it and go deeper and find out. And I will definitely put a link to the quiz in the show notes. Is there anything else that you wanted to say before we close out here?

DR. CAMDEN: I'd be curious to hear from you how you see this connected with emotional and spiritual abuse in your practice, since that's your focus area. How do you see this showing up and affecting your clients?

NATALIE: Well, it's funny — we were talking a little bit about this before we started. I have not really addressed this in my own life very much. I'm remarried and I'm married to a wonderful man, but we still really need to address some things. Even he does. He grew up Catholic, but he was a bachelor until he was fifty-years-old and married me. And he was a good boy, a good bachelor man. So he didn't have any experience and he had a high view of God. So even though he wasn't raised in purity culture like the evangelical world was, he still brought into our marriage the same types of baggage that I did. And so because I haven't really processed through that, I feel like I probably need some coaching on it, I'll just be honest.

But I definitely see this coming up in the private forum with the women that I work with more closely. We mostly deal with spiritual and emotional abuse, but this definitely comes up, and I do think it has to do with the patriarchy and just the ideas of, it is a power-over system when you put women in a position where... I mean, sex, it's a powerful thing. And when men hold the power in the whole realm of sex and women are the... But we were taught, "You're the receiver — you just..." I hate to be gross here, but, "You just lay back and just let them power over you," basically.

And so the idea that you could actually take power over your own sexuality, even now, it's like there are parts of me inside that are still like, "No, that's so wrong. That's not how it's supposed to be." That's how embedded these ideas get into our... And it serves the patriarch. It serves the agenda of patriarchal cultures of which Christianity, today's version of Christianity, is very patriarchal. And then when you have that idea that men have power or hold power over women, you will always see emotional and spiritual abuse, because they're using God to maintain that power when you're in the evangelical world, which is spiritual abuse — they're basically attributing to God this idea that they should have power over women — and then the emotional abuse is just the gaslighting and the lying and the propaganda that women are under to believe that it's actually right and good and holy and pure for them to be in a power-under position.

And it's so interesting, because what I've heard is kickback that says, "Well, you women, you just..." And I even hear this from women: "Well, then you're just feminist and you just want the women to take power over the men." No. That is also just as egregious as men taking power over women. I believe that Jesus Christ came to show us a better way, and that is that we work together as partners — we're side by side, as if you and I were to go out and be missionaries and be partners in what we were doing. I wouldn't be powering over you and dictating to you what you do. You would be fulfilling your gifts, I'd be fulfilling mine, and our roles would be given to us by God, not by another human being who says, "Well, I really think this is the best role for you because you're five foot two and you're female" and whatever.

DR. CAMDEN: Yeah, yeah. Something that can help people deconstruct these beliefs is think, "Who, who benefits from my believing this? Who does this benefit? If so, if I believe that men, all men, always need sex and I need to have sex every seventy-two hours with my husband, who benefits from that?" Not you. And it sets up very much inequality instead of mutuality, which is really what I think God wants, is there to be a sense of mutuality. And so I really tell couples, "You have to get away from the thinking of sex about give and take, like, 'I'm giving him sex, I'm giving him oral sex,' or 'I'm giving him this pleasure,' or 'He's taking this pleasure,' and change to a sharing. It's a mutual sharing of our bodies, of pleasure, of this time together, of this connection." And I think that helps with what you were saying, Natalie, about we don't want women to be in power over men, either. So it's also not a give and take in that regard. It's a mutual sharing.

And I have seen that verse in 1 Corinthians about, "Do not deprive one another," I have seen that be used in a spiritually abusive manner from husbands demanding sex from their wives. And that is not what that verse intended. It was actually quite revolutionary for the time for Paul, the author, to say that men's bodies belong to their wives too. In a time when women were literally considered property he said, "The husband's body belongs to the wives. So what you're doing with your body affects her and vice versa." It was very much about mutuality in that passage of scripture. So that's one example of spiritual abuse I've seen in this area.

NATALIE: Yeah, I love that. That is so, so good. Well, I'm really glad that we had this conversation. If anyone's been listening to my podcast for a while, you'll know that we haven't talked about this ever, I don't think. Maybe we've touched on it with Andrew Bauman — I don't remember — but we have not really devoted an entire episode to this subject, and I think it's about time that we did. So this is going to bring up a lot and I know people are going to have a lot of questions, and it's an area that I really lack in, so I'm glad that we've been able to introduce people to you and your work. Do you

want to tell them a little bit about what you offer as far as your resources and how you can help them further since this is your area of expertise?

DR. CAMDEN: Yeah, sure. So as far as resources, we've talked about my quiz, and I have a lot of articles on my blog that people can access. And then of course you can follow me on social media. My name's Dr. Camden on all the socials. My website is drcamden.com. So that is all free and accessible to anyone.

But if you really want some one-on-one, more focused work in this area, I offer coaching for women and couples, specifically for purity culture recovery and faith. So if you feel like, "I have been dealing with this for so long and I just need freedom from these beliefs..." And it is hard to find a mental health therapist in your area that might even know what purity culture is or that specializes in this or has the the skills and the education to help you, and so that's why I started offering coaching, because therapists, you are restricted to the state you're licensed in. So I can only provide therapy in the state of Tennessee where I live. But as a coach, I can work with anyone in any country, even. So that is available to you, and I'd be happy to talk with any listeners who have questions about that or are ready to have freedom from these beliefs.

NATALIE: Awesome. And you guys, I will make sure to put all of the links that you need in the show notes so that you can directly go to these different resources, okay? So thank you, Dr. Camden, so much for coming on here and talking with us about purity culture. And to the rest of you, thank you so much again for joining us and listening, and until next time, fly free.

DR. CAMDEN: Thank you.