

I'M SO CONFUSED! IS THIS REALLY ABUSE?

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 224 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we are going to do a smorgasbord of questions about reactive abuse, how to identify covert abuse, how to know when you're in an abusive relationship as soon as possible so you don't waste your time, and that kind of thing. So it's all going to be about covert abuse.

Now, we have several other episodes where we touch on this, including Episode 26, "This Is What Covert Hidden Abuse Looks Like," Episode 78, "Are You Married to a Quiet Covert Abuser with a Hidden Lifestyle?" Episode 20, "The Difference Between a Normal Marriage and an Emotionally Abusive Marriage," Episode 49, "Emotional Abuse: When You Have All the Responsibility and None of the Freedom," and Episode 87, "What is Emotional Manipulation?"

Now, those are just a few of the episodes where we talk about covert abuse. It's really easy to find. If you go to my website, flyingfreenow.com/whatever the episode number is that I just gave you, that will take you straight to that episode. So for example, "What is Emotional Manipulation?" That's Episode 87, so you'd go to flyingfreenow.com/87 and it'll take you right there. Otherwise you can search for these on your favorite podcast app on the Flying Free Podcast.

Now, these episodes are going to help you identify covert emotional abuse, and we are going to talk about it again today in relation to specific questions that have come in from listeners. But I also have a course called "Dealing with a Dysfunctional Relationship." And this course not only helps you with identifying covert abuse, but it actually equips you with strategies to deal with the abuse. And that course comes with a membership to the Flying Free program. So when you're a member of Flying Free, that's one of the courses, one of the many courses that we have — courses on boundaries, healing your relationship with God, healing your relationship with yourself, parenting, and many more.

Membership is only \$29 a month, and you get instant access to everything when you join. It also includes weekly live coaching — and we have a private podcast where you can listen to all the replays — a robust private forum where you can interact with hundreds of Christian women who are just like you are, who are in emotionally abusive

relationships or maybe are separated — some of them are getting divorced and going through the divorce process — as well as access to live monthly online events and more.

I'm not going to go into all of it here, but there is an application process and you can learn all of the details. Everything, everything you need to know about this program is over at joinflyingfree.com. So head over there and read the information — here's a bunch of reviews over there — and then you can fill out an application if you're interested in joining us. Okay, we're going to start with a... It's not really a question... Well, I'll just play it and you can decide for yourself what it is.

LISTENER: Hi, Natalie. I'm hoping you would touch on a topic of reactive abuse.

NATALIE: So we actually did, and I meant to actually put that question in front of the episode that we just recently did on reactive abuse, which is Episode 214, and I completely forgot. So we had Annette Oltmans come in, and she's from The M3ND Project and she talked about reactive abuse. That's her area of specialty. And I actually want to play right now a review. Someone sent in a review of that particular episode. So listen to what this woman said about that episode, and then you might want to head over to that episode.

LISTENER: I'm trying to leave a review for Episode 214. I've been listening to Natalie Hoffman for a few years, and every single one has been absolutely awesome, and this one is also extremely awesome because someone at least understands. It would be so nice if judges and lawyers and people could understand this reactive abuse. Thank you so much for all this information.

NATALIE: So thanks for sending that review in. I agree — that episode is amazing and I really appreciated Annette's perspective on this. I'm actually going to read a quote directly from that episode here just to kind of whet your whistle a little bit, and then you can head over there and listen to that if this sounds like something that you have experienced or that you're familiar with.

She said this. (I'm picking up where she left off on another thing.) But she said, "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 are still 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're experiencing is in fact abuse, and they aren't yet ready or understanding that they are a victim of abuse."

So I highly recommend that episode. Everything that you need to know about reactive abuse is going to be in that Episode 214. And again, if you go to flyingfreenow.com/214, you'll be able to listen to that episode. All right, now we're going to get into our set of questions, and these questions are all similar. Each one is slightly different, so we're just going to kind of explore a different facet of covert abuse based on the question that each individual has brought to the table today.

LISTENER: How do you determine whether your husband is emotionally abusive or just doesn't understand what it takes to be a husband in a marriage?

NATALIE: Everyone when they first get married is ignorant about what it takes to be a husband or a wife in a marriage, largely because they've never done it before. A healthy individual will learn what it takes in a variety of ways. One way is by being a good listener and tuning into his wife's voice. When she expresses gratefulness or delight, he will learn what pleases her and brings her joy. When she expresses pain or discomfort or offers feedback, he will learn what hurts her or where he needs to adjust his behavior or his thinking, and vice versa. Obviously it should go without saying that this goes both ways.

Another way a healthy man learns how to be a good husband is by hanging out with other healthy men of different ages who are good examples. Another way might be reading good books on the subject. If he's struggling with something due to past trauma, a healthy man will go to therapy to unravel that trauma so that it doesn't end up harming him and his intimate relationships in the long run.

Now, I'm guessing that the person asking this question is not three months into her marriage with a man who is just green behind the ears and learning what it means to love, respect, and hold space for another human being. All of that said, I remarried a man who was fifty when we got married, and he had never been married before. You could say that he didn't know what it would take to be a husband or a father, but lo and behold, he ended up being an amazing husband and stepfather. Why? Because he is a good man, and that's what you need to understand.

Good men make good husbands and fathers and employers and employees and neighbors and friends — period. Good men are kind and respectful. Good men care about the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the people around them. Good men don't have to control everyone in order to feel joy in life.

So if your man is unkind, dishonoring, manipulative, blaming, shaming, unable to take responsibility for his behavior, uses you, mistreats you, ignores you, scoffs at you, and so on, then he is not an emotionally healthy man and he will not be able to show up in his intimate relationships in a way that deepens those relationships and offers safety and joy.

He may be able to pretend to be a good man sometimes, but pretending is very different from actually being a good man. If you are asking, "Is my husband emotionally abusive, or is he just ignorant," here's another way you can know. Call him out on his behavior, and if he denies it, justifies it, minimizes it, or blames you for it, then he is an emotional abuser. If he's just ignorant, he will thank you for the feedback and be a better man next time.

LISTENER: Hi Natalie. The question I have is when does abuse become abuse? So I know that abusive behavior needs to be repetitive or needs to happen more times for it to be called "abusive behavior." But where is that line where it just gets called "abuse"? I hope my question is clear, but it's something that I've been thinking about and I don't seem to find the answer to know if something really can be called abuse. How many times does something need to happen or how often that it's actually abuse or not?

NATALIE: Abuse is abuse even the first time. So the very first time that someone gaslights you with the intent to serve their own agenda, they have abused you. The very first time that they withhold information from you with the intent to manipulate you, they have abused you. The first time they tell you that you're stupid with the intent to shut you down, they have abused you. The very first time they give you the silent treatment in order to force you to do whatever they want you to do, they have abused you.

You may not recognize the abuse for several days, weeks, months, or even years. I mean, maybe you grew up being treated like that, so it might feel normal and familiar. You might even think that cruel feedback is a form of love because it's the water you swam in, and the people in that water always said they loved you, so how do you know any different? You can be married to an abuser who only abuses you in ways that you can recognize maybe once a year.

I remember watching the show “Big Little Lies,” and in that show, Nicole Kidman plays the role of a domestic violence victim who is married to a wealthy man. They have two beautiful twin boys. He's an amazing husband and father most of the time. But once in a while he flips a switch and he beats her, and she hits him back. So she believes that it's just a marriage thing and that they're both abusive sometimes. The series shows how she goes to therapy, and she just cannot see how she's in an abusive relationship. And even us as the viewers are tempted to think that the relationship is mostly fine and that he's actually a very loving, attentive, caring man the rest of the time, and there are reasons that he flips out, so we should give him a chance, right? We should give him a pass.

But the fact is abuse is abuse, and nobody should treat another person that way ever. Not even once. So I realize that show obviously depicts physical violence and we are dealing with psychological violence here, but nevertheless, it is violence against the personhood of another human being.

Now, my husband, Tom, my second husband, has done what you might see in any relationship. He's not picked up after himself at times, he's failed to do something he said he was going to do, he's gotten annoyed with the kids who get too loud for too long — normal human stuff, right? But even so, he's also, without me even having to give him any feedback or tell him — sometimes I do, but most of the time I don't have to say anything — he'll just come to me and go, “Hey, I'm sorry I said I was going to do such and such. I failed to do it. I'm going to make sure I get that done before the end of the week.” Or if I have to give him feedback about something, he might say, “You know, you're right. I haven't been cleaning up the dog food spills every time. I'm going to work on that.”

Now, my ex's response in similar situations was always, always some version of, “I said I was going to do it, didn't I? Why do you have to nag me about everything? No matter what I do, it's never enough,” or “You do the same thing, so why are you harping on me again?” Do you see the difference? I see women asking these kinds of questions because they're looking for the loophole that will make their reality untrue. I have never, ever heard any of my friends who are in healthy marriages ever ask me or even think this thought: “How do I know my husband's emotionally abusive and not just ignorant,” or “When do I decide that he has harmed me enough for me to be able to call it abuse?” Do you see this? That's not even crossing their minds. Why? Because they're not in an abusive relationship.

So if you are asking these kinds of questions, your relationship is abusive, and armed with that understanding, you can now learn how to deal with your reality instead of

pretending that it's not real or that it's not happening.

LISTENER: Hi. I just want to thank you for your podcast. It's been very insightful, and I have a question. I have been married fifteen years, and the first five years were really bad, but the last ten years have not been as bad, and especially the last few years since I've been doing healing work, I've noticed a big difference in him, or a difference in him. So I guess my question is, he's not doing the things he used to do like the first five years where I'm not being controlled, I'm not being kept from my family, I'm not being blatantly told things like, "My happiness doesn't matter," stuff like that that's very bold and in your face — it doesn't really happen. And I'm not being controlled or anything like that.

Now it's more just like, I guess you could say covert. It's more subtle, so manipulation, demeaning, berating, degrading, and blaming, blame-shifting, and the inability to take ownership or apologize or accountability for anything. And the manipulation, like twisting things, like everything's my fault. Those are the kinds of things I'm dealing with now, but like I said, it's not as bad as it was before. So is that even still considered abuse? It feels like something I should be patient with because he's now telling me he needs me to keep pointing it out to him and he's willing to change, because I have seen change in him before.

NATALIE: Yes. The kind of abuse that he is doing to you is known as covert abuse. This is what I lived with for twenty-five years, so I'm very familiar with it, and that is what this podcast is all about. I recommend my book that I wrote. It's called, "Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage: A Christian Woman's Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse." You can get that book on Amazon. It's sold in paperback or Kindle or Audible format.

What abusers do is they switch masks. So maybe at the beginning of your marriage he was more blatantly abusive, and maybe he realized that he couldn't get away with that at some point. I don't know the whole story. Maybe you threatened to leave him or pull the plug in some way. So all he did was exchange the overt abusive mask for a covert abuse mask. If he sees that he can fool you with this kind of abuse, then he'll continue doing that.

I see women learning about covert abuse and then they'll often... Well, I don't know about "often," but they'll sometimes threaten to leave, and then their husband will put on a repentant mask. We should do a skit with just all the different masks that they try. It's fascinating. And the repentant mask is they're super nice, they appear to have changed, they'll tell you all the ways that they've changed. And all of this is just them

trying on different masks, trying them out to see, "Which mask is going to work with this person? Which one is going to fool her?" And if none of the masks work, that's when they get really nasty, because then they won't even try anymore and you'll just see the full monster face of the person you married. And it's scary.

This is why we're careful — we're scared to confront them or give them feedback. Plus, here's the other thing: He'll put on a mask that he sees is usually really effective at fooling everyone else, so then we end up looking like we're crazy, unforgiving, willfully blind, bitter, whatever.

If you can imagine him putting on a mask when you go out, and then you get home and he knows that you're onto him, so he just takes the mask off and you can see his ugly monster face while you're at home in private. But then right before he steps out the door, he puts on his nice-guy mask, and then other people don't know that he's just wearing a mask. That's really hard to deal with as well.

So if you're wondering if his better behavior is abusive, yeah, it's 100% abusive. I wouldn't even call it "better." I mean, at least before it was obvious and you knew even in your own mind, "Yes, this is abusive." When they get more covert, that's not better. Now they're abusing you emotionally and psychologically. It's psychological violence. And you mentioned twice that he's no longer controlling you, but if he is covertly abusing you, that's what covert abuse is. It's control. He's totally controlling you, and he's using covert abuse to do it. You said that he does manipulate you. Well, manipulation is just another word for controlling someone.

I encourage you to make a list of all the things that you can't do or say around him or else you get in trouble just to see how he is controlling you. If you're truly free, you should be able to do, act, and say absolutely anything and he will be fine with it. You're in a safe space. You can be whoever you are. Think about who you are with maybe your best friend, okay? Your best friend is not controlling you. That's why you're able to be who you are. I bet you money you can't be like that around him.

Are you free to give him feedback and know that you won't get blamed or shamed for it? No. You even mentioned that you can't do that. So then he's controlling you. He's controlling whether or not you give him feedback. Do you have just as much control and say over the finances that he does? Are you free to build a career if you wanted to? Could you go on a trip with friends or even by yourself if you wanted to? Could you go to a different church and not have any repercussions for that? There were things I wasn't allowed to do that I just thought, "Well, there must be good reasons." I wasn't allowed to go to a chiropractor. My husband was, but I wasn't allowed to because he

didn't think it was necessary.

So think about other things that maybe he does that you are not allowed to do. Are you allowed to get groceries where you want to shop, or do you have to go where he says you should? I'm just throwing out examples, all right? Can you wear what you want to wear? Do you have to wear what he thinks is appropriate? Can you keep the house clean or can you keep it messy sometimes and know that you're not going to get any repercussions from him? Can you parent the way you choose? I would just go through and make a list of all the things that you are not free to do, and then you'll be able to see, "Hmm. I guess he really is controlling me."

I really do recommend that you read my book. I think it's going to help you see the ways that you're being abused. So go to amazon.com and just look up, "Is it Me?" and it'll come right up. Okay, we have just one more related question, and then we're going to call it a day.

LISTENER: For about the last ten years my husband has slept in the guest bedroom. It was his decision, not mine, and it's not like we had a fight and he decided to go in there. He came home from a business trip. My daughter had slept with me in our bed because we had always laid down with her until she fell asleep, and her mattress hurt my back, so she slept in our bed while he was out of town. And he decided to go in there and he's never come back to sleep in our bed.

There's also been an issue of pornography that has affected me. It felt like betrayal, and I've just had a hard time getting over it. So I guess my question is, is that abuse? I mean, I'm very depressed and sad and I'm feeling like I want to move on. And he actually talked about divorce over the last year, and now that I've kind of come around to talking to him about it, now suddenly he's ignoring me. He's acting like I never said anything. It's just really confusing. So anyway, if you can give me any advice, I would appreciate it. Thank you.

NATALIE: So just going off of what was shared here and not knowing anything else about the relationship, I would call this emotional abandonment. There's the emotional abandonment of no longer sleeping with you. And by the way, I don't want anyone to confuse this with what victims will often do in setting boundaries of protection for themselves when they're married to someone who's raping them or abusing them in other ways and the victim has decided that they're no longer safe to offer themselves sexually to their abuser. That's a very different situation as far as not sharing the marriage bed. So don't think, "Oh no, I set this boundary and now that means I'm emotionally abandoning my husband." No, that's not the same thing.

But in this case, the husband has emotionally abandoned his wife and then he has also turned to porn, which is emotional and sexual betrayal. And then he is talking about divorce without following through. That's very threatening and frightening. All of this is abusive, I believe.

Sometimes we can't see it for ourselves, so I will often suggest to a victim that she imagine that her daughter is an adult now married to the same kind of guy and going through the same things. What would we believe about her situation if it was our daughter? Would we say, "Well, you made your bed — now you've got to lie in it"? We're often very unloving and unkind to ourselves because we have a low view of ourselves, but we would never think that way about our precious child. And the irony is that we are a precious child too, and we're the only precious child that we must take responsibility for for the entire duration of our short stint on Earth.

But let's just play around with this for a minute and let's just pretend that he's not abusive, all right? There might be people listening to this who would say, "No, that's not really abusive. It's not controlling or anything. It's just negligent, and that's not the same thing as abuse." Okay. Let's go there and say that they're right. Even so, is this a Christian marriage? Is this Christ-like? Is this marriage bringing glory to God? Now, I'm using a lot of spiritual language here for the sake of those who think in these terms and defend "Christian marriage." I'm sorry, but you're not really defending Christian marriage at all when you say that a marriage like the one that is described here is "Christian" and it should be left intact. This is not a Christian marriage — this is not an example of one. Now, this might be a Christian woman setting a Christ-like example within her marriage, but the marriage itself is not a Christian marriage. Does that make sense?

You get to decide — and you don't need anyone's permission to decide this — whether or not this is the kind of marriage you want to be part of. And if any of you out there are thinking, "Well, now, wait just a minute here. She does need God's permission," I will just say that she already has God's permission and even His mandate to take the one life that He has given to her to steward as her responsibility and make her own choices about how to steward it. This is called autonomy and freedom. And He promises never to leave her or forsake her, period. His promises are not conditioned on whether or not she stays in an abusive, negligent, or emotionally destructive marriage.

She's depressed and miserable and has been for many years. Is that how we change the world? With masochism? I don't think so. We change the world by first starting with ourselves, and if we're in an environment that is making us sick in our heart and in our head and in our body, then we are not going to be able to live our lives to their fullest

potential, and nor will we be able to offer any kind of example of that to others for how to do that.

I want to read a review. Before we go, I want to just do a final recommendation to the Flying Free program, because this program is going to help all of these women that asked these questions. And by the way, we do a live Q&A every single month for two hours. Basically I answer questions like this live, and we do that every month. We have years and years and years worth of every single month, live Q&As. You could go back and listen to archives if you wanted to, if you like to binge on that kind of thing.

But here's a review that someone recently sent in to the Flying Free program: "Last night while I couldn't sleep, I was thinking about the last fifteen years of my life in this crappy marriage with a strong desire to leave but never feeling like that was an option, but I was fantasizing about how I could leave. After reflecting on the last fifteen years, I realized that I made a couple of attempts to get out, but I ended up right back where I was.

Fast forward to today and I have never felt more empowered and confident and assured of my decision. I have moments of second-guessing, but my brain pulls up a lot of evidence, and that is because of this program. I have spent the last year working this program and consuming all of the information and the private podcast and every yummy morsel that you've put out there for us.

I cannot thank you enough for creating this space and giving us access to so much information and tools and walking alongside us in the mud of it all. When I first started, I remember you saying, and I've heard you say it many times since, 'If you do the work in this program, I promise you — I promise you — you won't be the same in a year.' Admittedly, I kind of doubted those words because I was living without hope. But today, today I can say that you were 100% right."