

BAD ADVICE CHRISTIANS OFFER EMOTIONAL ABUSE VICTIMS

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 235 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I want to talk about articles and books for Christian women that address marriage and how women who are in abusive marriages tend to read these kinds of resources and really end up digging themselves into a deeper grave because of these resources.

And I'm going to demonstrate how this happens by looking at one specific example. This is a specific article that came out on Ann Voskamp's website, and the article was actually written by Jodie Berndt. And there's nothing wrong with the article in and of itself if you are in an average, normal, Christian marriage. For example, I'm right now currently in a normal Christian marriage with a normal Christian guy, and when I read this article from that lens, I understand what she's communicating. She's recommending basic human respect in our marriages.

The outline goes like this: 1. Believe you will make it, 2. Don't go to bed mad, 3. Don't fight in public or complain about your husband to your friends, 4. Be kind, and 5. Pray. I mean, there's nothing super profound here. It's just a few of the ABC basics of relationships, right? So when I read this article from my perspective as a Christian woman in your normal, run-of-the-mill marriage — I mean, I think my marriage is awesome, but it's just an average Christian marriage — I think, "Oh, that's a nice little article." Actually, to be honest, I thought it was kind of boring, but. Here's how I interpreted each little bullet point from the lens of a happily married woman.

1. "Believe you will make it." Make it? My marriage is sweet. It's not a survival test. It's never crossed my mind in the last five and a half years of my life that my husband and I will not make it, but okay. Thank you for the pep talk.

2. "Don't go to bed mad." Well, there's hardly anything to be mad about in my marriage, but on the rare occasions that I have been upset, I've also been able to express my thoughts and feelings without being called names or told that I'm making ridiculous stuff up in my head. My husband is a good man. He listens and he cares about me. He doesn't just say, "I'm a Christian." He actually works on living out a Christian life, a life that is like Jesus. There's a big difference. And a healthy marriage, it requires two

people that are doing this. Not one. Two.

3. "Don't fight in public." Now, since we rarely fight, I mean, think about it. You don't have to fight if you've got two people who love and listen and care about each other. But since we rarely fight, the temptation to do it in public is completely nonexistent. That's never even crossed our minds. I have nine kids. And you know how kids have different personalities? Some are more volatile than others. Some are peacemakers and they don't like conflict. Two of my nine kids are like that. They're peacemakers. You can't draw them into a fight even if you try. And these kids also, they genuinely care about other people and they hold space for them. They have good boundaries and they look out for themselves, but they also care about others and look out for them as well. There's a really good balance there.

If I told either of these kids, "Hey, don't fight," they would be bewildered. They'd be thinking, "Why would I fight?" because that's not who they are. So if you've got human beings fighting in public, like having a fight in church or having a fight in the grocery store or whatever, I promise you there are deeper problems going on, and an article like this is not an appropriate solution.

4. "Be kind." Again, a healthy marriage is naturally going to be made up of two people who are kind.

5. "Pray when you are annoyed." She gives this example of a husband leaving dirty dishes in the sink *gasp* and how the wife was annoyed. Instead of giving in to her irritation and getting angry about it, she prayed and everything was better. Okay, maybe. I mean, the purpose of prayer to me at this point in my life is more of an ongoing, moment-by-moment practice and awareness of God's presence within me. It's not this quickie solution for my irritations. It might've been like that when I was in my twenties.

But prayer can help us in different ways, so I'm not saying that we shouldn't use prayer that way. I'm all in on however you want to use prayer. But also, what if we were okay with doing the dishes in the first place and we didn't even need to beg God to help us do it without getting irritated? The women I work with, a lot of them would be literally thrilled to be dealing with dirty dishes instead of regularly getting cussed out for not keeping the kids quiet, for example.

I remember one time I was meeting with an elder and his wife, and I was trying to explain to them some of the things going on in my former marriage. And she's like, "I know. You know, when my husband leaves the socks on the floor, it can be really

frustrating." And I was thinking, "What are you even talking about? Socks on the floor?" That was so basic to me compared to the things that I was actually dealing with in my marriage, but whatever.

Women like these writers of these kinds of marriage articles or books who have never experienced abuse or never been in an abusive relationship, it's not their fault, but they are utterly out of touch with the reality of about a third of married Christian women. And they're writing books for all of these women, but they're not addressing, they're not giving any caveats, they're not saying... I would love to start seeing in some of these books and articles a thing at the very end that said, "If you are in an abusive marriage, this advice is not for you. Please get help," and then link to some other resources for them to get help with. Link to my emotional abuse quiz at emotionalabusequiz.com. Let people know that this article may not be helpful for them.

Now, I was in an emotionally, spiritually, and financially abusive marriage for twenty-five years, and I read all of the marriage books on the market. I was a big reader — still am. I journaled all of the Bible verses and prayed all of the prayers for two decades. Here's how the old me would have read this article.

First of all, you are unimportant, but your marriage is your identity and your god because your marriage is the one thing God is looking at to ascertain whether or not you are a good girl. So maintain your marriage, or at least the appearance of a good marriage, at all costs, including the cost to your core values, your personhood, and your physical and mental health. Oh, and also your children's mental health.

1. "Believe you will make it." Abuse is normal. If you think it will never get better, your ship will sink anyway. Always believe he can change and then hunker down and gut it out until you die.

2. "Don't go to bed mad." If your husband calls you names and blames you for why he lost his job, don't give the devil a foothold with your anger. Try to talk it out with him, and when he calls you more names for doing that, say you're sorry and go to sleep in peace.

3. "Don't fight in public." Never tell anyone what your husband is doing behind closed doors. Don't talk about how your grief drives you to self-harm or overeat. Keep your abuser's secrets. Lie. Cover up. Remember, the marriage is what matters — not your life.

4. "Be kind." Give him what he wants. Your job is to make him happy. To do otherwise is

unkind.

5. "Pray." If you really love God and are a good Christian, all you have to do is pray and have enough faith and everything will feel better in time. Be patient.

This is honest to God how I read articles like this, only there was no sarcasm. I literally believed all that stuff. And indeed, when I did allow my anger to show or I did try to get help from friends or church, which obviously required me to tell them what was going on, I was told these same things. And so I would slink back to my hole in the ground and pray I would die.

One of the things she says at the very beginning of the article is that Satan's goal is to destroy marriage. That is a freaking lie, you guys. His goal is not to destroy marriage. His goal is to destroy the people in the marriage. And sometimes blowing up the marriage is the only way to save the people within it. It's this kind of teaching that I believe is straight from the pit of hell. Satan is laughing his fool head off because he has everyone looking at and freaking out about an institution instead of looking at the people, the human lives that Jesus loves and died to save. Satan hates people, not marriage. Why? Because God's focus is people, not marriage. Satan hates and wants to destroy what God created and loves. People are eternal. Marriage is not, nor was it ever intended to be eternal — see Matthew 22:30.

The last line of the article says this: "Conflict can become a catalyst for grace, and that's always a win for your team." But a woman in an abusive marriage is not on a team. In fact, she's often been isolated from "Team Church." Her husband and her church culture are on the same team, but she's been left out unless she agrees to go along with all of the lies and the abuse.

So here's how I would reframe that last line for women who are in abusive marriages: "Abuse can become a catalyst for change: your change. And that is always a win for love." I guess my word of hope to you is this. While the world is full of chaos and there is a swirl of truth and half-truths mixed with little and big lies, and sometimes it's hard to know up from down when you're drowning in a storm, it's okay to set aside a certain type of programming, meaning it's okay to slide past articles like this that show up in your Facebook feed, and it's okay to stop reading all of the marriage books that never address the elephant in the room for one-third of Christian women.

I recommend trying out some new ways of thinking. The Bible calls this "renewing our minds," and right now in the Christian culture that we've got going today, we are in desperate need of that. I have a page full of resources that I recommend for survivors

that will help you detox from the programming that has set you up to be the perfect little abuse victim. If you go to flyingfreenow.com and you click on "Resources" in the menu bar, then go to "Best Books For Christian Women in Bad Marriages."

I want to read what one woman shared about the book I wrote called, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage: A Christian Woman's Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse." Here's what she said: "It dawned on me that it's been around six months since I came across Natalie Hoffman's book, which dramatically, and I mean dramatically, changed my life. It's been half a year. When I came across Natalie's book, I read it within a couple of days. I couldn't put it down. I couldn't believe that someone could put words to my experience and that it was actually, like, a thing. It felt like the scales were literally falling off my eyes, and I finally started embracing the truth I had been living in for sixteen years. I went from extreme fawning on Valentine's Day to a cold wake-up call within a matter of weeks, and I couldn't unsee it. I couldn't pretend anymore.

Looking back over the past six months, I almost don't recognize myself. I still have so far to go, but I have come so far too. I am beginning to understand what it feels like to love myself, to advocate for myself, to take care of myself, and to not feel guilty for doing it. I'm finding my voice again. I'm finding my confidence again. I'm learning that God really does love me, like, He really loves me. It's not just a cute Christian saying when deep down I thought He actually wanted me to suffer and die and become nothing. He not only loves me, but I think He actually likes me. Is it possible that it's okay for me to like me too? Maybe I don't need a man to like me. Maybe I can just be okay with liking myself. I'm starting to believe that.

Also, I've gone six months without sex. I got married when I was eighteen and have been sexually active consistently since I was seventeen, and I didn't even realize how much I relied on sex to feel loved, wanted, and approved of. I think maybe because I was so starved emotionally for so many years, sex was my only way to feel loved. The first couple of months without it was hard. I didn't anticipate that struggle, but the struggle was real. I felt desperate for physical affection, for a man's approval. I didn't realize how addicted I had become to my husband's approval of me, probably because the only verbal affirmation I ever got from him was related to sex somehow. I didn't even know my value was so tied up in it.

This program has been a lifesaver for me." (She's referring to the Flying Free program.) "The mind work has been really hard and exhausting at times, but the models work. Like, they really work. It has allowed me to experience such deep healing and understanding, which has allowed me to have grace and love for myself. This

recovering perfectionist has never experienced that before. I think I'm getting a taste or maybe a small peek of the butterfly life.

A relative gave me a bookmark for my Bible as a gift to remind me of the butterfly work God is doing in me. I was so touched. It's the perfect six-month milestone gift. They didn't even know it. I might not be fully emerged from the cocoon yet, but this I know: I will never go back to being a caterpillar. Isn't that the amazing thing about the transformation process? There's no reverse button. The butterfly can't go back into the cocoon and go back to being a caterpillar. I am forever changed, forever committed to this process. I'm all in, and I'm on the path to being truly set free. Thank you to each one of you who have been voices of truth and encouragement to me. And thank you for the work you do here, Natalie. Your work is so important. You are saving lives."

So the book she's talking about, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," is available on Amazon in Kindle, paperback, or Audible formats. I read it myself on Audible. I will send you the first chapter free when you hop on my mailing list, and you can do that by going to my website, flyingfreenow.com.

I also have an emotional abuse quiz that you can take if you are a Christian woman and you're wondering, "Is my relationship abusive or not? Or maybe it's just hard. Maybe it's me," right? So you can go take that emotional abuse quiz by going to emotionalabusequiz.com. And then the program this woman mentioned that has helped her move into a butterfly life is the Flying Free Sisterhood program. And you can learn more about that and complete an application by going to joinflyingfree.com.

Hey, beautiful butterfly, thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, be sure to subscribe, and then consider leaving a rating and review so others can find us. To connect with me and get a free chapter of my book, head over to flyingfreenow.com. And until next time, fly free.