

SURVIVOR STORY: STACIE

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 250 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, we are going to meet Stacie. Stacie was a member of Flying Free for a year, and she's been a member of Flying Higher for over two years now. How long were you married?

STACIE: Twenty-two years.

NATALIE: Twenty-two years, okay. So she was married for twenty-two years, she's now divorced, she's rebuilding her life, and she's going to share her Butterfly Story with us today. We were just talking before we got started here that we have these Butterfly Stories — they're basically women's testimonies of how they ended up getting out of their destructive relationship — and we have several dozen of them inside the Flying Free program. And she did hers about a year and a half ago, we're thinking, but she's never shared on the podcast.

And we were talking about how so many things happen in a year and a half. You learn more things, you grow in new ways. And so she said she's taken notes and she's come up with even more good nuggets of truth that she has learned even since she dropped her Butterfly Story in the program. And you guys get to hear it and I get to hear it too, and I'm excited. So welcome, Stacie.

STACIE: Thank you.

NATALIE: Okay, so we want to talk about, first of all, how and when you noticed that there might be something off or going wrong in your relationship. Was it at the beginning? Was it in the middle? Where did you start to go, "Something is not quite right here"?

STACIE: So actually when we were dating. It's going to sound really bizarre, but I gave the engagement ring back to him six times.

NATALIE: Oh, wow.

STACIE: And you know how they say in a coercive, controlled relationship, it takes seven

times to finally get out?

NATALIE: Yeah.

STACIE: The seventh time was twenty-two years later. Now, looking back on it, I can see all of the signs were there when we were dating. One time he picked me up for church and I had this beautiful pink mini skirt on with sock tights — and I just loved this outfit — and heels, and he said, “You can't wear that,” and made me go in and change, and then proceeded to come over later and go through my closet and take out all of the clothes that were inappropriate, in his mind, for a Christian woman.

NATALIE: While you were dating he did this?

STACIE: While we were dating.

NATALIE: Unbelievable.

STACIE: Yeah. He would criticize me and make jokes at my expense and tell me they were for my benefit, for my growth. He started early on separating me and my son — my son was probably three or four years old — and he would call me selfish or manipulate it so that my son would spend time with him.

He had two teenage children and he left them alone a lot. And I thought to myself, “You know, they're really not old enough to be alone like this, but oh, they're fine. They're fine. They've been doing this for a while. My mom checks on them — whatever,” but neither of the kids acted right. They were broken children.

And there were just a lot of things going on during that time. And I was young, I was a single mom, I was out of money, and he used those insecurities and that fear to give me a false sense of security that he was the only one who could take care of me. My list of wants and desires in a husband were ridiculous, and he could meet every single one of them, and it was just a weird... I wish I'd had this program then because I would have totally avoided it, but there weren't resources for me at that time.

NATALIE: There weren't really resources for any of us back then. This kind of thing was not talked about — certainly not in Christian circles.

STACIE: Yeah, no. And I remember his cousin, when they picked us up to get married, because we basically eloped, she asked me, “Are you sure this is what you want to do?” And I'm like, “Absolutely, of course. We bought a house, we're building this family, we

have to do the right thing," and it wasn't what I wanted to do.

NATALIE: Wow. How long was it between when you met him and when you eloped?

STACIE: It was probably a little over a year. It was a little over a year, because the first year we were married, Austin, my son, turned five.

NATALIE: Okay, and was he pressuring you to get married soon?

STACIE: Yes. He wanted us all to be in one environment, in one place: "We need to get married." I wanted to wait. I wanted a fall wedding. I wanted all those beautiful things. And that was "selfish." And the kicker that did it is he promised me that we would have a child together. And that sealed the deal because he knew I really wanted a child. And then once we got married, that was "a selfish desire." We already had three. "Why would we want one more?"

NATALIE: So you didn't have any more children?

STACIE: No.

NATALIE: Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry.

STACIE: So everything was pretty much built on a lie. I found out recently — it's probably been a couple years ago — that he was arrested at some point while we were dating. And his story of that was that he got caught in a sting operation by the licensing bureau and they put him in jail overnight. And what I didn't think of is to look for myself on the county until a friend of mine said, "Are you sure that's why he really got arrested? That doesn't sound right." He actually got arrested for domestic violence, and the whole time we were dating, hid it from me.

NATALIE: Wow.

STACIE: He got arrested in November before we got married in June. So in March, two months before we got married, is when the courts dropped the case. And I had no idea.

NATALIE: Yeah. So you eloped, then, he actually didn't want to have children. And what are some other ways that he emotionally... Or it sounds like there was a lot of spiritual abuse too — using God to control you. What are some of the ways he did that after you were married?

STACIE: There would be things like he would mentor other men, or he would even have really good, long conversations with his daughter, and I would ask for that. It would be like, "Why aren't you and I having these conversations? You know I'm a new Christian, you've gotten me this new Bible" — because I was raised Catholic, and when we met, I was still going to the Catholic church — and he would just tell me, "Intimacy comes with time. Spiritual intimacy comes with time. Stop comparing me to other people. Why is this so important to you?" And I'm like, "Well, because you're telling me intimacy comes with time, so why are we not taking the time to build that?"

And part of his abusive cycle was and is religion and God. He gets these epiphanies of something magnificent in his mind, and then he tells everybody about it. And if they don't jump on board, then he gets mad, rages. And a lot of times, I didn't know anything about spiritual things. We were going to a church where they taught through the Bible, and I'm soaking all of it in and looking back at all the things I'd done wrong, and I have so much shame, and he used that shame against me in every argument. Then it would be brought back up, and I didn't know. I didn't know any better. I thought I was going to hell for sure.

So there was a time when I shared something in a small group, and one of the women, an older woman, went to the pastors and said, "Hey, this is what was shared." He got called into the pastor's office and they had a conversation about it and I got in trouble. It wasn't, "You know what? I'm sorry I did this to you. I'm sorry I made you feel this way." It was, "Why are you talking about our relationship in a public environment? This is not acceptable. This is not something you do." And after that, I just shut down.

NATALIE: So did the pastor believe what you had said, then? It was just your husband who was saying, "You're being bad for doing that."

STACIE: Yep. The pastor brought him in and said, "Hey, this is what somebody's concern is. If this is what's going on, maybe you need to take a step back. You need to work with your wife, blah, blah, blah," and he did not take that well at all.

NATALIE: You know, what's surprising is that they didn't — I see this a lot, too — is that they didn't pull you aside and say, "Here are your options. This is what's going on in your relationship. Here are your options." I'm sure they don't know. They just are like, "Well, if we talk to the guy and tell him what he's doing wrong, he'll just fix it and everything will be fine." And the exact opposite happens.

STACIE: Exactly. The pastor staff never once talked to me about it. They would call him in.

NATALIE: Yeah, yeah. That's not the way to do it. If anyone's listening to this, not the way. Trying to help the abuser is a lost cause, but the victims, they desperately need help. We need to be helping the victims.

STACIE: Yeah. There were two physical altercations in our first year, and one, I actually called one of the associate pastors of the church and asked him to come over, and he took the kids and took them home with him and left me in a place where I had just been physically attacked.

NATALIE: Unbelievable.

STACIE: That is something that I'm still desensitizing a little bit with because this person, since I've left, has told people I've walked away from God, I don't believe in Jesus anymore, and, "What a tragedy, and we need to pray for her." And whatever, pray for me — that's great. But you don't know the story. And you left me there. You left me alone with this person.

NATALIE: Well, they abandoned you then, and they've re-abandoned you all over again. They ultimately have a completely different idea of what abuse is. It's insane. So what kinds of things did you do, then, to try to fix the problem, and did anything work?

STACIE: I asked for counseling a lot because I really felt led to make this work. "I've seen the good in this person. He does things for people that are wonderful and kind and whatever. I know that I've seen the good person in him," and so I would ask him to go to counseling. "I would be a better counselor than anybody else." And we even actually mentored young couples at one point. I remember sitting there and I was thinking, "He doesn't do these things for us. What is... What?" And I have since gone back and I've even contacted a couple of the women who I really feel like I screwed up in my advice to them knowing what I know now, and I just apologized for not hearing them and not seeing them because I felt led to do that. I wasn't apologizing for him — I was apologizing for my behavior and not hearing and seeing them.

NATALIE: Well, I'm sure that was powerful because we were immersed in that kind of thinking. It impacted our lives, and of course, that's going to naturally dribble out into everybody around us. I knew a couple, almost the same thing, where they were very actively mentoring young couples, especially the newly married, or like helping couples get ready to get married. And on the back end, he was physically beating his wife and his children. And they did that for several years. It's just insane what ends up coming out on the back end.

And the only reason I think that's important to draw out is because we kind of tend to think that if people are in positions like that in churches, whether they're paid staff or just volunteers, we give them credibility automatically because they're doing this important work or they're teaching Sunday School or they're on the elder board or whatever.

That doesn't mean anything. It means nothing to what their character is. We have to stop just automatically trusting and giving people credibility. We need to get to know people and understand how they're showing up behind the scenes, not just how they're showing up at church, because this is an epidemic in our churches.

STACIE: Yeah. I did end up going to counseling on my own twice. One, I really was on the verge of leaving and I didn't want to do that. So I went to somebody in the church and I said, "Hey, do you know anybody who's a Christian counselor?" And they said, "Absolutely. Here's this great person." She was great, but I wasn't honest with her. I was trying to deal with my issue of not walking out the door. I wasn't telling her what was happening. I was paying somebody to be my friend and just talking about the day-to-day life.

And then later on, it was probably about three or four years before I left, I had an incident with my mom and I got really angry, and I thought, "This anger is not healthy for me. I need to get help for that," and she called it out. She said, "Are you sure this marriage is even... You guys are even in it anymore? Are you sure it's not over?" And I just wasn't ready to face it then. I wasn't ready to face what was happening, so I stopped going to her because it wasn't the time. I thought I was the problem, because you do. You blame yourself. You normalize what's happening. And I really felt like it was me.

NATALIE: Yeah. And was that a Christian counselor too, the second one?

STACIE: No. I just found somebody who was older, who had a kind... I spent hours looking online at people's faces and trying to find somebody.

NATALIE: Oh, interesting. Yeah, I've done that too. "Let me look at their eyes and see if they're trustworthy by looking at how they're smiling or..."

STACIE: Exactly.

NATALIE: Because what else do you have to go by, you know?

STACIE: Right, right. And then they look nothing like that in person and you're like, "Okay."

NATALIE: Right — they're just a crank in person. They looked really good online. And sometimes the people who look cranky online end up being just amazing people in person.

STACIE: One thing that I did end up doing for a while is I ran. I just started running races because I could have conversations in my head. The music would be flowing in my ears. I could get it all out and not have to actually deal with reality of it. And by the time I was done, I was convincing myself, "This is all made up. This is all fake." So you spend so much time believing that it's you. Again, it just went back to I was the problem and I needed to figure it out.

NATALIE: So did the running help you to figure it out or did the running keep you stuck?

STACIE: The running kept me stuck because the physical activity would allow me to kind of relax.

NATALIE: Okay, and process through.

STACIE: Yeah, because I could internally process all of the arguments or all of the conversations or what needed to happen. And by the time I got done, I was like, "Okay, I can face another day."

NATALIE: Yeah, okay. That is fascinating because I've heard that exercise is actually... Because it gets you in touch with your body. So it does help you to process through trauma when you're exercising. And music is helpful too, and when you combine the two, it can be really powerful. But it's interesting because it was powerful for you in reaffirming your programming, keeping you in that programming. But it's also — just for people who are listening — it's also good when you're reprogramming. So if you're trying to shed old programming and open your mind to new ideas and new ways of thinking about things and new ways of problem solving, it can actually help you with wiring in that way too. But I've never actually heard about it going the other way or that you could actually use it to stay stuck.

I wasn't a big exerciser. I still am not. But when I was getting out I was exercising, and it helped me with the depression, actually. It helped me stay just a little bit ahead of that dark depression monster that was chasing me down all the time.

STACIE: Yeah, I can see that because I've done that too since getting out, and then I had to take a little break for health reasons, but.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's the problem with exercising too. I feel like you get in the groove and then you get sick or you get an injury or something and then it's like, now you have to get back in the groove again after you heal and stuff. It's hard. Oh, that's a whole other podcast episode — the trials and tribulations of exercising. Okay, so what ended up making you decide... It sounds like you were really, really stuck and actually wanting to be there, probably because deep down inside it was terrifying to think about getting out. But what made you decide to get out? What was that process like?

STACIE: So in the whole process of the twenty-two years, there was probably this dual battle going on of, "How do I get out?" and "How do I stay?" Because I knew all of the things that were wrong, but without really putting words to them. I knew that I was unhappy. I knew that things were rotten.

One, I was worried about losing my son. I was told at one point that my son would stay with him, which, that conversation never happened and that wasn't a truth, but he made me believe that. So when the kids were all gone, everybody's doing their own thing, COVID hits, somebody breaks my glass house. I had someone have the courage to call me out on my behavior, and I had to take responsibility for that and I had to take a really good, long look at what was happening. And I spent a lot of time crying, I spent a lot of time processing, internalizing, and I realized I needed help.

So I started researching. The first thing that comes up when you type in certain behaviors is "narcissist." And I was like, "Okay, what is that?" And the list of things completely... He nailed every single one of them. I'm like, "Okay, now I'm really in trouble. I really need to find a counselor now." I started to want to live again because before that, I sunk. The monster got me and I was like, "You know what? I may as well just die because that's the only way out where I'm going to be accepted by God. And then maybe even not," depending on who you talk to about that.

And I just slowly started making progress, and actually, my boss started seeing things on camera during meetings, staff meetings and stuff. He would be behind me, like, lurking in the shadows behind me, and he would say things and she just picked up on a lot of it. And so she reached out to me privately and said, "What's going on?" And I said, "Here's what's happening. I have an appointment with a counselor. I've been trying to get an advocate. There's none available in our county."

And so she helped me create a file and we called it the pickle file. And we started

putting everything that I was going to need in the pickle file. It was hidden on my work computer, so he didn't have access to it. And we just started. I started telling people the truth, I started letting my family know what was happening and building my support group.

NATALIE: Why was it called a pickle file, just curiously?

STACIE: Just because, well, I work in food, so it was like, "Okay, we've got to name it something that is food related," so we called it the pickle file.

NATALIE: That won't raise any suspicion.

STACIE: No, it still looks like work. But it housed all my stuff, and we would save things in crazy names. So it was like pickle cutting, sweet pickle cutting, dill pickle cutting, you know.

NATALIE: That is hilarious.

STACIE: Yeah, so that was entertaining. And I planned for a year. I planned for a year to get everything in order. And unfortunately one of his friends told him, "I can't spend time with you anymore," and he flipped out and started destroying property. I spent two weeks watching him destroy property in the backyard while I was working, and my counselor at the time said, "It's time for you to get out. You need to leave right now. I'm afraid for your safety." So I met with my support group and we came up with a plan. She had my dogs and my sister came and we loaded everything up in our two cars that I could take, and I went and lived with her.

NATALIE: Wow. Thank goodness for sisters.

STACIE: Yes — who care, right? Right, yeah.

NATALIE: So what was the hardest thing about getting out, and also tell us what was the most transformative thing for you?

STACIE: The hardest thing was the initial, because you know in your mind... In my mind, I knew, "I can never go back. I need to cut off contact and I'm never going to go back to that." And it was a lot like that scene at the beginning of "Tangled" when she gets out of the tower and she's screaming. She's dancing and singing one minute and then she's sobbing and crying the next. It was like that.

My sister was so patient with me. In fact, she even got me a little frying pan, a little cast iron frying pan for my desk, because we laughed so hard because we watched that movie one day, and she's like, "Well, that's been my last three months of my life with you," because you have that struggle of, "I'm doing something wrong; I'm doing something right. I'm doing something wrong; I'm doing something right."

And then once someone in my support group sent me a podcast for the Flying Free program, and she's like, "You have to listen to this today," and I reached out to you, I think on Messenger, and said, "Hey, when's this opening up again?" and I just started soaking it up. That was what I needed, but I think God used the timing for what He wanted it to be because the way the program is structured, it really does hit where you are in the healing process if you're doing the work and you're putting the time in, and the little bits at the beginning were so helpful because my brain was so overwhelmed. And it's doable in those little bite-sized pieces.

NATALIE: Good, I'm glad. I know some people come in and there's a lot, but if you just take it slow and you just do the one little step at a time, it is designed to just feed you like a little baby bird, you know?

STACIE: Yeah. Just that little bit, and then there's so much about it besides that, like, all of the resources that are in the program. I was able to read scripture again. I was able to take a look at the Exodus story in a way that wasn't... Someone taught me how to do that where it wasn't... It just mirrors what God's heart is for us. And you have Bob Hamp in there who is a pastor, and that's the first male pastor I've been able to listen to and really follow, and there's so many tools in there that are available when you're ready for it.

NATALIE: Okay, so what is one piece of advice that you would give to women who are thinking about getting out?

STACIE: Oh, so I have two points that I put in my notes, but be patient with yourself. Every day is going to look different. You're going to find that old habits are easy and building new ones is hard, but every day is a new day. And if you just take one day at a time, don't judge yourself too harshly, and lean on the people around you. The people that know are going to be there and they're going to be your support system, and lean into that. Be honest with them.

NATALIE: Yeah, I'm glad you brought up the "Tangled" movie and the being so happy and then also being so sad, because that is such a common reaction when people are trying to get out. And it does need to be normalized that that is normal and expected.

And yeah, I think there is a lot of shame. It's like, "I know I should be doing this, but I'm also really sad about doing it. And then does that make me a bad person that I'm not... Like, I would never want my child to stay in a relationship like this. But for some reason, I keep throwing myself under the bus."

And there is so many layers of shame to this whole thing — whether you stay or leave — just so much. But to be able to learn how to love yourself and care about yourself through all of that. And you do need to have people who are walking alongside of you and showing you how that's done, showing you that yes, you are lovable just the way you are. Whether you stay or leave is irrelevant. You are a lovable, worthy human being who deserves to be seen and heard and supported on your journey, no matter what part of that journey you're on. Even if it's the part of the journey where you're going back for the sixth or the seventh time.

STACIE: Right, exactly. And everyone in my group was like, "If you decide that you need to go back or you decide this is what you need to do or you don't want to leave, we're going to be here for you. Now we know, we're going to walk through that journey with you too." And even though I knew that that was never going to be an option, it was nice to know that they weren't making decisions for me. They were letting me make my decisions. Even though I wasn't sure what those decisions were going to be all the time, they were letting me make them.

NATALIE: Yes, which is so important. You're an adult. You should be making decisions for yourself, and that's one of the many things that an abuser takes away from you is your autonomy. So when people helpers come along and then try to... I've seen this where people-helpers, they mean well, they're trying to help you, but when they just kind of take over your life and tell you what to do. They're continuing the process of stripping away your autonomy.

You can't ever fly free if people won't let you go so that you can fly free, even if it means that you fly into another window and crash, you know? They should be waiting for you on the ground to help nurse you back to health so that you can get set free again. That is love. That is real love. I'm so glad that you had a support locally that was loving you in that way. Okay, first of all, thank you so much for being willing to come on here and share.

STACIE: You're welcome.

NATALIE: I know it's a little nerve-wracking to do that sometimes. If you are listening and you want to hear Stacie's whole story where she's not interrupted by me and my

questions, where she just shares her whole story from start to finish, you can hear that story along with several other women's stories inside of Flying Free. And you can go and find out more information about that by going to joinflyingfree.com. Thanks, Stacie, for being on here.

STACIE: You're welcome.

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.