

THIS IS WHAT COVERT HIDDEN ABUSE LOOKS LIKE

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 26 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me a beautiful butterfly named Brenna.

BRENNA: Hi.

NATALIE: Yes, I realize that's a lot of alliteration, but I just couldn't help myself. I had the privilege of getting to meet her face-to-face a couple of weekends ago at our second annual Flying Free Retreat with about fifty other beautiful butterflies. When we got home from that retreat, we wanted to be able to connect and continue building those relationships, so we started a new Facebook group. Inside of that Facebook group, Brenna shared a poem that she had written about what it's like to live with covert or hidden psychological abuse that nobody else can see on the outside. All of us were just flabbergasted!

I asked her if she would be willing to share her poem with you guys because it is so good. (And also, I wanted to hear her read it again.) Brenna graciously agreed to do that, and also to just sit and talk with me a little bit about what it's like to live with covert abuse, how she figured out that's what she's dealing with, and what she's doing now today with that understanding and information that she realized has happened in her life. So welcome, Brenna.

BRENNA: Thank you, Natalie. I'm super excited to be here with you and very honored.

NATALIE: Awesome! I think we'll start with your poem. When we're done with that and people have blown their noses and recovered, we'll talk about what that poem actually means, okay?

BRENNA: That sounds good.

NATALIE: Alright.

BRENNA: I just have a very simple title for this. I just called it "Hurt." Right after I moved out, I sat down and wrote this. I didn't share it with anyone until the retreat. I actually

read this to my roommates, who I have gotten to know through Flying Free, at the retreat. They are some of my very good friends, and they encouraged me to share it, so I did. That led me here, so here we go:

Hurt

I think

I might

Be going crazy

I never was before

But now I am I think something is wrong

The something must be me

I must be going crazy

Because

There's nothing black-and-white for me to rest my finger on

Nothing cut and dry that will explain my sense of dread

Instead there is a litany of good that I have memorized

He has always bought amazing gifts

Remembered my favorite drinks

Made sure there was plenty in the bank

Which he never kept from me

Never cheated on me

Never screamed in my face

But yet

I think something is wrong

I must be going crazy

After all

It's not like

He's ever really hurt me

I can't quite wrap my heart around the shock

The searing pain

Of hearing those cruel words about my body

I can't quite grasp how to respond

When he turns away with sorrow in his eyes

For himself

To be stuck with a wife

As ugly as me

For a second I am angry

That he can grieve for himself and then go to sleep

While I am left in the dark
Shattered
But
I realize he just hates himself for hating me
It's not his fault I gained those pounds
A size 8 is far larger than the 4 he married
So I comfort him until he falls asleep
And try to silence my heart's screaming
I catch sight of myself in the mirror
And I understand his pain
Now I see it too
How awful I am
He is right, just trying to help
So why can't I shake this unending pain
I think I'm too sensitive
Or maybe going crazy
After all
It's not like
He's ever really hurt me

He tells me with tears in his eyes
That he uses videos of other women
To make up for what I lack
He is so sad
So grieved about his failure
There is no allowance for me to be angry
I must offer grace and forgiveness
So I do
At each new confession; each new failure
Year after year
But his words ring in my ears
The comments about my weight
my size
my looks
They cut like a knife
His eyes above me looking down
Disgust pouring out
My body lying there exposed
Examined
Found wanting

Disappointing
Discarded
But later the cruelty taken back
Never meant; should be forgotten
Promises made
Promises broken
A cycle repeating
If only I could be better
If only my skin could bring him joy instead of pain
I cringe at every glance
Cover up
Switch to the guest bathroom
So I won't have to wonder
If his gaze will hold desire, indifference, or disgust
I hide myself
I hate myself
I think I am going crazy
After all
It's not like
He's ever really hurt me

I do my best to be the best
To be what he knows he deserves
After all he is better than me
At life
at looks
at knowing me
I cook but make a simple mistake
Now he won't look at me
Won't speak to me I wander around, anxiety pulsing in my veins
Trying to figure out the best way to be the best wife
Stay quiet or try to talk
Walk away or stay near
The minefield I tried to avoid
Has exploded
The eggshells
I so carefully tread across
Are slicing my feet
But he tells me he never wanted me to walk across them
He never asked that of me

So I wonder why I am
I think I might be going crazy
After all
It's not like
He's ever really hurt me

We have fun together
Laugh and talk
Go out with family
And to our friend's homes
But then I catch that tightening around his lips
The way they get a bit taut
And white around the edges
And suddenly I am on edge
I cannot think clearly
I must have said something stupid
Or my double chin is showing
Or this shirt is too tight
Or this dress is all wrong
I should have remembered that swimsuits are a no-win option
I cannot relax
I can no longer have fun
My legs begin to bounce
And I pull my shirt to loosen it
And silence my laugh and my voice
In case they are the problem
Because if I don't
Then I will be ignored
Not touched
Not loved
A disappointment not even worthy of a goodnight kiss
But why is my heart racing over a simple tightened lip
A shade whiter around the edges
No one else would ever notice
I think I might be going crazy
After all
It's not like
He's ever really hurt me

My breath comes faster

My heart beats quicker
And as I listen to him cry and pour his out heart
About how much it hurts him
That I am this way
That I do not match the hope in his mind
The expectations he knows I can meet If would stop being lazy
And just try
My nails press into my arms
Deeper and harder
Cutting skin but grounding my mind
I must stay focused
I must not become emotional
I must not be hard-hearted
I must face my own short comings with humility
I must care for him
I must not be angry
So my arms are dotted with crescent moons
That won't fade away
Permanent reminders of how
I am going crazy
After all
It's not like
He's ever really hurt me

He works so hard
And he needed that pillow
I was trying to be strong for myself
But strength doesn't seem to work out in my favor
I gave it to him
But it wasn't enough
I tried to cuddle up and make the tension go away
But I should have known that he needs space when he's been angry
I thought he said before that he likes to be comforted when he's angry
I must have been confused
And now that soft touch
Has been used against me
His arms
Once so trusted around me
Locked down
Squeezing

I think I must have exaggerated
It really wasn't bad
But it hurts to take a deep breath
It hurts to turn or lift or bend
Not terribly though
And he is sorry
Terribly sorry
He truly just didn't know he had the strength to hurt
He asks me to forgive him
Demands that I forgive him
I cannot bring myself say the words
And so
I am branded an unforgiving wife
Who does not love him
At least, not as much as he loves me
But I have always forgiven
And I have always loved
I have always tried so hard
It doesn't seem to be enough
I think I'm going crazy
After all
He's just barely hurt me

I don't want a tight hug
Last time that brought pain
I'm learning about boundaries
So I simply say no thank you
But he doesn't like that answer
His body doesn't match his face
His smile is genuine and kind
His voice hurt and confused
His body tall and overpowering
Step after step
Walking into my space
Wondering, asking, kind, curious
Why I don't want his hug?
Why do I seem scared?
What has he done to deserve that?
My voice still speaks
No thank you, please listen

But it's shaking
My hands outstretched
Trying to hold my ground
But they're shaking
My back reaches the counter
Suddenly his face matches his body
He is furious
But calm
Demanding to know
Why I've pushed him across the kitchen
Why my shaking hands
Hit him in the chest
Wait
I'm so confused
What just happened
I don't understand
I think I'm going crazy
Really truly crazy
Something is wrong
But he stands by his version
Maybe mine is wrong
Maybe both are right
Perception is reality
That's what they say
I have mine; he has his
God,
It doesn't make sense
I think I'm going crazy
After all
He's just barely hurt me

The crescents on my arms grow deeper
I know what the carpet
Covered in old dust
At the back of the closet
Under the clothes
Smells like
It's a place I can escape and breathe
I think I'm going crazy
I plead my case to him

The nearest glass meets its fate
splintering crash
Against the wall
I plead my case to him
The corner of my cake is smashed
My birthday night ruined
I plead my case to him
He is sobbing on the floor
while I am standing numb
Not knowing what to do anymore
I think I'm going crazy
He is sorry
I have to believe him
This is hurting him
I am hurting him
I think I'm going crazy
I have forgotten how to breathe
I go to a doctor, and then another
I try a medication, and then another
I cannot sleep
I cannot breathe
My heart will not slow down
My hands shake and fidget
My eyes dart and jump
My mind cannot find paths to solutions that work
I do not know what to do
I want to run out of my skin
But I do not know how
If I did, I would have done it long ago
10 years ago
5 years ago
Last year
I don't know
Good and bad tangled together
A Sinister twister of confusion and pain
Leaving nothing but chaos in my brain
So much good
So little bad, really
Right?
Always an apology

A reason
And it doesn't make sense
I am going crazy
After all
He's just barely hurt me

I try to tell him I am hurting
But I only wound him in the process
I reach out to comfort his sobs
But he shies away
Not wanting my touch
Because he can't see that I still love him
I am so confused
I thought we were talking about my pain
But now I'm just causing him more pain
I start to imagine what it would be like
To fade into the black
To fall into the sleep
That comforts and heals
And stay there
But it doesn't make any sense to feel that way
There's no logical reason
I think I'm going crazy
After all
He's just barely hurt me

With tears in his eyes
And grief in his voice
He confesses to me that he doesn't like who I've become
That he thinks our decade together
Should have been as only friends
I have hurt him too deeply
For him to see a way forward
Before I left
I filled up the fridge so that maybe
He wouldn't hate me
I hung up new pictures on the walls
And scrubbed the toilets
So that maybe
He would see that I still cared

I didn't want to walk away
I'm not sure even now that I did the right thing
I broke his heart
But mine was already broken
Damaged
So it's beyond that now
It is crushed
Overwhelmed
Barely alive

He returned to our home
His home
With our dog
And our beautiful yard
And our comfortably worn bed
But
He did not see that I cared
He did not see that I tried
He simply saw that I left
He never meant what he said
About being friends
I should have known that
I should just come home
I hurt him so deeply
I should just come home
I've been unforgiving and imperfect, too
I should just come home
I've misunderstood and misjudged
I should just come home
I've been led astray and misguided
I should just come home
I want to go home
But I cannot go home
I'm hurting so badly
Ripped and destroyed
Damaged to what feels beyond all hope of repair
I am sure that I am crazy

But

As I sit on my bed in my new sparse apartment
Looking around at the shards of my life that are left
Shaking
Numb
My phone lighting up from text after text
Begging and accusing in turn
Deepening the agony
I glance at my arms
Fit my nails onto the reminders
Of life before medication
Remind myself to take my pills
That somehow now I cannot function well without
Try to sort through the fog
Wonder how I got here
And for just a second
Half a second
I wonder
If maybe
Just maybe
I'm not crazy
I wonder
If maybe
Maybe he has hurt me
If maybe
Sometimes
This is what hurt looks like

NATALIE: Wow! That's the second time I've listened to it, and it is absolutely phenomenal. It really is. You have captured the essence of what this is like. That poem is absolutely beautiful, painful, and profound.

BRENNA: Thank you, and yes, very painful.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think, gosh, how do you even follow up from that? I think there are many, many listeners out there right now who are staring out into space thinking, "This is my life." I remember that moment. It wasn't a poem for me. It was doing a search online, but I remember that moment when the truth hit me. It was literally like a physical punch in the gut because the next step is, "What am I going to do about this?"

BRENNA: Right.

NATALIE: It immediately goes into, "If this is really true, now what do I do?" Why don't you tell us a little bit about what that was like for you, when you first realized that you weren't actually going crazy and that maybe you were just living with crazy?

BRENNA: Well, I will tell you that it definitely is a cycle for me. I have those realizations, and then it kind of circles back to, "Maybe I am crazy." Then I come back to, "No, no, I'm not," and then, "Maybe I am." But as time goes on, the "I'm-not-crazy" gets a little stronger. It's two steps forward and one step back sometimes, but it's still progress."

NATALIE: Exactly.

BRENNA: The way that it really started for me, I have now been married ten years. I am still married, but I am separated. About two and a half years ago I had a friend who killed himself. The surface level reason for that is that he was with a girl who could not make up her mind if she loved him or not. According to some of our mutual friends, he would find himself on his knees begging her to say that she loved him. I thought, "Man, anybody could have told him this is a messed-up situation." Then I remembered nights where I sat on the edge of my bed sobbing and asking my husband, "Please, can you even say you love me?" and he would just go to sleep. I thought, "If I would have told my friend that this is a messed-up situation, why am I not telling myself this is a messed-up situation? Why am I doing this?"

I took about six months. (Nothing in these cycles is very quick – at least, not in my experience.) I took about six months to start processing that. I tried to talk to him about things that I was not okay with, and it didn't get any better. So in August of 2017, I really started searching for answers. Google was my new best friend.

The biggest turning point for me was an article I found. It's very hard to find. I've only found it a couple of times. It seems like it's been taken down off most places on the internet. But it was an article from 1998 called "The Silent Killer of Christian Marriages" by Amy Wildman White, and it talks about emotional abuse. She identifies this husband who is a good father, never had problems with alcohol or drugs, always a good provider, and never harmed her physically, but yet, there is still something very wrong.

Honestly, Natalie, the part that stood out to me the most, the part that caught my attention was this one short paragraph that said, "The wife in these situations experiences intercourse as an indignity, almost as rape, because the physical and the deeply personal, loving aspects of sex have been torn asunder. Intimacy and trust, which lay the necessary foundation for a woman to respond sexually, have been removed from the relationship." I thought, "Oh my gosh, yes! I've never actually had

somebody put words to that.”

The rest of that article goes on to explain emotional abuse. They didn’t really talk much about narcissism and things like that, much less multiple types like covert narcissism, in 1998. But this woman framed emotional abuse as bad and bad enough to be worthy of splitting up a marriage over. I thought, “This is like reading my life.” That’s where my journey started in 2017 with this article.

NATALIE: We can put a link to that in the show notes so that people can access that themselves. I’ve seen that article too. I don’t know when, but I’ve read that. I know I’ve seen it at least twice. Where are things at for you now?

BRENNA: Currently, I am separated. My husband works out of state, so a couple of months ago when he was home, he told me that he thought we should just be friends. I don’t know how you tell your wife of ten years that, but it was kind of the release I needed. I had already been working towards exiting the marriage anyway, but I took that as my cue. The next time he left town for work, I moved out. I told him that I was moving out, so he didn’t come home totally shocked. But I think I still have a lot of fog that I have to fight through on a semi-daily basis. I have my own apartment. I have an attorney who is excellent.

NATALIE: Oh, good.

BRENNA: That’s kind of where we’re going from here.

NATALIE: So have you filed?

BRENNA: I haven’t filed yet. There are a couple of things I was waiting on logistically, and I think for the sake of taking the moral high ground, maybe. My husband has not cut off finances and things like that which is a good thing, because I have family living in a house that we jointly own. So I’m trying to work through that before I officially file. But I am expecting to within the next month.

NATALIE: Okay. Do you have kids?

BRENNA: No. That’s actually a product of knowing that something was wrong for a really long time. I love children. I’ve always desired to have a family, but I kept telling myself, “We can’t have kids until my husband gets better. He just needs to get better. If we just try a little harder or talk through it little more, then things will get better.” Ten years later they haven’t, and I don’t have any children.

But also, I knew that I didn't want my sons to grow up with the same mindset and the same entitled, narcissistic attitude, and I didn't want my daughters to be shamed or to feel like I did. Honestly, I was terrified that if I got pregnant, I wouldn't be able to handle the comments about how my body would look after that. I have been told a lot of really cruel things – always taken back, always said that he didn't mean it – but those things stick with you. I thought stretch marks and loose skin... I didn't know if I could take it, honestly.

NATALIE: That's so sad.

BRENNA: That's why I don't.

NATALIE: But you know, it's wise. I can't tell you how many women wish that they hadn't had children because that is probably one of the most painful aspects of getting out if you have kids: The fallout with them.

BRENNA: Absolutely. I'm a child of divorce, too, and went through that.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's excruciating. A lot of people think that if they have a child it will help fix the problem.

BRENNA: No!

NATALIE: I know, it's crazy. But we think crazy things, though. You start thinking irrational things because you are so desperate to fix the problem and move on. "Maybe if we have a family we will look like a normal family or we will be a normal couple."

BRENNA: My grandmother actually suggested that to me. When I told her recently that we were going to be separating, she said, "Well, have you thought about having children with him? It might make things better." I said, "No, Grandma! I don't think so."

NATALIE: Yep. That really is an old-fashioned way of thinking, though. Back in the day, divorce wasn't as common. You would stay with your abusive spouse, and women just thought that was part of their lot in life being a woman. You should just be glad that you have someone who is putting a roof over your head (if they are being a good provider), focus on your kids and your life, and just make the best of it – that stoic kind of attitude.

Then, of course, if you bring Christianity into it and some of the twisted ways of looking at scripture and what scripture says about divorce – it doesn't really say those things,

but that's what we've been taught, and most people don't want to research it out for themselves – that also keeps us stuck. We think we are doing what God wants us to do by enabling that abuse to continue. Anyway, I am really relieved to hear that you don't have kids. By the way, if you are listening, you can't see Brenna, but I have to tell you that she is cute as a bug's ear, okay?

BRENNA: Well, thank you.

NATALIE: I love you to pieces. I think you are absolutely gorgeous. You're adorable. It breaks my heart to think that someone that is broken could have come into your life and shattered your life that way for ten years. I say this all the time, and I will say it again: Emotional and psychological abuse IS physical abuse. It's physical abuse, as you know by looking at your arms. You can see that on your arms, but a lot of people – some people cut.

I remember a time when I actually threatened my husband that I was going to start cutting notches in my thighs every time he did something mean to me so that I could keep track of it myself because there was nothing that I had to prove what he was doing, and he dismissed everything. There was a lot of gaslighting. "No, that never happened. I never did that. I never said that."

BRENNA: "And if I did, it wasn't that bad."

NATALIE: Right! Exactly! But I wanted proof. I thought that maybe I could go with my legs full of cuts and scars and go to an abuse shelter and say, "Hey, look at how my husband is treating me." But someone talked me down. They said, "Natalie, no. He's going to say you're crazy. They will look at your legs and they might think you're crazy." But that's not crazy. That's actually a rational response to abuse when you think about it. Think about it! You know what's an irrational response to abuse? Denying and pretending it's not there is irrational. I think it's Patrick Doyle who said, "Denial is the root of all pathology." All psychological pathology is rooted in denial of some kind.

BRENNA: I haven't heard him say that. I've listened to a lot of his stuff, and I haven't heard that one. But that makes a lot of sense. In my own life and in some of the conversations I've had with other people, with myself, and with my husband, somebody is always denying something. "If it's not me, then it's him. If it's not him, then it's me."

NATALIE: Right. Exactly. When you think about what denial is, it's basically not acknowledging reality. What is crazier than that? You know what I mean? Not acknowledging when something is real? When someone tells us something that is real

to them and says, "This really hurt when you said this to me; this really hurt," when we dismiss that and say, "I don't care about that experience; that's not true; I never did that," we are denying that they are a human being who had an experience with us. We are denying responsibility. That's pathological.

When you are being abused like that and you are experiencing maybe an eating disorder, you're experiencing mental trauma, you're experiencing depression, anxiety, panic attacks, heart palpitations, you are cutting – your body is reacting. Bessel van der Kolk, who wrote that book "The Body Keeps the Score," says we store trauma in our physical body. So it is going to come out in our body. That's why emotional abuse is physical abuse.

They've done brain scans of people's brains after trauma, after long-term trauma such as emotional abuse, and their brains are different. There's pathology there. There are problems in those brain scans because the brain changes when you are being traumatized like that. My point – bringing it back to cutting, pulling your hair out, or sticking your fingernails into your arms – that is the head banging reality of, "There is something so wrong and I can't fix it." Anybody put into those circumstances would do something. Not always the same thing, but we are going to do something with that trauma. That is not the victim's fault that their body is reacting to the trauma. That's just a natural outcome of trauma.

It bothers me when other people come in and make judgments about victims, what they've gone through and how they react (maybe they are super angry). Come on! If you were living in that, you'd be doing the same thing. Let's not judge what is happening in the lives and bodies of other people who've been traumatized like that.

BRENNA: It's very true. It's also hard to rationalize that within yourself while you are still in it, though. It makes you feel like, "Why am I doing this? This is crazy. Why am I curled up in a ball in the back of the closet under the clothes in the guest bedroom? Why do I have nail marks all over my arms? Why am I doing this stuff? Why am I suddenly needing to take anxiety medication? Why am I having these panic attacks when I didn't have them before?" Especially when you're first trying to get out of that, hearing other people say they went through that too really helps, and hearing the rationale behind it.

I remember one time last summer I was sitting on the bed with my husband. He was crying and feeling horrible for himself about how horrible I was. I was trying to stay in the moment, stay grounded, and stay focused in the conversation. Without realizing it, I was digging my nails into my arms to just try to stay okay. He glanced over at me and said, "That looks healthy." I thought, "He's right! This isn't healthy. What is wrong with

me?!" It just adds another layer.

When I started taking medication, to him I was being fed pills by a pill-mill doctor, and suddenly I was crazy. So for anybody listening, you are not crazy. Just like Natalie is saying, that really does affect our bodies. Even if the people around us don't understand the reasoning behind it, it doesn't make it wrong. It doesn't make you crazy. You're not going to understand it if you haven't lived it.

NATALIE: Right. Exactly. For listeners, the first step on the road to healing is just waking up, acknowledging that there really is something wrong and, "It's not me. I'm not the problem here." You are so used to hearing that from other people that it's difficult to wrap your brain around the fact that it's not. Just because it's not you and it's not your fault, that doesn't mean there is nothing you can do about it. That's the good news. The bad news is that this is happening to your life and you are a victim. Nobody wants to say, "I'm a victim." But until you recognize that and wake up to that fact, you won't be able to make decisions or do anything to help yourself, to be an advocate for yourself.

You have to be the first advocate for yourself. We can help children who are victims of abuse. Oftentimes we can get outside help for that, but we can't always help adults because they have to make their own decisions. We must make our own decisions for our own lives. This is also why I encourage people not to judge the decisions that people make for themselves, because they are the ones that know their lives. They are the ones who have to live with the repercussions of the decisions they are making. It's not anybody else's right to say which choice is going to be the safest choice for them at any given time.

I'm so thankful that you came on here and that you were willing to be vulnerable and share your own story. I think it's very brave. I think what you are doing is brave. I do believe that as you continue to extricate yourself from your abusive situation that things will get more and more clear. Like you were saying, it is two steps forwards and one step back. But it will get more and more clear and solidified in your head.

Your testimony, even today hearing your poem, it was the first step for somebody out there. There is someone out there listening, and this poem was just for them. It was written for them so they could have that lightbulb moment, and this is the very beginning of their journey up and out.

If you are listening and this is the first time you've ever heard this podcast, welcome. You can listen to other podcasts as well as read articles on my website, FlyingFreeNow.com, and I think we're going to end it there. Thank you so much for

joining us, and Brenna, thank you for being on this episode with me.

BRENNA: Absolutely. Thank you for having me, Natalie.

NATALIE: And the rest of you, fly free!