

TAKING YOUR LIFE BACK AFTER EMOTIONAL 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 HOFFMAN: Welcome to Episode 30 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I am tickled out of my mind to welcome a very special guest from the UK. Her name is Natalie Collins, and you are going to adore her not just because of her accent. Natalie is a gender justice specialist who's been working to address domestic abuse issues for almost a decade, working directly with women subjected to domestic abuse and abuse perpetrators, and training church leaders and congregations on domestic abuse issues. She has delivered keynote addresses both nationally and internationally on the subject and has spoken alongside archbishops and U.N. representatives.

Natalie is also the founder of the "50 Shades is Domestic Abuse" Campaign and has appeared on national television, radio, and printed media talking about abuse, consent, and women's rights. She has further written several articles and book contributions on domestic violence and is the author of the widely-used domestic abuse pack for UK churches, "The Restored Church Pack." She has a brand-new book out called "Out of Control: Couples, Conflict, and the Capacity for Change."

So let's get started. Natalie, I want to warmly welcome you to the Flying Free Podcast and thank you so much for taking time out of your busy life to share your knowledge and insights with us today.

NATALIE COLLINS: Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

NATALIE HOFFMAN (NH): I heard you for the first time a few months ago on the "Unbelievable?" radio show where you were having a conversation with a complementarian pastor, Phil Moore. I will put a link to that show in the show's notes. I did share it widely on social media at the time, but it's worth sharing again. The title of that show was "#MeToo and the Church." It was answering questions like, "Does the church need a #MeToo movement? Does egalitarian and complementarian theology help or harm men and women in the church?"

What I want to do in this interview is a couple of things. First, I'd like to hear more about your book: Why you wrote it, who it's for, and how these particular women who are listening to this show are going to benefit from your story and the things that you offer

in your book. Your book is not just your story.

Second, I'm hoping that towards the end (I'd like to do a hundred things with this interview, but we'll try to do two), I'd love to hear your thoughts on how patriarchy... Sometimes there is confusion about how patriarchy and complementarianism are similar and different and how those ideologies actually contribute to the abuse of women in the church and even cause women to stay in what are abusive relationships because of the things they believe in their theologies. So this is a lot to cover, but let's start with your book.

NATALIE COLLINS (NC): Yes. My book is called "Out of Control: Couples, Conflict, and the Capacity for Change." I didn't ever intend to write a book, but one of the things I had noticed was that there were quite a lot of bad books from a Christian perspective about relationships and marriage. Particularly, a few years ago I read Stormie Omartian's "The Power of a Praying Wife," and that is kind of the pinnacle of "bad." So from that I was aware that people could write really bad books about abuse. That was my motivation in ending up writing a book. I had no kind of real desire to write a book, but here I am. I wanted to write something that would help the helpers, so the book is primarily for family, friends, church leaders, or pastoral supporters of somebody who is with or has been with an abusive partner.

Often, I think family and friends just feel so powerless when we're going through this stuff that they really don't know what to do. But I've written in a way that is accessible for people who are going through it themselves or who are trying to make sense of what is going on in their own life. It's designed to be very gentle, but also, it's very full-on.

When I started writing it, I planned to only share my story at the end, because I do a lot of media work and I find people have a box that they want to put me in. They either want to say, "This is the woman who's got the story," or "This is the expert." The idea that you could be an expert and also someone with a story is really anathema to them. So I usually tell my story at the end when I speak at events or do training because I don't want people to package me as "This is the abused woman."

Actually, I think one of the interesting things is when I tell my story towards the end of a three-day training or towards the end of a talk or something, people are always really shocked. They are like, "You?! I can't imagine you have been abused!" I've been told I'm too tall to be abused, I'm too young to be abused, or I'm not ugly enough to be abused. It's really interesting. One guy said to me, "You? Some small, shriveled-up thing I could imagine, but you?"

So I think there's a really interesting thing that when we have this idea in our head of who someone who's been abused looks like, that's not only detrimental when we are helping someone, but it's also detrimental if we are being abused, because we don't understand we are being abused. We think, "I'm not like those women over there who get abused. I'm strong and I'm capable. He's not like those people, those men who are abusive. He's just having a difficult time at the minute."

One of the big problems with the "abuse" word is that it's like exploding a bomb into someone's life. If we start to talk about abuse too early people think, "Oh, it's not abuse because if it's abuse, I have to be something. If it's abuse, I cannot keep going."

I find it interesting to not make my story the kind of focus of what I do because I'm actually an expert... I describe myself as a gender justice specialist. Some people ask, "Well, what is that?" I say, "I kind of made the title up. It's after about a decade of working with domestic abuse issues, sexual exploitation, pornography, female genital mutilation – doing lots and lots of different work generally having to do with men's violence." So I wrote this book, and I intended to just tell my story at the end. But I found that as I was writing it in chapter one, I was like, "Oh, you should have some cake. Isn't that hilarious?" It was really sort of factsy. Then I thought, "People are going to think I'm really insensitive with having this quite light, 'making a few jokes' tone."

I figured the only way I could get away with having a quite light tone throughout the book is to kind of say, "Don't worry. I'm one of these people. I'm not just a horrible, mean person making light of a serious topic." Whenever I do training, I always say, if we're going to talk about domestic abuse or any of these tricky issues, I'll say, "One of my expectations is that we'll have fun."

One time this woman came up to me in the break and had a massive go at me. She said, "It's not acceptable! Fun is not acceptable. This is a terrible issue!" I said, "You're talking about this issue for one day of your life. My whole life is this stuff." Actually, there is a real power in laughter and a power in fun to break the power of this stuff over us, because when we can laugh at this stuff it's not as powerful.

NH: Right.

NC: So the book weaves my story throughout. About twenty or thirty percent of it is my story, which I can tell you a bit more of it later if you're interested. The rest of it is talking about, "What is abuse?" I think we have this tendency to talk about abuse very conceptually. People say, "Physical violence, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse." Those things, when they are conceptually described, feel very intangible. We can really

distance ourselves as we come from the word “abuse” and say, “It’s not abuse because...”

So for me, the first part of this is making abuse more tangible. The way we do that is talking about “What does somebody do to another person to be abusive?” We focus on different tactics that a perpetrator might use. There are eight different characteristics that I use when I talk about abusive behavior. I use the work of a guy called Albert Bitterman who worked to look at the ways that prisoners of war were abused. He found eight different ways that they were abused. The reality is that there are only a certain number of ways that you can abuse somebody, whether that’s a prisoner of war, a partner, or sexual exploitation. There are these eight different categories across the board.

In some ways it can be really powerful, because a lot of the time we will minimize the ways our partner is treating us or our husband is treating us. But when we hear that these tactics are how prisoners of war are treated like, suddenly it’s much more serious, and it’s not something we can minimize so easily.

I talk about these types of behaviors as different characters. So I talk about somebody being the humiliator who makes us feel dirty and ashamed. They might abuse us sexually. They might mock us in front of people, and then when they’ve mocked us and are laughing at us and we object, they mock us some more. “Oh, she can’t even take a joke.” There is this shriveling up inside that happens when that humiliation occurs or is perpetrated.

Then you’ve got the threatener who makes us scared, who threatens to tell people our secrets, who threatens to hurt the children. You’ve got the exhauster. Exhaustion as a tactic of abuse is something that I had rarely heard about or read much about, but it is really key, because when he is keeping us up late at night wanting to talk about his feelings, when he wants to have sex in the middle of the night, when he’s ensuring that we’re doing all of the household tasks and all of the childcare – when we’re exhausted – it’s difficult to make good decisions. Having kids is exhausting in and of itself without having someone who is deliberately trying to keep us exhausted.

The brainwasher controls the narrative. You may be more familiar with the term “gaslighting.” They are making us feel like we’re going mad, not giving us space or time to think. The brainwasher will minimize, deny, and blame their behaviors. “It was just... It was only...” They will shrink it down to make it less dank than it really is, and we’ll end up saying the same stuff.

I was speaking to someone I knew and she said, "My ex was a little bit abusive – not really very much, because he only held me up against the wall by my neck once." I said, "Should we get back to the point where you just described being strangled, which could be attempted murder, and how we called that 'just'?" But we all do that. We minimize it because minimizing it makes it feel safer. The smaller we can make it the safer it feels, even if that's not necessarily true. He'll deny it: "I never even touched you. I never went anywhere near you. You're imagining things." He will blame it on, "It's my mental health issues. It's the children. It's stress. It's my job." One woman said to me, "It's because he's got diabetes and his low blood sugar makes him abusive." I did say, "There's no website that I've been on that says symptoms of diabetes include being abusive."

NH: Right.

NC: So blaming. But the main thing they blame is us. "It's my fault. If I hadn't done this, he wouldn't have done that." The understanding why we blame ourselves is key here. The first reason we blame ourselves is because he blames us, so we learn to take on that narrative because all the abuse is designed to avoid him having to take any responsibility. It's partly about that he blames us. It's also that we live in this wider society that blames women for everything. When there's a case that a man has done something wrong, "It's probably his mother." So women are always at fault in society, so there is societal blaming.

If we're Christian, there is the whole Christian cultural blaming of women which starts all the way back with Eve. "It's all Eve's fault." There are theological and cultural aspects of blaming of women. Then also, the key thing that I found very helpful to understand is that one of the reasons we blame ourselves is that it makes things consciously safer because "If it's my fault, then I can fix it. If it's my fault, then I have some control in the situation. If it's not my fault, then I am powerless to affect change." That is very scary and very psychologically difficult to deal with.

Well-meaning people say to us, "No, it's not your fault." What they are doing is stripping us of the only power that we believe that we've got, which is to think it's our fault. Because "If it's not my fault, then how do I change this? If I can't fix it and change it, then that's really very difficult." So understanding blame and self-blame is key.

I think we need to be really kind to ourselves to recognize that our body and our brain are cleverly giving us a way of surviving. Self-blame is a survival tactic. It's not necessarily the truth. The truth is not that it is our fault. It's definitely not our fault. But recognizing why we have this tendency to think it's our fault is about recognizing that for the brain, for our bodies, and for our psyche, powerlessness is much scarier than

being at fault. Recognizing that can be helpful in how we then can take steps to move forward.

To finish whizzing through the rest of the characters in that, you've got the brainwasher who makes us feel like we're very mad. The brainwasher, where any acceptable is "bad," "sad," or "mad." Say "bad," it's all our fault; "sad," pathetic and useless; or "mad" is totally mad. They might hide things or move things. I've worked with so many women who've said, "I've recorded him on my phone, because he'd always say stuff and then deny he'd said it later." Then they play the recording back and say, "Actually, you did say this. I recorded you." Or he might tell her that she's going mad. "Look how mad you are. You don't know what you're doing."

The first thing we think is not that "He's trying to make me think I'm going mad." The first thing we think is, "I am going mad," particularly as women, because we live in a society which tells us we're irrational, so already we are culturally conditioned to believe that we are likely to be mad rather than that he's likely to be manipulating us.

There's an interesting story with a guy who is a self-confessed gaslighter. He was saying how he started to begin making his girlfriend think she was going mad. He said what happened is that he was cheating on his girlfriend, and she began to be suspicious of it. When she accused him, the first words that came out of his mouth (and it wasn't planned) were, "You're going mad, you are. You're paranoid. You think I'm having an affair. I'm not. It's you. You're paranoid." To his surprise, she said, "Am I?" She believed that narrative, and he suddenly was like, "Oh, I can get away with this!" He learned that this affected what he wanted. So that recognition that is so much of what the abuser does is trial and error.

You have the almighty who uses extreme acts of power, violence, or aggression to convince us that he has all the power. That might be about violence or sexual violence, but equally, there is a trauma theorist called Judith Herman whose book "Trauma and Recovery" is amazing. In that, she says that when someone is not truly broken by the abuser until they have been forced to compromise their own integrity, what often happens is the abuser will work out what is most important to this person. What are their values? They will do what they can to break our integrity. That might be about making us do sexual things that we don't want to. That might be about lying.

My ex-husband... I was a Christian, and he said he was a Christian but wasn't. He knew that my faith was very important to me. Very early on in the relationship he would try to make me call him "God," and it was a way of trying to make me break that power of my integrity and make me sacrifice my faith. The tricky thing is that only the person

themselves will know what that thing is that they've been made to do that is breaking their own integrity.

I've written a course for women who've been subjected to abuse called "Own My Life" course. It's being piloted in the UK at the minute. [This course is now available to the public!] One of the exercises we do is that we have this list of values. You can do it online. You can Google "biggest core values." I get people to read through them and find out their top ten, and then strip it down to their top five, which is a bit of trauma itself to try to work out "What are my five core values?" Then I ask them to work out, "What are the ways that the abuser has tried to undermine those values in your life?" For every person that will be different, because our values are personal to us. The almighty is about destroying our sense of self in ways that show that they have all the power and we have none.

I came across a story about a little boy who'd been sexually abused, and the perpetrator said that he had a camera in every light bulb, and if the child ever disclosed, he would know. After that you'd go around and look at light bulbs and think, "Where is there a place where there aren't lightbulbs?" It's the sense of all-powerfulness and omnipotence that leaves us thinking, "There's no hope. I can't escape this."

You also have the demander who forces or manipulates us into doing trivial or pointless tasks and who makes constant demands of us. You have the isolator. The isolation is key, because when somebody isolates us, the only narrative that we have is theirs. That makes it very difficult to make good choices when the only person that we have is them. They might isolate us by saying, "You're not seeing your mother anymore. I hate her." These narratives of mothers-in-law being a nightmare obviously feed into that. But it also might be subtle. They might say, "How well do you know Natalie?" And you say, "I know her well. Why?" They say, "No reason. I just wondered." And then suddenly there's a seed of doubt very subtly being planted.

Encouraging us to have children and then refusing to support our parenting choices, so then we are isolated because we've got kids. Particularly if they undermine our parenting, then we can't get anyone else to look after the kids or no one wants to spend time with our kids because they are a nightmare because of his behavior. Isolating is a key part of what an abuser does.

The last one is the nice one. This is a tactic that is hard to hear for most people, because they want to believe that sometimes he is nice and he's not always bad. Even the nice behaviors are tactics. One of the key things the abuser gives us is hope. Hope is a necessary part of the abuser's tactics, because if there is no hope, we probably

would get out. But because there is this sense of hope or this promise that things are going to change – being nice to us, going back to what they used to be like – then we think, “Wow. This is it! They are back to who they used to be.”

The other thing that happens when someone is abusive, over time the level of abuse and the level of awfulness to us means the least nice thing they could possibly do – the tiniest nice thing – takes on epic proportions. I explain it this way. If someone denies us access to a toilet for twenty-four hours – they locked us in a room and said, “You can’t use the toilet for twenty-four hours,” – when they let us go to the toilet, our first response is not going to be to say, “You awful person. How could you not let me go to the toilet?” Our first response is going to be, “Thank you so much for letting me go to the toilet,” because what we’re grateful for and what takes on kindness proportions is very different when somebody restricts us of the general niceness that you would expect in the world, even their nice behaviors.

The book starts by going through these tactics of abuse and talks about what these look like and looks at how these different tactics will use the children, will use finances, and will use the Christian faith. Then it goes on to look at why somebody perpetrates abuse and goes beyond that to look at, “How do we work out how to leave? What’s going on in our brains and our bodies? How do we co-parent with somebody who’s been abusive whether we are still with them or whether we have left? How do we raise children so they don’t become abusive? What do we do about theology?” So it’s quite a comprehensive book, but it does have me ranting about cake and saying some things throughout, so it’s not entirely miserable.

NH: I was just listening to an interview that another person had done of you. In that interview, you were talking about sex as being like a chocolate cake that you put in the refrigerator. I thought that was such a great picture. I love pictures. I like to use them. I like to hear them – word pictures – because they illustrate and bring to life realities in a way that we can really grasp and see. I noticed that you do that a lot. I’m really excited to get your book. I’ve not read it, but I’ve looked at it on Amazon.

Let me quick jump in here and explain to my listeners that Natalie and I connected on Twitter, and I still don’t have any recollection of it. I don’t remember anything about it, but I put it on my calendar that I was going to do a podcast interview with her. Then I went on vacation and I came back. I saw that I had this interview, and I was trying to jog my memory. I didn’t write anything down, and I don’t know why. Usually I am pretty organized. I went back and searched through Twitter.

I couldn’t figure it out, so I reached out and said, “Natalie, I’ve got this interview with you

and I can't remember anything about you." She sent me a link to her page that I will put in the show notes. She's got a page with bazillions of links to all these different articles she's written for lots of different people and interviews she has done. She can cover this topic very comprehensively. Anyway, I went to her website and saw her picture and I thought, "Oh my word! I remember seeing this lady. I loved her!" There was an interview that you did with Phil, and I remember thinking at the time that I felt like you were so gracious and so articulate. I was so impressed. Phil seemed a little bit patronizing. Did you sense that in that interview? Do you remember that? Did you feel like that, or did you feel like it went pretty well as far as the vibes you got from him?

NC: I think it's an interesting thing, because when I'm speaking or doing this kind of stuff or debating like that, I spend all the time kind of discerning how to respond to what they're saying. I don't really assess the tone. I'm just so busy thinking what the next thing is that I need to say. It's interesting, because I think Phil is a nice guy. Actually, that came about after the biggest complementarian network in the UK had a conference that was sort of rebounding and rebranding complementarianism. That happened last year. I went as this woman who had to disclose I was egalitarian at every small group discussion.

NH: Oh, my goodness.

NC: It was interesting. I went because I really wanted to hear what was being said. They've rebranded it in the UK as complementarity to try and distance themselves from the US fundamentalist end of complementarianism and from John Piper, etc. They've given it a new name and everything. They said it's more like an orchestra and all this stuff. I connected with Phil there, and there was a sense that he's committed to addressing domestic abuse. He's not a bad guy, as most of these people are not bad people.

NH: Right.

NC: But I think there is this sense that a lot of this stuff only works in theory when you come from his perspective, which is great for him, because he's a man and fits the profile of the sort of man who's allowed to speak. He's white and he's able-bodied and he's heterosexual and all that kind of stuff. So he's never had a challenge. It's never been a problem to him that this stuff exists. I think for him there's a kind of naivety.

I guess you could, as you did, describe it as kind of patronizing or condescending, because there's this idea of, "Well, if you could only understand how beautiful it is. You're saying that Scripture is problematic, when it's beautiful." I think, "It's so beautiful

for you because you've never had it used to keep you being abused. It's beautiful to you because you don't have to face the consequences." But the reality is that scripture and the Bible and what we understand of Jesus is that the priority and the centering is always the oppressed. It's always the people who have been damaged and hurt.

The frustrating thing is that the core of scripture, though I would say there are many scriptures that don't fit this, but fundamentally, it's about love and those who are powerless and all that kind of stuff. It's really frustrating when Christians are perpetuating this idea that, "If you just understood it the way I understand it, you'll see how beautiful female submission is. Male headship can be beautiful." Well, it can be beautiful to you because you're a man and you're not abusive. That works great.

The thing about complementarianism is that it works well for men and for women who don't have a call to leadership. They can all get together and say, "Oh, it's lovely. Isn't it great? Yes, we all love it. Blah blah blah." Actually, if you're a woman called to leadership, you don't fit. The problem is that not every woman is called to leadership, and that's fine. I have a friend who is a clinical psychologist in a complementarian church saying, "I don't feel called to leadership, so it's fine for me." But I said, "Well, it's not fine for me!"

NH: Right! Exactly!

NC: So if it's not fine for me but it's fine for you, what does that mean, because we are supposed to be interconnected as human beings? You don't get to abdicate responsibility for what your theology is saying to me. The guy who is the main speaker there is kind of an up-and-coming theologian. His name is Alastair Roberts, and he was the big theological articulator of all this stuff. I thanked him afterwards. We've been friends for quite a long time, and I didn't even know he was complementarian for years. I thought he must be egalitarian because "How could he not understand that?" and then I discovered he's like, a raging complementarian.

He even knitted me gloves once. It's been an interesting dilemma. This person has knitted me clothing. This man has knitted me clothing. In the US it might be crazy there. I did complementarian knitting. They might be like, "What?" I say this guy is knitting me gloves and I really like him, and it turns out his theology and what he's perpetuating are horrific.

Anyway, in this conference he said, "We don't need to define manhood and womanhood. It will just ooze out of people and they will just perform gender in the ways that we understand it, because that's what true liberation is." Afterwards, I said to

him, "You're saying that we don't need to define this stuff. That we will just be our true selves and it will be wonderful. But the framework that you have provided means that who my true self is cannot flourish in the framework you've provided. So if your framework cannot work for who God made me to be, then there's something wrong with your framework."

NH: Right.

NC: He just couldn't answer. So, yes, it has been interesting. I'm grateful for Phil being willing to have that conversation, because there are a lot of complementarians who wouldn't sit down at the table with me, and I think we need to be sitting down at tables with each other.

NH: Yes! And that is what I loved about that conversation. He was gracious, too. He was not at all antagonistic in any way. It's funny, because when you said the word "beautiful" over and over – "it's so beautiful" – that is something that was glaring in that interview. It was like, "Come on. Please don't say that again, because that's what destroyed me. That destroyed me, and I watch it destroying hundreds and hundreds of women every single day. It's not very beautiful, honestly."

NC: Yeah. I think what you were saying before about the chocolate cake in the fridge analogy, for people who got a glimpse of that and then we moved on without making more sense of it, there is a number of Christian leaders in the UK, male leaders, who have used this analogy. I grew up in Christian culture. I grew up in a Christian home. Within the youth talks about sexual purity, there was this teaching that sex was like a chocolate cake. You put it in the fridge and you stay out of the kitchen. That was actual teaching that we were taught.

I didn't have a framework for consent. I'd learned that premarital sex is bad, postmarital sex is good – the end. If you save sex for marriage, you will have mind-blowing sex on your wedding night, and it will be amazing and wonderful. Just to clarify, it takes 10,000 hours of something to become an expert, so your wedding night is not going to be the best sex of your life.

NH: Right, exactly.

NC: That's not to say it will be terrible or it doesn't have to be terrible, but let's be realistic about this stuff, anyway. The vagina is an organ, and if you haven't done much with it before, unfortunately, all sorts of stuff can go on before sex is pleasurable. Anyway, what happened was when I was seventeen and had grown up in Christian

culture, one of the things for me was that I thought the way that I manifested the gospel in my culture as a countercultural Christian (which is what you're taught to be in the church) was by being a virgin – by not having sex. That's the thing that makes me prove to all my non-Christian friends that I am a Christian, and that's how I'm going to win them for the Lord.

It's not necessarily that somebody said that. I didn't stand in a church where a youth leader stood up and said, "Kids, your virginity is the pathway to salvation." But as a girl growing up in the church, that's what you learn. I said, "This is it. If I tell them all that I'm a virgin..." I went to a college, and college in the UK is sixteen to eighteen year olds not in university. So I went to a college, and it was the first time I was in a non-Christian environment because I'd gone to a church-run school, a Catholic secondary school. All my friends were Christians. So I was thinking, "Look at the mission field. I can evangelize them all with my virginity."

So I took this college course, and this was it. My not having sex and committing to not having sex was the definitive thing about being a Christian teenager, not like, building a relationship with Jesus or anything else. That was also there, but sex was the thing. When I then met a boy who was also seventeen and said he'd recently become a Christian... The two things you get taught about sex is that sex is the chocolate cake. You keep it over there and that's it. The other thing you are told is make sure the other person is a Christian. As long as they're washed in the blood, that's all. It doesn't matter whether they are a good person. It doesn't matter whether you have anything in common with them. As long as you're not unequally yoked, it's fine.

NH: That's so true.

NC: That's 100% of Christian sex education. Those two things. So here I am. I'm doing the first thing because I'm a virgin. I've declared it very religiously to everybody. Also, he's a Christian, so we're fine. He was also very attractive, which at seventeen was also useful. So I say to him, "I don't believe in sex before marriage. I'm not going to have sex." He said, "That's okay." But then he proceeded to coerce and manipulate me into sexual activity to the point that within twelve days, he had manipulated me into having sex with him.

He did that through a process that some people would call "love bombing." People may or may not be familiar with that term. People can Google it. There are very different parts to it, but one of the things is about high intensity. Other things are about kind of taking over somebody's entire life so they don't have any time to think for themselves; spending all their time together; making big, grand gestures; talking about forever love

very quickly. All these things mean it's very difficult to get any perspective. He was an expert at this level of intensity and pushing me into greater and greater sexual activity, and because all I'd been told is that you only have to say you don't want to have sex and that's it, I didn't have any skills to recognize that what was happening was sexually abusive.

So within twelve days where he had essentially coerced and forced me into sex, I then felt terrible. I didn't think, "I feel bad because he has sexually coerced me." I thought, "I feel bad because I have betrayed Jesus." I didn't have a framework for premarital sex that could feel good, so I didn't know that this was sexual abuse. I didn't know you could be sexually abused in an intimate relationship. I thought it had to be an adult to a child.

The problem with the chocolate cake analogy is that it doesn't give any differentiation between whether you go in the fridge and eat the chocolate cake or whether somebody drags you into the kitchen, opens the fridge, and shoves your face in the chocolate cake. Both of those things are very different contextually, particularly when we understand the impact of pornography on youth culture (and on adults) and how it normalizes graphic sexual violence as well.

So it was really difficult. I then thought the way that I could solve this was that I had to marry him. I'd known him for like, three weeks. He'd coerced me into sexual activity within twelve days of actually starting a relationship. Then I thought, "The way I solve this is that God would want me to marry him." I'm seventeen. This was 2003, not the 1950s. But I thought I had to marry him.

Within six months I was pregnant because he refused to use contraception. Actually, it's really important that we recognize reproductive coercion as a form of abusive behavior. We know that pregnancy is a high-risk factor for somebody being abused, but what we don't often recognize is the number of women for whom the abuse involves them being coerced into pregnancy. That might be that he pricks holes in condoms. It might be that he lies and says he's had a vasectomy or that he's got low sperm count. It might be that he takes the condom off during sex. Or that we are in a religious culture that says that women don't have the right to control their fertility as well. There are all sorts of things that lead us with, "Your job as a woman is to have babies," so we feel like we can't control it. Or you're in a religious community that thinks contraception is bad.

In the UK there is data that came out, and I want to get the stats right. It was over 50% of women who had been subjected to abuse by a partner. Over 50% had acknowledged that they had been subjected to reproductive coercion. Actually, we often don't realize

we've been subjected to reproductive coercion until we become pregnant. So if we happen to not get pregnant, we don't always realize it. Recognizing that our pregnancy is a result of that abuse, as you can imagine, that is very complicated, isn't it? Suddenly we didn't choose to have that child, but now we love that child. Now that child is a weapon that the abuser can use to harm us further. It's a very complicated situation, and there are some abusers who will keep their partner pregnant over and over again, and that keeps them stuck. They can't ever leave then. You've got the Quiverfull movement and other theological, kind of Christian arguments to justify some men doing that, which perpetuates all of this stuff.

So six months in I am pregnant, and then we got married when my daughter was three months old. He was horrifically dominating to me. He made me think that I was worthless; that I was stupid, ugly, and fat; and everything he did wrong was my fault. He made me do humiliating sexual things, and I was compliant because I thought that doing it with consent made it somehow better, and if I said, "No," I knew he'd make me do it. So if I proactively would consent to things I don't want to do, then "It can't be abuse." Also, there's a sense of thinking that, "I'm going to convince myself I like doing these humiliating things because then it's not abuse," so my identity becomes caught up in some hypersexualized stuff.

It was really atrocious. He had cheated on me regularly before, and within six months of getting married he started having relationships with teenage girls and ended up convicted of sex offenses against teenage girls, which then meant that I was married to a sex offender. But all the way through this I thought, "I need to love him, and by loving him, the vehicle of my love will mean that Jesus comes in and saves him, and that through my loving him Jesus will save him. That's how this thing will be resolved." I kept thinking, "If I just forgive enough and love enough and give enough..."

What I was doing was enabling him to sin – not in my own head. It wasn't my fault, but it was perpetuating. Why wouldn't he change? One of the reasons why somebody is abusive, and I think most people who have or have had an abusive partner... I know for me the key thing was "Why? Why is he doing this to me? If I can understand why..." One of the other reasons is because we want to fix it. If we can get the formula of what is the problem, then we can work out the solution. So we jump on things like, "It's because of his childhood or because he's stressed or it's because of us," because they are all solvable.

But the reasons why somebody is abusive are two things. The first thing is because it is hugely beneficial. People don't want to hear this. Society doesn't want to hear it, and when we're being abused we don't want to hear it. We want to believe that he must be

some sort of tortured soul. We have this idea that “hurt people hurt people.” It’s hard with our Christian narratives of sin and brokenness.

But fundamentally, he’s abusive because he gets what he wants. He gets whatever he wants; he goes wherever he wants; he gets sex on demand; he gets to have the status of being a good parent and being a good spouse without actually doing anything; he never takes responsibility; he gets to blame everyone else; and we all run around doing everything that he wants and take all the responsibility for anything that goes wrong. Who wouldn’t want a life like that?

NH: Right.

NC: Yes, there is a sacrificing of empathy and intimacy and all things that every other human being wants, but the benefits are huge. So we really must be honest about the fact that yes, he is getting what he wants from us. That’s the first thing. It’s hugely beneficial to be abusive. The second thing is about the beliefs that he holds. Somebody who is abusive believes two things. They believe that they own their partner, and they believe that they are entitled to do what they want to their partner.

NH: Yes.

NC: Ownership and entitlement are the roots of abusive behavior. Often, we hear abuse being described as jealousy. I don’t use the word “jealousy,” because I think humanity is capable of jealousy. It’s possessiveness, because they believe they possess us. It’s about ownership. “I own my partner. Because I own her and I own my children, I have the right. I’m entitled to do what I want.” If we want to effect change, we must challenge those beliefs of ownership and entitlement.

When someone is abusive, that is fundamentally what is going on. They are not somebody who is a psychopath. They are not somebody who doesn’t have the capacity for empathy. They usually are very emotionally intelligent and capable of communication, which is why they can convince everyone else they aren’t abusive and why everyone else is manipulated, because these are not emotionally incapable people.

One of the things I come up against more and more is people saying, “Yes, but my partner is autistic,” and autism being used as a reason why someone is abusive. Now, somebody who is autistic wants to control their environment to feel safe. Somebody who is abusive wants to control their partner. Somebody who is autistic might say, “I don’t want to go to the party.” Somebody who is abusive says, “I don’t want you to go to the party.” So recognize that. More and more I’m coming across women saying, “It’s

because he's on the autism spectrum." In reality, someone on the autism spectrum is more likely to be abused than they are to be an abuser.

It's hard to hear this stuff, because we want to believe that if we could just get him the right counseling or the right support or that maybe it's his anger issues, then we will resolve this stuff. But it is simply not about those things. What counseling will do is that a counselor will generally be sucked into his narrative and collude with him. What anger management will do will just train him to control himself even more, because he's not actually angry. He might appear angry at these points, but if someone turns up at the door, he won't start screaming at them. He will turn it all down and be nice and lovely to them, and then as soon as they've gone, he'll start screaming at us again. So there is a level of control.

I worked with one woman, and she realized he knew what he was doing when every time he'd kick off, he'd smash her phone, and then he couldn't track her and obsessively control her through the phone when he wasn't with her. Until one time, he kicked off and he went for her phone, but then he stopped. She thought, "Hold on a second! He knows what he's doing. He's not out of control."

NH: Exactly!

NC: Also, if we've got a partner who smashes things, what you will notice is that the only things he smashes are things that are not important to him. So he'll smash our things. I know a police officer who went to a house. The police had been called by the husband who said, "My wife's gone mad. She's smashing up the house." When the police arrived at the house, the police officer was well enough trained to see that the only things that had been smashed in the house were her things. From that, they were able to ascertain that this guy was lying.

All of this is really key, but understanding that this is about benefits and beliefs is crucial to start to effect change. I talked to a woman recently who had realized her partner was abusive and had separated from him. He was continuing to control her through the children. She was saying, "I just don't know what to do. I want to have a life going on. I want things to work out okay." The problem is that an abuser is always motivated by power. So the question we need to ask when we're interacting with an abuser is not, "Why is he doing this to me?" but "How is he trying to gain power in this interaction from me?"

An abuser works in the currency of power. Every time, every interaction, whether they are being nice or horrible, whether they are involving other people or not, every single

thing they do is about power. What we need to think about is “How are they trying to get power from me? Is it by being nice to me? Is it by trying to use money?” What we need to look at is “How do I stop him from stealing my power?” Often we may think, if they are harassing us through the phone, “Let’s get a new number.” But what that will mean is that they will just turn up at the door because they can’t get a hold of us. So the most strategic thing to do is get a second number so that we can give all the people that we care about the second number. But he’s got the old number, and we can check that phone whenever we want, and he’s no longer taking over our life and our phone.

NH: Great idea!

NC: It’s about operating differently. In the course I’ve written, we have this activity with traffic lights. You’ve got three different types of sign. You’ve got a road, a red light, and a green light. You think about, with the road, what is the action that you want to take? This could be while we’re still with the abuser or when we’ve left the abuser. It might be that I’m still with the abuser, and I want to go to college. It might be that I’ve left the abuser and I want to put the appropriate boundaries in place with my children. So you put that road on the counter.

The red traffic light is, “What is he going to do to stop me from taking the action?” Then you list all the things that he is going to do. So if it’s going to college, “He’s going to tell me we don’t have enough money. He’s going to tell me the kids need me at home. He’s going to suddenly want to have another baby.” You think of all the things that he could do to stop me from going to college. Or if I’ve left him, “He’s going to start turning up at the car and revving the engine. He’s going to start demanding things. He’s going to start telling the children horrible things about me.” The red light is, “What is he going to do to stop me moving forward on this road?”

Once you’ve worked out all the things he might do, then you need to list on the green light, “What are the things that you can do to plan around those red lights?” What we often do when we are with an abuser or after we’ve left an abuser is that we assume the best all the time. We assume that he’s just going to wake up one day and be nice, but he’s not. We always have to presume that there is an inevitability that there will always be a red light on that road. Our job is to work out how we turn that red light green.

What do we do strategically? We can only do that if we start to think of what other obstacles he’s going to put in my way. It is a different way of thinking about this, but by doing that, it’s a very effective way of starting to think strategically and starting to operate in the same space he’s operating out of rather than trying to pull him into a

space in terms of our good intentions and our niceness. It's horrible, because we don't want to be setting boundaries. This is a person we're supposed to care about and love. They're the father of our children. We want to have a nice going on, but the reality is that is not possible. That's something that we must mourn and make space for that reality.

NH: So good. I love the practical ideas that you had. Okay, I want to wrap this up by circling back, because what I really want people who have been survivors to understand, and what I would really like the church to eventually understand, is how their ideas about men and women and their ideas about roles of men and women lead to... Well, in some ways, that is the definition of abuse. When you think about it, when you said, that they are about ownership and entitlement...

When you tell a couple who is just getting married that the man's role is to basically own and make all of the decisions and lead and be the head of this woman and that the woman's role is to follow this man and to give him your power, aren't we just setting them up? Now, if they're a really nice couple and the man is really nice, and he's not the kind of person who wants to take power away, then maybe that would work. But in a lot of cases, these are just people who are being inundated with this kind of teaching. They are kind of being set up.

It almost seems like you could even start with a guy who has this put into his head, and then the woman also, and they fall into these roles which turns into an abusive situation because, like you said, it seems to work. It works for the man; it doesn't work for the woman. But she's doing it for the glory of God, and any suffering that she does, she can always spiritualize it and say that she is suffering for Christ. I don't know. I think that is one of your agendas too, to help the church understand and see how this creates a doorway for abuse to get into the church.

NC: Yes. This is why it's crucial to understand that the core of abuse is ownership and entitlement, because one of the challenges we have in the church and one of the reasons the church is so terrible at dealing with abuse is because they misdiagnose abuse. They misdiagnose abuse as a relationship issue – as a marriage issue. So they respond to abuse whenever it emerges as, "This couple needs marital counseling. They need communication issues help." Even when they deal with abuse, they think it's a relationship problem. They think it's an emotional incapacity problem, that it's an anger problem. The problem is misdiagnosis.

While relationship counseling is helpful, while counseling is helpful, while anger management may be helpful... I describe it like, yes, that works for someone with the

stomach flu, but that's not going to treat someone who's having a heart attack. That's not about them needing counseling or marital counseling or any of these things. It's saying that's not going to help someone who is being abused, and it's not going to help the abuser to change. So we need to deal with our misdiagnosis problem in Christian cultures and in Christian communities.

That's why understanding that the core of abuse is the beliefs of ownership and entitlement, because when we realize that, we start to recognize how complementarian theology is part of the problem. If you believe that men and women fundamentally have different roles in which the man has more power... And you can say as many times as you like that it's about power to serve, but the reality is that it's about having more power, having more cultural capital, and about the cultural colluding of what men do as being powerful and what women do as being less powerful. By doing that, you create a context in which you are perpetuating beliefs of ownership and entitlement.

Like you said, that may not happen if you have someone who is a kind, caring, compassionate person. The vast majority of functioning complementarian marriages are functionally egalitarian in practice. They would say, "We believe that the man makes the final decision." If you ask them how many times that happened, they will say, "Well, it never happens, because we talk about it until we work it out, but theoretically we could do that." So when you find those ones, they were operating functionally egalitarian.

The problem is when there are people who are perpetuating. This has been perpetuating the ownership and entitlement, because if you say to someone who already believes that they are entitled over their spouse, "As the head, you are in charge to have the final say," that is a horrifically problematic thing. That is inviting him to be abusive. You can't say, "Well, we don't have any abusers here." There is as much abuse perpetrated in the church as outside of the church. The only difference is that women stay longer. It's not that men are less abusive and that perpetuating abuse paves patriarchal narratives.

It's not fair on men, either. God did not design it so that men have to hold it all on their shoulders. There's a real irony in masculinity that masculinity is constructed as strength. What that means for men is that they are not allowed to fail, and the irony there is that the only way that you become strong is by having failure in your life. The only way that strength is developed is through resilience being built, and that resilience is built through falling down and getting back up. You have this masculinity that is constructed as strength, but is hugely weak and fragile because boys are taught, "No matter what, don't cry. Keep it all together. Hold it all in." They've never actually failed

and had to get back up, or they've avoided the consequences of failure.

I talked to a guy who had played American football, and he said when he had the opportunity to play professionally, he chose the worst team where he could be the best player rather than the best team where he would be the worst player. He knows that meant he didn't do as well as he could have done, because his masculinity demanded that he had to be stronger all the time. So these men are not being given the skills to become strong.

Ironically, the amount of fragility in our Christian male leaders is off the scale, isn't it? But also on top of that, you have not just this fragility, but also this ideal that is being put forward that men have to hold it all together. "You have to have it all on your shoulders." You know what the gospel is? The gospel is saying, "I can't do this on my own. I can't make it alone. I need Jesus to help me." All of this perpetuating of headship, of hierarchy, of patriarchal masculinity – it is perpetuating a message that says men have to have it all together, and that is absolutely against what the gospel stands for, which is saying, "I'm vulnerable. I'm weak. I can't do it, and I need God to help me."

NH: Excellent! Those of you who are listening, I don't know if you're thinking what I'm thinking right now, but every time Natalie opens up her mouth and says something, I feel like now I want to go off in this direction. We could talk for another hour just about this one topic. We have touched on so many different aspects of this whole issue, and I want you to know that you can actually find out more of what Natalie has to say on all of these different issues that we've touched on in this episode.

I will have a link to her website in the show notes, so if you are listening on your phone, you can go to FlyingFreeNow.com. Go to the podcast, and Episode 30 with Natalie Collins. In those show notes I will have all the links that you need to get to dig into more of what Natalie has to offer online for free. You can listen to her talk. You can read her articles. She's got all kinds of stuff. Natalie, I want to thank you so much for being willing to spend an hour with us today. This has been a great episode. I've learned so much, and I'm really excited to keep connecting with you and help you in what you are doing also. I don't think this is going to be the end of our discussion between you and me. I'm really excited about what you are doing. I really love you!

NC: It's been so great to be on the show and I'm so glad. Thank you for having me, especially when you don't even know how you ended up with me.

NH: I know! I feel bad about that, but that's the craziness of my life. I have nine kids. I have six still living with me, and I'm remarried also. My life is absolutely crazy busy, so it

doesn't surprise me that it happened. I try to have some safeguards. I've got Post-It notes all over my desk. But for some reason you slipped through the cracks. I don't know if I figured I would go back and figure it out or what. Clearly, there was a mind glitch there. But I'm so glad that we connected. When I figured out who you were, I was really excited. I thought, "If I would have known that back then, I would have been counting the days for this episode."

NC: Well, it's been great. All your listeners can contact me via my website. I would say that, because I'm based in the UK, if people want to read reviews about the book, they can read them at the Amazon UK version of the site, as it's not as familiar to people in the US. So if people want to know about the book before they buy it, they might find it there, because the reviews don't cross over, annoyingly.

NH: Right. I didn't know that.

NC: Yeah, it's really annoying. So if anybody does read it and wants to review it in the US, please do so I can have reviews on that. If you find it useful, do put a review up. Thank you so much for having me, and I'm looking forward to further conversations with you as well.

NH: Alright. And the rest of you, fly free!