

## WHY IS MY HUSBAND SO MEAN TO ME?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://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 36 of the Flying Free Podcast. Rachel, you're back with me this time! Hello. Welcome.

RACHEL: Hi! Good to be here.

NATALIE: It's been a while.

RACHEL: It has.

NATALIE: We've had a lot of guest interviews, but it's good to be back here with you. I thought it would be a good topic to talk about... We're calling this episode "He Loves Me; He Loves Me Not," because one of the most common issues that women in emotionally abusive relationships have is trying to figure out, "Is this really abuse?" and "Is it really that bad?"

Women say, "Sometimes my husband is really wonderful, and there's a lot of wonderful qualities about him – which is the reason why I married him. Then at other times it seems like it might be abusive. But don't all marriages have problems? I'm not perfect either, and sometimes I have problems. How do you differentiate between a normal marriage with your garden-variety arguments versus a marriage that could be defined as emotionally abusive?" That's what we're going to talk about today. What do you think?

RACHEL: I think there's a lot to get to here. I've got my flower ready to pick the petals off while reciting, "He loves me; he loves me not." That's what that makes me think of.

NATALIE: That is kind of how you feel. In a normal relationship, even though there are problems, there is never that feeling of doubt to question, "Does he really love me?" You still know. You may have had an argument, but you know he really loves you.

RACHEL: Yes. It is built on a solid foundation of love.

NATALIE: Yes. So to even know that if you are experiencing on a regular basis that

feeling or thought of, "I'm not really sure if this guy really sees me or knows me or even loves me on a deep level," then that's a red flag. It's a good thing that you're listening to this podcast, because we're going to talk about that. Rachel, what I'd like to do first is define what the problem is, and why is it important enough that we should be talking about it?

RACHEL: I think you can boil it down to the fact that people who have narcissistic tendencies, who have levels of toxic pride that they don't want to overcome – they act in inconsistent ways in what they do and what they say. In my previous marriage, my husband was good about saying, "I love you." We always said, "I love you" when we got off the phone or even when we left the room. But he didn't act like that. He never put that into practice. If you think of love as self-sacrifice, getting into the other person's world and loving them for who they are, that was never the experience there.

Instead, I was always afraid that if I stopped doing something, he would stop loving me. If I gained too much weight or if I didn't do something he had specifically told me to do, then it was all off the table. There was very much this level of insecure attachment that was going on. But it wasn't like that all the time. Sometimes he would do loving things like bring me home a new water bottle, bring flowers home, or something to that effect. Then I would think, "He really does love me, and I shouldn't think so poorly of him or wish that he would be different."

NATALIE: Right. It reminds me of a show on HBO called "Big Little Lies." It's also a book by the same name written by Liane Moriarty. There are two seasons of it. If you get a chance to watch that series, it's a perfect example of the cognitive dissonance that happens in an abuse target's life. I like that it's this extreme. Nicole Kidman is the victim, and she really thinks her marriage is okay. She knows there's problems. On the one hand, they have great, amazing sex. He's really a wonderful dad. It shows him a lot with his kids: Playing with them, really getting into their world, and really caring about them. He's also really wonderful to her, but the dark side is that he actually beats her so that she has bruises and cuts.

That's an extreme case. Most of our listeners aren't living with those kinds of extreme swings; however, the same dynamic is happening. It's the same cognitive dissonance. On the one hand they've got all these great qualities and there are some really good things about the relationship that keep you on your toes wondering, "Well, maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm making a big deal out of nothing when he's not being kind." On the other hand, they may be doing these more subtle kinds of abuse tactics.

So let's talk about the more subtle kinds of abuse, because that is what I think most of

our listeners are dealing with rather than being beaten. Even in our culture, though, if you had a friend who was being beaten, you may say, "You have got to get out of that marriage. You have to get out or you could be killed someday," but the person inside of the marriage doesn't necessarily feel that she's in danger because she sees him when he is being good.

However, when you have covert abuse going on, you aren't getting outside feedback. People on the outside only see the amazing stuff that this guy is doing, and they aren't seeing you show up with bruises. If you don't understand and they don't understand, how in the world are you going to see what's actually going on in the relationship and that it is abusive? That was a very long introduction to talking about some of the covert tactics that are used in an emotionally abusive relationship. Maybe you could talk about some of the things you've experienced or that you've heard other people have experienced.

RACHEL: The biggest thing for me that I was never able to put my finger on was that my husband never took responsibility for himself. If there was a problem between the two of us, there would be an argument, and then he would stonewall me or ignore me until I came to him and told him that I was sorry for whatever I had done – raised my voice, been rude, or whatever. But then he would talk to me about how I needed to do better, how I just needed to do what he said, and he never would talk about his role. He didn't even believe he had a role. It was all my fault. So I think that is the biggest one that we can identify – the subtle blame-shifting.

Something I think is even more subtle than that is that my husband would never apologize. He would never, ever say those words. He thought it was stupid to apologize. He didn't have any use for apologies. Other people do have husbands who apologize, but they don't really mean it, because they will start in with making excuses afterwards, or the apology is empty and doesn't result in any change. Apologies that don't result in repentance and a new leaf of trying to not act that way anymore is meaningless. The words are supposed to represent an action of something changed. Without that change, it really is meaningless.

Looking for that changed behavior is important when assessing whether someone is truly sorry. Using words to manipulate people can be tricky because you don't know if they really mean them or not, so you have to see if their actions line up with their words.

NATALIE: Right. What you are talking about, I just did two videos this week which you can find on my YouTube channel. Look up Natalie Hoffman on YouTube or go to the

show notes. One of the videos gives thirty covert emotionally abusive tactics, so you can find more details in that video. The other video talks about crappy apologies – all the different ways that anyone can apologize but not really mean it.

One thing that happened a lot with me in my relationship is that I would see a behavior that he was doing that was causing a problem either with the kids or with me. It was causing a lot of pain or hurt. I would tentatively bring it up because I was nervous. I knew what was going to come next. It was the same thing time after time. I would bring it up to see if I could have a meeting of the minds to try to get him to understand what he had done that was so painful, because I wanted him to have good relationships with his kids. I wanted him to have a good relationship with me. I wanted us to be close. But there was this behavior that was causing this pain, and how can you get close to someone who is hurting you?

So I would bring it up to talk about it, and he would turn it back on me. What he did would somehow be my fault. He would make comments like, “You think that you’re better than I am.” All of a sudden it would be about me and how I thought I was better than him rather than being about what he did and how much pain that had caused for people in our family.

If anyone is listening and thinks, “Boy, that happens to me,” you need to know that is not a normal behavior. That is actually a covert, abusive behavior. It may seem normal because we all react to negative feedback in a defensive way at first. Even if you don’t respond in a defensive way, deep down inside your bristles will go up if someone brings up something they want you to work on, because that’s just human nature.

Your spouse may even say one of the following: “I don’t think it made that big of a difference,” “I don’t think it really hurt the kid that much,” “I didn’t really mean it that way – don’t you understand what I was trying to communicate there?” That’s fine to say, but if they don’t circle back and make it right with you or acknowledge that your perspective was different from theirs, that’s a problem. It’s a problem if they shut you down and say, “I’m not going to talk about this anymore.” That is actually abusive. If you are in an intimate relationship with someone, it is okay to say, “I need to think about this. I didn’t realize I had caused that kind of pain, but I need to think about it because I want to figure this out.” That’s okay! But then circle back and say, “I’ve been trying to see how you might have taken this from your perspective, and I can see how it came across that way. I am really sorry. I don’t want to hurt you.”

RACHEL: Yeah. But be careful, because (and I see this in the private Flying Free Sisterhood group posts) abusers can sometimes use the correct language – “I see I

need to work on this” – but it is always paired up with something that you need to do better or some reason that you did something bad. So that is a big red flag if they are acting humble, but then they go back and say it was actually you. It’s so confusing, because you take the humility and are glad for it. You want to think, “Okay, everything is going to be great. He’s taking responsibility for himself,” but then it turns around and there is a blame-shift back to you. That is a tell-tale sign. That’s what you must go with, even though you don’t want it to be that way.

NATALIE: Yes. Another one is when you show up as yourself with a different opinion than the one he holds. So if you say, “No,” to him for whatever reason, that will be a problem. Or if he wants something to go a certain way, but you disagree and want to discuss it, that will be a problem too. You will be shamed or criticized for having a different perspective than he does. Basically, you are safe if you enfold yourself into his mind and into his perspective, but if you show up with your own mind and your own perspective, you will be criticized. That is a big no no.

RACHEL: Yes, you are not allowed to be your own separate person from him. You must be right in line with who he is, what he values, and what he thinks. This was huge for me in my marriage. My husband had very strong opinions about the world and everything else in it. For the most part I was pretty aligned with him, but if there was something I thought was stupid, I had to keep it to myself, because I couldn’t speak up ever and say, “Here’s why I think that’s wrong.” He would berate me down or have some clever argument about why I was wrong and also dumb.

NATALIE: Yes. Another one I dealt with... There will be times in your relationship where you fall apart. Maybe your friend died. Maybe you just had a new baby. Maybe your child is sick and in the hospital. Maybe you are really stressed out because of work or because of some traumatic relationship at church. Things happen for whatever the reason, but they will not enter into that experience with you. They expect you to be on your “A” game 100% of the time, and if you are not, then you have failed as a human being.

RACHEL: Right. There is no room for you to be a genuine human with skin and “made of flesh,” as the Bible calls it. There is no room for that kind of weakness. My husband despised any form of weakness, or what he viewed as a weakness. He could not handle it. It’s funny, Natalie, that you talk about stressful life situations. I didn’t even have someone die, but the catalyst for what set me to thinking that there was something wrong in our relationship was when I lost my job through no fault of my own. The irony of it is so funny. I always thought of my husband as this strong leader who had these really strong opinions, he knew right from wrong, and all these things. He could not get

out of bed and he was blaming me because of all the circumstances. If I had done this differently and done that differently, and I had better hurry up and get a new job. He was not a leader; he was the opposite of a leader. He couldn't handle it.

NATALIE: That is absolutely crazy.

RACHEL: Yes, it is. I was so deluded though, and it was my way of excusing him by saying that his strong opinions made him a strong leader. No! He is just his own prideful god. He is god in his own mind. He is stuck up in toxic pride. He can't handle this because it's an injury to that pride.

NATALIE: Very interesting. Let's talk about what it looks like... I'm remarried, and you are... Do you want to say it in public, or should we wait?

RACHEL: I am engaged!

NATALIE: Yeah!

RACHEL: Yes! Praise God.

NATALIE: Rachel got engaged since our last episode.

RACHEL: Yes. I am so grateful to be in a relationship with someone who is the opposite of what we are talking about here. He takes responsibility for himself. He apologizes. He has good character. He is actually a strong leader because he doesn't crumble under pressure. I am so grateful and so excited to do life with him.

NATALIE: That is awesome! I am so, so happy for you.

RACHEL: Thank you.

NATALIE: So how is your relationship different? What is he like when you have...? Well, your whole meeting and getting to know him was around you going through a really hard time in life.

RACHEL: Yes. We had worked together while I was still married and in a really stressful situation where there were long hours. I had never seen him get angry, raise his voice, or use guilt or shame to get people to do what he wanted. He is just who he is. He is sort of reserved, but he knows exactly what he thinks. He has strong principles that he stands by, but he doesn't push them on other people. He just accepts people for where

they are. That is such a gift, because I have been quite a mess at times over the course of our relationship. He is just there with me in it.

I think that is a huge difference. I never had that kind of support before in my first marriage. It was always, "Oh, you have a problem. You'd better deal with it and get back to having sex with me," or making dinner, or taking care of the kid, or whatever it was. It was always that there were expectations for what I was supposed to do, and I wasn't allowed to step outside them. What it really comes down to is feeling safe to be a person, to be weak, and to need support. It comes from a very vulnerable place. I actually don't have it all together. I actually don't have it all figured out.

As I just said, my ex-husband despised and couldn't tolerate that sort of weakness. In my new relationship, he sees it, understands it, knows it, and accepts it. He is there with me to get through it, and I have the ability to do the same for him when he is stressed out. He lets me in to be there to support him. That's how relationships are supposed to be.

NATALIE: Yes!

RACHEL: You can't even call what I had before a relationship. I hate to say it this way, but it was like a parasite taking resources from another person. It wasn't even symbiotic where it goes back and forth. It is just sucking out all those resources and giving nothing back. That's a stark way to frame that, but that is how I lived for fourteen years.

NATALIE: It comes back to the whole idea of you being a separate person. Your fiancé views you and values you as a separate human being from him. He's not trying to get you to mesh with him, become him, think the way that he thinks, look the way that he looks, and enter into his world. He's not like the sun that you are supposed to revolve around. You are each two separate people and you are both looking at one another as two separate, valuable human beings.

RACHEL: Yeah, and giving each other permission to be two separate, valuable human beings whereas before I was just my husband's showpiece – something he got to show off and say he had a hot wife or whatever. It was crazy because it was a mixed message when he would talk to me about how chubby I was or something like that. I was supposed to dress in a way that made him happy, which was the opposite of the way I like to dress and feel comfortable. I was so mixed up that I did that because I wanted him to be happy with me, and I thought what Christian women were supposed to do was make their husbands happy. But I wasn't a separate person. I was a decoration or a



toy – something to play with or stay amused with until he didn't need it or want it anymore – and then he was off to do other things. It is very much dehumanizing to be treated that way.

NATALIE: One of the things I've been fascinated by that I have learned in the last few years (because I've been remarried for almost two years), my current husband and I come out of two completely different church denominational backgrounds, are on different sides of the political... I don't want to get into politics. We're on the same side as far as our beliefs on a lot of things, but as far as our party alignment in general...

RACHEL: How to carry those beliefs out – that's what it always comes down to.

NATALIE: ...we are polar opposites in that way. In my prior marriage, we went to the same church, we had the same political beliefs, we had the same eschatology. But here's the thing. You can have all the same beliefs and you can still be in an abusive relationship. You can also have completely different beliefs or perspectives on things and have a healthy relationship. The key is this mutual love and respect for the other person as an individual. That's the way friendship should be.

I see this a lot in religious circles, and I was part of this and I participated in it, where you feel like you can only be friends with, love, or respect people who are exactly like you. They look like you, think like you, talk like you, read the same books you read, have the same beliefs that you have, have the same eschatology – have everything the same all the way on down the line. But that is not true! That is one of my huge epiphanies from the last few years. That is just completely not true. In fact, that really limits your ability to grow as a human being if all you are doing is surrounding yourself with people who think exactly the way you think.

RACHEL: Yeah. You know what, it is amazing when you have this shift in perspective and you start reading the Bible again – the Gospels – you see that Jesus did this. He came to where people were, and He helped them where they were. The woman with the issue of blood, for example: He reached out and touched her even though she was literally unclean and completely cast out from society. He went to her and was there with her where she was, and He healed her where she was.

That is what we are called to do. The broader Christian culture just misses that – being with people where they are and showing them the love of Christ where they are instead of saying, "Buck up! Get yourself cleaned up." The message is sort of like, "God loves you, but He'll love you more when you do this." That is the message that is received a lot of times. God's love is going to start working with you where you are, filling you. It



will be a long journey, but He will be with you. He loves you beyond your understanding. I think there is such a myth. We have got to learn to love again in Christian culture. I think it is starting, but there is a long way to go.

NATALIE: Yes. I think you are right that it is starting. I think there is a huge movement of people getting away from that kind of thinking. I would call it fundamentalism – the “us versus them” mentality.

RACHEL: Really what it comes down to is thinking, “I have the right view of God and everyone else has the wrong view of God. So if people want to be close to me, they need to get with my picture of God.” It is just out of alignment. Get some humility here. You don’t have it all figured out; I promise you.

NATALIE: Exactly. One of the last tidbits I want to cover, and I talk about this a lot, but I will again for those who haven’t heard it: Pretend you are a fish. You need nourishment and sustenance. One of the ways you get that is by eating worms.

RACHEL: Delicious!

NATALIE: Worms or other fish. So you need that, but what you don’t need is a hook on the end of it. The problem with abusive relationships is that they dangle something that looks nourishing and looks like it will be beneficial to you in front of you. But if you take a bite out of that, there will be a hook in it. This doesn’t just have to be a marriage relationship. It can be friendships. It can be your family members. If you have adult children, it can even be them. It can be any relationship in your life. When you start to realize that every time they offer you something good it comes with a price tag – either they expect something from you or there is some type of manipulation ploy – then you know that is not a healthy relationship. You want to be in relationships where there are two little fish swimming next to each other enjoying worms freely without any hooks involved.

RACHEL: Yes. In my marriage, I grew up in an abusive background, so I didn’t really know any different. I longed for a family, and I longed for someone to love me. My husband’s family looked good on paper. His parents weren’t divorced, and they seemed to have it all together. That was quite a nice, juicy worm. I didn’t understand that there was a hook in me until quite a long time later, but it was a really bad environment because I was not allowed to be a person. I was not allowed to have problems. I was not allowed to have needs. I was just there to serve a purpose, which was to serve him and meet his needs.

NATALIE: Yes. I would venture to say that is not God's original plan for any of His children.

RACHEL: It's a perversion of that ideal, and we know where that comes from.

NATALIE: Yes. Well, I think we're going to call this a wrap.

RACHEL: It was a great discussion.

NATALIE: Thank you so much for listening. If you could head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a rating and a review, that will help other people find this podcast. Share it with other people you know who need to hear this, or maybe even other people helpers – people in your church who are helping women who are in dysfunctional relationships or parents of older children who might be in a relationship – so they can learn how this works, identify it, and then help these people with solutions and support them in what they are going through. That's it for this week. Until next week, fly free!