

## THE BELIEFS THAT KEEP CHRISTIAN WOMEN STUCK IN ABUSIVE MARRIAGES

*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 53 of the Flying Free Podcast! I don't know if you remember this, but a few episodes ago I said that once a month we'd be doing an episode where I'd interview a survivor who has gotten out of her abusive situation and is now flying free. Well, as free as you can fly while still on planet earth. And because I'm just setting this up, I didn't have someone set up in time to do today's episode. I was scrambling to figure out what to do, and then it hit me: "I'm a survivor! How about if I share my story?" So that's what I'm going to do today. I'm going to be the butterfly for today. And I'm going to answer the same questions that I'm going to be asking all of the other survivors. So, here we go!

1. How did you meet your husband, and were there any red flags before you married him?

I met my husband at the church I was part of in my early twenties. We both ended up being on staff of a college ministry, and he worked with the guys while I worked with the college girls. We did group planning together and prayed for this group of kids together. He was a new believer with a past. I had been a devoted believer since childhood, and I really saw my role as helping support him in his personal and professional growth during that time. I admired what a hard worker he was and how willing he was to work behind the scenes on projects without looking for any attention or lime light. I thought this was a sign of humility, but I didn't learn until later that humility is more than that.

2. What were some of the ways your husband emotionally and/or spiritually abused you throughout the course of your marriage?

The main problem I had with my husband was his inability to take responsibility for anything. If anything went wrong, it was never his fault. It was always someone else's fault, including mine. Whenever I felt hurt by something he said or did, if I brought it up, he would turn it back on me and blame me, making himself out to be the victim. This really confused me because I couldn't understand how I could be hurt, and yet it was my fault I was hurt. I was raised on Bill Gothard, so I had been taught that if anyone was offended by you, you needed to say you were sorry, take full responsibility, and ask for

forgiveness. This was great, except when you're living with someone who can't do this. So our pattern always went like this: He would hurt me. I would say "Please stop" or "That really hurt." He would blame me. I would say I was sorry and ask for forgiveness. And because I was also taught to forgive even if someone never asked, I would forgive, and then forgetting meant I had to sweep the whole mess under the rug until the next time.

A couple of months into our marriage I was filled with a deep sense of despair about what I had gotten myself into. Divorce wasn't an option, so I set about to make the best of it. Some other issues that were extremely difficult for me included gaslighting. He would tell me that my experience wasn't accurate. Or he would say something didn't happen that I was sure really did happen. He often left out information, so I was left not knowing what was going on. My life was constantly riddled with confusion, guilt, shame, and despair. I cried a lot. I got sick a lot. He didn't seem to notice or care. I felt so alone.

I wrote this in my journal a few months before we got married:

"I need You to help me work through something in my relationship with So and so. I need help. I saw him grow in confidence while we worked together last year, but now that we are engaged, I see more clearly that he depends on me for feeling good about himself. This means that when I praise him or am happy around him, he's happy and content and even confident. But when I bring up the slightest serious or negative thing (like last night: his relationship with So and so) he gets mad. He yelled at me last night when I told him he was being defensive. Why can't he just admit that he's an imperfect human being? He can in generalizations but not in specific examples. He's got every excuse in the book. If he makes a mistake there's a million reasons why it happened. It's never fully his fault. He can't even share with the college group his personal failures. He talked in generalizations that never mean anything to anybody anyway. He won't open up and admit to specific weaknesses. I'm scared."

November 16, 1991:

"So and so and I sort of worked through things. I just need to focus on his strengths. I think I'm expecting perfection from him and he expects the same from me." I then made a list of twenty things I appreciate about my fiancé.

3. What coping strategies did you employ?

I spiritualized everything. Here are some journal entries. This one was written a year and a half after we were married. I had lost a baby girl a few months prior to this, and I

was expecting another baby and already having problems with the pregnancy and had to be on bedrest.

“Dear Jesus, I’m back home from the hospital now. The place is a mess. Dishes everywhere. Dirty. I get up to get all my snacks. So and so is gone - comes back and crashes on the couch. Then he’s going to a bachelor party tonight, so I’ll be alone again. I have to ask for everything. This is so bad, I already hate it [being on bedrest]. I feel like a burden, but I’m not. I’m doing everything for myself to keep my baby alive. It was so nice to have had one week with real help and support. Someone who met my needs and my baby’s needs before I had to ask. Someone who kept me company without expecting anything in return. Lord, I need a big dose of a lot of things. Humility to ask every time I need something. Patience to wait all day for it if I have to. Wisdom to know what is best for my baby. A good cheerful attitude to keep my husband from feeling like a failure and to keep my baby feeling safe and loved. I don’t have any of these things right now. I don’t feel loved or cared for by anyone. I’m trying to make the sacrifice of my life to save this baby, but I feel very much like I’m doing it solo. Help my attitude!”

I don’t often write about specific incidents because I felt it was a sin to remember them, and that unless I could forget them, I would not be forgiving them. I spiritualized the whole thing to help me cope. But once in a while I allude to the problem:

“I have so many problems in my life. So many knots. I feel so confused and hopeless of ever feeling free of these knots.”

My journals are full of scripture verses and quotes from books about suffering and trusting God in the darkness. I was lost and very much alone.

“God is showing me much about forgiveness, especially when someone has caused great pain over and over and will never admit it or apologize for it. Someone has hurt me many times and I have never forgiven them.”

At the time, I thought that forgiveness meant forgetting and being reconciled in a relationship regardless of whether or not the other person is involved. I now know that forgiveness can be extended even while a relationship has to end because the other person isn’t interested in doing their part in the process of reconciliation. So I viewed my lack of finding reconciliation as a lack of forgiveness. It was one more unnecessary thing I took full responsibility for and berated myself for.

“I’ve longed for them to recognize the hurt they’ve caused. It’s so much easier to forgive them! [I would now call this reconcile.] But that doesn’t take any character. I have an

opportunity to see God do a miracle in my heart. He can provide the comfort I need for my pained heart, and the grace I need to forgive and love this person. Please help me to forgive this person completely and with a cheerful heart.”

4. How did you come to realize your relationship was abusive and you needed to get out?

Three years into the marriage I wrote:

“So and so and I are having many struggles. I’ve finally figured out what the main problem is, though, and why I haven’t discovered it until now. I know that he will need outside help to “get better.” It is like an addiction, and he needs an intervention of sorts. It has slowly destroyed me though. My self-worth. I’ve become melancholy, depressed, insecure. But I’ve fought it for so long, and I’ve thought even God must despise me. I’ve always felt patronized by So and so - treated as less of a person....”

At this point I tried getting help from our pastor. That pastor talked to my husband, but I wrote this in my journal after that talk:

“We got home from church and So and so never said anything. He’s been acting like nothing happened. I made a casserole for lunch, but he wanted to take a nap instead of eating. I’m very sad. I had dreamed of him crying, recognizing his sin and his need of God’s mercy - and seeing the pain he has caused in the very core of who I am. I had dreamed of him finding mercy and forgiveness and help. And love. I love him. I want so badly to see him mature and grow strong in his worth as God’s child. I still dream of finding an intimacy and love in our marriage like we’ve never had before. I know now that I need to move on. I need to seek God and let So and so do what he will to me, and pray that God will somehow, someday keep me from bitterness and protect my son from suffering in his character growth. And I need to love So and so and show him respect. I need to ‘win him over’ perhaps, by my character, and not my words. I need to forgive without being asked, and I need to find my hope and joy in God alone.”

There are several pages of my journal torn out here at this point. I must have written down specific things that happened following that confrontation. They would not have been good. It was a very traumatic time for me. I tore things out that I didn’t want my kids to see if they grew up and ever looked at my journals. I also did it in the spirit of “keeping no record of wrongs.” By this time I was forgetting the worst fights. I couldn’t remember them within a week. Even a few hours later I couldn’t remember what they were about, just that I was in so much pain. All I could see was red and all I could feel was thick darkness on every side with no way out.

"Psalm 31 is so comforting to me today. I think it was written just for me. One of the deepest challenges and greatest sources of anguish reared its ugly head today. I was told I was a "ditz-head," "stupid," and "ridiculous." I was told I thought of myself as superior to others, and that friends of mine were even discussing this among themselves. [This was a lie, but these are the kinds of things So and so said to me to hurt me.] I went into a frenzy of hurt. I felt misunderstood, uncared for, and unloved. It was a trap. 'Free me from the trap that is set for me, for You are my refuge.' I felt utterly abandoned over to my enemy, but 'You saw my affliction and know the anguish of my soul. You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place.' It even spoke of being 'a dread to my friends...I have become like broken pottery. For I hear the slander of many. Let me not be put to shame, O Lord, for I have cried out to You. Be strong and take heart all you who hope in the Lord.'"

January 27, 1996:

"Today I feel such a loneliness, and I think it is because the one person on earth I've wanted to count on for love and understanding provides so little of it - sometimes not a bit of it - especially in times I need it most. I've had so many horrible things said to me. I feel utterly cast down. Almost every night I dream of someone loving me, wanting to be with me and care for me. When I wake up a very constrictive, dark wave rushes over me as reality hits. I need to give up hoping to get this from anyone on earth. I've experienced getting it from you....but...I know I can't run away from the person who hurts me the most. I need to get strength and agape love from you to actually return good for evil. So far I haven't been very successful at doing that. All I have left is a very small piece of coal, cold as ice, under a mound of snow. And the person I'm supposed to be burning with love for is the one heaping more snow on it, although he doesn't realize it."

Four years after our marriage:

"I'm very lonely and weary today. So and so takes out his frustrations on me in such negative ways. I worry about our son and how it affects him. I'm trying hard to respond correctly, but I hurt so much inside at times. Today I'm so weary of this ache. I wish So and so could show love to me in front of our son instead of so much anger. I wish I knew what to do right away, and I wish I could maintain a bright, cheerful attitude when I am hurt. But it seems all I can do is cry and hide myself away."

"I've been feeling guilty about everything and fearful of punishment. Fearful You will take my little one away. My nightmares have increased a thousand fold since our second baby was born. And during the day, horrifying images plague me out of

nowhere. Is this to be my thorn in the flesh for the rest of my life? Set me free, Jesus!"

"I am such a sinner. My depravity runs deeper than I care to fathom. It is a bottomless pit. You love me. You love me. Oh that this truth could penetrate and illuminate my darkened heart!"

"I pray for my relationship with So and so - that You would bring healing to his wounds. Help me to love him and build him up in spite of how he treats me. Convict him in areas You want him to grow in. Open up his heart to You and spark a fire in him for You."

I constantly prayed for my husband. Always in hope. I could not have prayed for him and loved him all those years if I had been bitter and unforgiving. I had to struggle through almost daily personal attacks, and this was trying. When I was trying to get help and trying to explain what was happening, I was told I was a bitter, angry, unforgiving woman. This is not who I was, though I often was angry at his treatment of me. To not be angry would have been to not be human. To have no feeling.

On our sixth anniversary I wrote:

"I have such heaviness of heart today. I feel rejected in all areas of my life. So and so picks on every little fault of mine to the point of driving me insane - and blames ME for everything he does wrong. I can't bear this load on my own."

March 9, 1999:

"I don't feel like I'm thriving in my marriage. I feel so lost and unloved and misunderstood. No matter what I say or do or try, it backfires, and I am lonelier than ever. I feel like I'm barely hanging on anymore. Please help me, Lord!"

Eight years into our marriage:

"I'm wiped out, Lord. I feel I must be toward the end of what I can bear. Physically I'm exhausted, and I'm in despair emotionally over my lack of being able to sleep well and sleep enough. I want so badly to be a good wife and mother, but my physical exhaustion makes it so much more challenging to be patient with my husband's lack of support and encouragement. It seems so unfair. It's hard to give up my 'right' to have a supportive husband. He's a Christian. The Holy Spirit works in his life too, so why do I feel like I'm the only one in this family being convicted all the time? My sin is ever before me. My weakness and failure. Shower down on my heart the ability and desire to persevere in love and kindness, to overlook my husband's sins, to forgive, to be long

suffering. Psalm 105:19”

Ten years into our marriage:

“Make me a wife who guards and heeds my husband. Help me cover my husband’s offenses with love. When he sins against me or the children, help me cover His sin. Help me be a channel of forgiveness and teach my kids forgiveness and how to overlook faults. How many times do I do the opposite and interfere and correct? I bring attention to his sin in the children’s eyes, and they are given a reason to be mad - by me! I am tearing down my own home. Change me Lord! I’m a prideful, self-righteous fool. I’m so sorry. I want to walk in your agape love and let it flow through me like a humble, quiet stream of healing to my children and my husband.”

I had our fourth child and wrote this:

“I don’t think So and so understands how badly I need help - or a break. He leaves me alone to run all his ‘errands’ on week nights and weekends. He may as well be working 80 hours a week. I wish I had regular times to look forward to where I could have an hour or two all by myself. I feel so drained. God knows my frustration and desires. If He thinks I need something, I know He will provide it at the right time. I thought I had an unexpected, happy miracle to recount, but it got taken back. So and so had initiated telling me that I could go to the home schooling conference. I couldn’t believe it! But a few hours later he was asking me about the education budget and questioning why I had spent it all for last year. [I had spent it on education materials, thinking that was what it was for.] So then he said the money to go to the conference had to come out of my pocket. [I was not making money at that time, and my husband allowed me to have \$50 a month to cover all personal expenses for any clothing, toiletries, haircuts, etc. I couldn’t afford to go out with friends and he didn’t like it when I did anyway, so I rarely left the house. I didn’t have any money to go to the conference.] This morning he was very upset because I threw one of his ripped up lunch bags away. He has two - and one always sits in the pantry closet, unused. I had bought him a brand new one for Valentine’s Day, so I threw one of his old, icky ones away. I thought he’d be pleased. Once again, I got it all wrong. He wanted me to take back the new one - and he told me this morning about how wrong it was for me to throw away something that was his without asking permission. I sat on the couch, nursing the baby, trying to emotionally prepare myself for a full day with four small children, two students, 3 meals, 25 diapers, 2 loads of laundry and 4 piles of dishes. When I told him, in tears, how I felt about this and that I was sorry I had done that, but that it would be nice to be encouraged rather than criticized, he replied with, ‘Well, at least you said you are sorry.’ So I swore at him and slammed two doors and spent the morning crying.”

March 5, 2002:

“Part of my ministry to my husband is to forgive him and overlook his insults and insensitivity. To die to my own rights and desires to be cared for and loved. This part I am having a hard time accepting. To take the blame for his sin. It struck me the other day that God’s call to husbands is to be like God, the head. The One who loved enough to sacrifice what was most dear - even when the ‘wife’ (Church) rebels. The call to wives is to be like Christ, a servant. The one who takes the sin of others on herself. That is what I am fighting. I do not want to suffer for his sin. I want him to suffer the consequences for his own sin. I want him to love me and obey God and have a vision. I know God wants me to focus on what is good about my husband. There are truly many things I appreciate and gain benefits from because of my husband. But I want to love and serve him even when his sin is hurting me. And I want to stop sinning toward him through my selfish reactions and my fears.”

When I read that, I am dumbfounded at how brainwashed I was. What a crock of bull. Take on the sins of my husband? Seriously? It was the only way I could make sense out of something so nonsensical and confusing. There are many pages ripped out of that year’s journal. This means a lot of trauma happened that year of our fourth child’s babyhood.

Four years later, February 2006: “

I don’t know, but I think I’ve never been more lonely in all my life. I’m slipping into something very dark, and I feel hopeless. I can usually figure something out - a way to cope - or a plan of action. I can’t think straight about anything right now. I guess I’m trying to let go of something. Something precious. My stomach hurts, my head hurts. I wish I could be done with everything and just sleep.”

February 2007:

“Psalm 37 - I need to meditate and memorize this Psalm. It is a balm on my chafed spirit. I am so provoked daily. My patience tried again and again unceasingly with pettiness, immaturity, unreasonableness, falseness - it is the greatest weariness to me. I just spit back venomous words to get ‘revenge’ - but that obviously does nothing. I try to point things out gently which does equally - nothing. It is an impregnable wall. Right now I am in a crumpled heap next to that wall, feeling hopeless and despairing. It will never change. It is my portion in life. This wall.”

And in May of that same year:



"This past week has been difficult. We are all sick. The main diamond in my wedding ring fell out and is lost. So and so let the baby roll away in her stroller at the Walk for Life, and it tipped over and the baby got a goose egg. My back went out Friday, and I was unable to do the Walk due to extreme pain. So and so and I had a huge blow out Sunday morning, and I could not go to church but stayed home, wept, prayed, and wrote out Bible verses for four hours in an attempt to restore my spirit in Christ. We are such a sin-sick family. I am beside myself with fear that it will all have been for nothing by the time I come to die. I started bleeding again yesterday. This is the miscarriage that never ends."

Two years later in January of 2009 as I was reading Proverbs, it struck me that my husband fit the description of a fool perfectly. I began writing down all the verses that pertained to fools and I was shocked. I didn't want to believe it. It felt horrifying to me to admit that my husband was like Nabel. A fool.

"Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words."

"Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself."

"Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse."

"Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you."

"Leave the presence of a fool..."

"He who rejects reproof leads others astray."

"He who hates reproof is stupid."

"Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores instruction."

"The complacency of fools destroys them."

"A scoffer does not listen to rebuke."

"Whoever hates reproof will die."

"A Scoffer doesn't like to be reprovved."

"Whoever ignores instruction despises himself."

"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding."

"Drive out a scoffer and strife will go out with you and quarreling and abuse will cease."

"A stone is heavy and sand is weighty, but a fool's provocation is heavier than both"

"Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper."

"He who is often reprovved yet stiffens his neck will suddenly be broken beyond healing."

"There are those who are clean in their own eyes, but are not washed of their filth."

I began a new business making and selling soap, started a Visionary Womanhood group, and began blogging, all in 2009. I decided I was no longer going to wait around for my husband to figure out what direction to take us. I was going to start doing the

things I loved and see what happened. I hoped I would not be struck dead, but if I was, so be it. I had a good hunch by now that the problem wasn't really me. I mean, yes, I had my own sin. But the pathology in our marriage was not my issue. God opened my eyes to see the truth. My husband was a fool, and I needed to start protecting myself from him. Around this time the three oldest kids and I sat down with their dad to share the ways he was hurting us. Our oldest son even cried at one point. So and so scoffed and made fun of us for weeks afterward. Of course, he blamed us for everything. That was when something snapped inside of me and I decided I was no longer going to try so hard to keep the peace by sucking up the pain and pretending stuff didn't happen. I wasn't going to say I was sorry for everything anymore. I wanted to see what would happen.

5. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in getting out and how did you overcome them?

In 2013 I initiated a brief separation and insisted that we see a professional marriage therapist. That backfired as the therapist himself had serious issues and viewed our problems as being mine. Of course, So and so liked him. I stopped sleeping with my husband and asking him to consider my feedback and get help. His problems escalated, he did not get help, and in the fall of 2014, shortly after our oldest son's wedding, I asked him to leave. When he wouldn't, I enlisted the help of a few friends from church and forced him to leave. I tried multiple times to explain things to various pastors and elders at church, but nobody took me seriously. I was rebuked and vilified. My husband's story made more sense, and my husband was so calm and nice and quiet. I was becoming a raving lunatic after all those years of banging my head against a wall. Another professional counselor disbelieved me as well, and that ended after two sessions.

Leslie Vernick coached me from the fall of 2013 until the summer of 2014. I credit her with helping me see my own issues and how they made me an easy target for my husband's pathology. She also gave me the courage to put my big girl pants on and make the hard decisions to stand up and say "no more." I found more and more resources that explained what I had been going through and helped me see it for the destructive force it was. 2013 until 2016 was a huge grieving process as I had hoped my husband would wake up, be convicted, repent, and change so we could be together. That didn't happen. The song that kept running through my head during this extremely sorrowful time was "Say Something" by Christina Aguilera. He successfully groomed the elders of our church to believe that he was just a broken man in need of tender love, something his arrogant, judgmental, unforgiving, mean old wife wouldn't give him. I stopped trying to get help from them and realized the only one who was going to help

me at that point was myself. God showed me that He had equipped ME with the courage and information and motivation and resources to get myself out, and the only one standing in the way of me and freedom was myself. I decided to get out of the way, and I filed for divorce in April of 2016.

6. How did life get harder for you after this? What were some of the bad things that happened because you got out?

My church ultimately excommunicated me. I was crying constantly, having panic attacks, and falling headlong into depression.

7. How did things get better?

I was diagnosed with PTSD and ended up getting on medication for depression and anxiety. I also started EMDR therapy which turned everything around for me. A few months into the divorce process I met Tom on Facebook. We had graduated from the same high school but other than that, we didn't know one another. We became friends and eventually fell in love. The divorce process took almost two years, and by the time it was over, Tom and I were ready to get married. So we did!

8. Where are you at today? Any regrets?

My only regret is that I didn't get out sooner. When I look at those journal entries, my heart breaks for the woman I was. I was like a brainwashed cult member. I will never regret leaving that cult and the man who hurt me using that cult's religious beliefs about the value of women or lack thereof.

9. What is one thing you learned through this whole process that you wish you could go back and tell your younger self?

I would tell my younger self that Jesus is not an abuser god. I would try to teach her about the real God, the real Jesus.

10. What is one piece of advice you'd give to someone who is contemplating leaving for good?

It's an option, and you get to decide what is best for you. God gave you a brain and a body and a heart. Use it to set captives free. And the first one you need to free is yourself. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Flying Free podcast. Until next time, fly free!