

## WHEN GIVING THE SILENT TREATMENT IS EMOTIONAL ABUSE

*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 70 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have with me a survivor. Her name is Julie. I will be asking her some questions and she will be sharing her story with you. We've prayed right before this podcast that you would be blessed and that God would use it to connect with you and touch you in a special way. First, Julie, welcome to the Flying Free Podcast.

JULIE: Thank you, Natalie. It's good to be with you today.

NATALIE: First, let's start by asking you how you met your husband, and were there any red flags before you married him?

JULIE: I've thought a lot about this question. I met him thirty-seven years ago in 1983. I was a single mom at the time. I'm a veteran of the United States Navy, and I'd been out for a couple of years. I missed the military, so I joined the California Army National Guard. My first assignment that I reported to, my husband was my instructor for a class I had to take. We didn't like each other at first. I thought he was arrogant, opinionated, and loud, but for some reason, he was able to break through that. The months went by and we started seeing each other. We were married the following year in 1984.

NATALIE: Interesting.

JULIE: Red flags. Now, yes. At the time, no. I didn't even know what a red flag was. I was in love and thought he was wonderful and caring. I believed my first impression was way off and wrong. I didn't see anything in the beginning, nothing. We had known each other fourteen or fifteen months before we got married. We didn't see a lot of each other at first, just on weekends or during the summer when we were in the Guard together. But as we grew closer, I didn't see anything wrong. Now I look back and of course I can see red flags, but not at the time.

NATALIE: Can you give us a couple of examples of when you look back, what you saw that you wish you would have recognized?

JULIE: He was still married. He had separated from his wife, but how he acted during

that time, how he acted toward her and his two children, should have showed me how he had discarded them. For the next thirty-three years I would be the one to connect with his children because he never did. That's probably the biggest thing: how he acted toward his then still wife and his two children at the time.

NATALIE: How old were they?

JULIE: They grew to love me. They were five and seven.

NATALIE: After you got married, what were some of the ways he began to abuse you emotionally or spiritually during your marriage?

JULIE: He never was, and still is not, a rager. I believe he has rage underneath the surface, but he wasn't a yeller. He didn't throw things. He didn't slam doors. When I would get ignored or when he would give me the silent treatment, it never occurred to me for decades that it was wrong on his part. We got married in the church. He was an elder in the church. We were church people. I thought he always had a command of scripture and the Bible. I believed he did. Now I know differently. Emotionally, he would give me the silent treatment. One of the things he loved to do was to pretend that he didn't hear me when I would talk to him. He would walk by and I would ask a question. He would just keep walking. I look back now and that was gaslighting. He was ignoring me. I would say, "Gosh, didn't you hear me?" He would say, "What? You said something? What are you talking about?" That went on our whole marriage.

He would project his covert behaviors onto me, so he would accuse me of ignoring him. You can ask anyone who knows me and loves me, I don't ignore anybody. I'm an empath. I love relationship. I will talk to anybody, anywhere, anytime. I would get so confused when he would accuse me of the things he was doing to me. I couldn't make sense of it. Spiritually, we started out in a mainstream Presbyterian church. Right after we were married, I quit college. I quit my job. When I married my husband, I had no desire to have any more children. I had my one daughter and she was my biggest blessing, but I was career oriented. I was going to go to school. I was going to have a career and have it all.

But then God slowly changed my heart and I wanted to have children and create a home life for them that I didn't have growing up. It was a true change of my heart because I quit school and my job. I got pregnant and I never looked back. My husband didn't believe in birth control. He believed God should plan our family. So I had seven babies in nine years. I homeschooled them. But I was happy. I loved my life. We lived in a little 900 square foot home.

NATALIE: Oh my goodness!

JULIE: It was glorious, though. I loved it. My life was simple, full of babies and children and homeschooling, and that part of my life was awesome. But then we went to another church. It was a patriarchal church. This is the period of my marriage where I saw big changes in my husband's attitude toward me and toward our children. Like your story, Natalie, he just really got entrenched in the patriarchal theology and culture. That is where I believe he started using the Bible against me to keep me in control.

NATALIE: What were some of the ways that you coped during that time?

JULIE: My kids. As my kids got older, we realized that they needed more room to spread their wings. So we were able to buy ten acres in the country and we got animals. Mind you, he was working. When I look back, I tell people he went to work, and I worked my ass off. We had the animals. I homeschooled. By this time we had eight children. Our youngest son was born with Down syndrome, and he had a sick heart when he was born. He almost died two times, and then he had heart surgery. So I was dealing with that. I was exhausted, but how I coped was that I would go out to my garden, go feed my chickens, or take my children on field trips. My whole life I had what I feel were good coping skills. I have coped through a lot of things in my life. I only remember ever feeling depressed one time in my life, and that was after my youngest son was born. But I've always been able to pick myself up by my bootstraps, if you will.

Even through all this time that I was raising my kids, I was constantly shaking off the loneliness, constantly shaking off the self-doubt and self-loathing. But I loved my home life. I loved cooking. I loved taking care of the animals and my kids. I think that's how I coped. He would go to work. He's a retired fire-fighter, so he would be gone for three days at a time. I loved when he wasn't there because I could be myself. I could make decisions freely. I could love on my children without him getting jealous. I think that's how I coped. I just poured myself into my children and my home.

NATALIE: I think a lot of women will be able to relate to that. I feel like so many survivors are strong people. They do have strong coping skills. They are very resilient. I feel the same way: when I look back on my life I feel like I was happy most of the time, yet there was this underlying (as you said) sense of devastation and self-loathing because I just couldn't make my marriage work.

JULIE: Everything I have read about that is that the stress on your body is constant. I couldn't describe it. Now I know so much, but I couldn't describe it to anybody. I would try to describe it to a couple of close girlfriends. My oldest daughter (who is not my

husband's daughter) is my closest friend and supporter. Later when I left my marriage, she felt free to be able to tell me how she felt about my husband. I was able to describe to her some of those feelings and things. She completely understood it. Being my daughter (and not his), she grew up in that home. I have eight children, and seven of them have moved out. My youngest son lives with me and he will for the rest of my life. But they all said, "It took us leaving and then coming back to see how dysfunctional that home was."

NATALIE: Yeah, they need that context. Kids grow up and they think this is normal, and then they go out and they get context for what they grew up in. It's usually kind of a shock.

JULIE: It is. A couple of my kids were angry. I've always been close to all my children. They are all adults. They all have partners. They are married or have boyfriends or girlfriends. I've always maintained close relationships with all my kids. But when I left, separated from my husband, and finally filed for divorce, a couple of them... It's not that they didn't think that was the right thing to do, but I think they needed to process it because they withdrew a little bit from me. A couple of them showed me they had some anger over it. They felt I should just deal with it or ignore it and just stay. "Why do you have to make a big deal about everything?" But now it's been a couple of years. The funny thing about my husband is, and I think this is probably true about a lot of men that are like this, we temper them. We temper them a lot. It took a year to eighteen months of me not being there to temper him and he was rising to the occasion. They and many of our friends are saying, "Wow! We didn't think you were like this." I'm thankful for that. My kids have all come back and adore me and honor me on Mother's Day and the holidays. They love their father, but they see that he is not a very nice man.

NATALIE: That's wonderful. I'm so glad you have your kids. There are so many women who have lost their kids completely.

JULIE: Yes. I understand.

NATALIE: What was the turning point for you? When did you say, "You know what, I really think this relationship is abusive and I don't know if I can do this for the rest of my life?"

JULIE: I think it took me a long time to use the word "abuse." The reason my husband was able to use the Bible against me was because he knew how much I loved Jesus and how much I wanted to please God and live to please God. My husband always knew

that about me. For decades I never ever entertained the thought of divorce. I couldn't. I would be sinning. I think it was Shannon Thomas's book I was reading. Something I read said that every woman will come to a point where they say, "I can't do this anymore." I came to that point. My husband was not physically abusive... Well, he physically abused all my sons. He didn't beat the crap out of them every day, but he was just a bully. Under the guise of discipline, he would kick them or hit them, even my youngest son with Down syndrome.

NATALIE: No!

JULIE: I have had people just be in disbelief about that. But to understand a person like this, it is believable. I had gotten to the point in my marriage where I said, "I can't do this anymore." I was crying out to God and I even said, "God, you're probably going to send me to hell, but I can't stay married to this man." I was entertaining those thoughts. But one day right before I left, I had gone out to the garage and left my son and husband in the dining room. I forgot something, so I came right back in. My husband didn't know I had come back in, and I witnessed him physically abuse my son. That was the moment. Of course, I intervened. I told him to get out. I used some colorful language. I said, "If you ever, ever touch him again, I will call the police and I will leave you. I will never, ever come back."

That kind of smoothed over. He was never apologetic. He never said he was sorry to my son or to me. But in that moment I said to myself, "I'm leaving." I prayed and said, "God, I have been married to this man for thirty-three years. I have been a stay-at-home mom. I don't know how You're going to do it, but You're going to get me out of this." And He did. I had a peace come over me. From that point on I made sure that my husband was never alone with my son again. I said, "Okay Lord, what's the next thing? Do the next thing for me."

I asked for a separation. We had ten acres, and on these ten acres we had two homes. So I told him I needed him to move into the guest house. I needed a separation. I needed it and I was going to have it. Finally he moved into the other house, but that didn't work because he could still keep tabs on me. He would text me and ask where I was going when I pulled out of the driveway to go to Bible study or whatever. That was in February. In May I said, "I need to get my own apartment." I did. I found an apartment. I took half of what was in our checking account and I never looked back. I was lucky, I think, because from the time I decided to leave to when I did was a relatively short period of time. From the time I realized I couldn't do this anymore and had to get my son out of there was only about five months.

NATALIE: One of the reasons why a lot of women... They don't do it quite that quickly. I think it's because (or I know, because I was one who took forever) they are so scared of all the insurmountable obstacles. They just terrified me. I really wasn't sure that I could jump those hurdles without dying. My amygdala was saying, "You're going to die! You're going to die!" Tell us how life did get harder for you and then how you were able to jump those hurdles just to give women the idea that it will be hard and there will be big hurdles, but here are ways that you did it.

JULIE: I was scared to death. I hadn't worked in over thirty years. I had no skills. I'm sixty-three years old. I was sixty-one when I left. I have a disabled adult son. What I had to do, Natalie, was to compartmentalize. If I looked at the whole thing, "How are we going to live? Where are we going to live? How long will it be?" there's no way. It would have paralyzed me.

NATALIE: Yes. Can I jump in here? I think what you said is so huge, that you compartmentalized. That's what I did, but I wouldn't have put it that way, though. So I'm glad you said that. But that's exactly what you must do. It's like you must stick everything into these little boxes and then just tackle one box at a time.

JULIE: Yes. That's what I did. Looking back, I didn't realize I was doing that at the time. Again, I believe I've had good coping skills my whole life. I haven't been a Christian my whole life. I've been abused by my mother, teachers, classmates, and other people, and I learned how to separate everything. That's what I did. I talked to my older daughter a lot. She was extremely supportive. When I finally did file for divorce, it was because my soon-to-be-ex-husband finally got sick of me being in the apartment. We were still sharing our bills. We were still paying our bills because I still truly had hope he could change.

But I guess he just got tired of me having my freedom. He took all the money out of our accounts and left me without rent money. Mind you, two of his children lived in this apartment with me. One of my other daughters works but can't afford to live in California on her own. But that didn't matter to him, so I ended up borrowing my rent money from my oldest daughter and her husband. I guess what really propelled me was seeing him abuse my son. He was always abusive to him. He was just a bully. He was emotionally and verbally abusive. But when I saw him physically hurt my son, it was like this little warrior girl who has always been inside of me... I was in the military. I was a single mother. I'm a badass.

NATALIE: Yeah, exactly!

JULIE: But that had been so pushed down. I truly believed for years I couldn't do anything without him. He allowed me to believe that. He wanted me to believe that. That's the patriarchal culture. So it just came out. I prayed a lot. I'm a woman of incredible faith. I'm lucky in that area, too, where my faith never faltered. There were times I felt that Jesus was the only one in my corner, and He was. I just knew in my heart that He was going to provide and He was going to take care. I just had to take the next step. So I got the apartment. I started one step at a time. I got my own checking account.

I lost a lot during this time, but I gained my self-respect. I gained that little warrior girl who has always been inside of me. To watch her come out when I was in the midst of it... I didn't feel brave. I didn't feel like I was overcoming. But I look back over the last two years and I don't recognize myself, if that makes sense. I recognize myself from a long time ago. But this warrior girl, she is in there. For all of you women, she is in there! Tap into that. She's there, but you've had someone tell you for years that you need to squash that. That's sinful. That's wrong. When I let her come out, she kicked butt. She is kicking butt!

NATALIE: She is. I love it! So where are things at today with your life? When you look back, do you have anything that you would have done differently? Do you have any regrets?

JULIE: Where I am now, we sold our home. We owned it for twenty-two years. I moved out two years ago. But we owned ten acres and we made a lot of money on it, but because my husband won't agree to a settlement, that money is tied up in escrow. I filed for divorce almost two years ago, eighteen months ago, and he is fighting. It's not like we have all these assets, but being true to form of who he is, he has to punish me. The funny thing is throughout our whole marriage I watched him do this to other people. I watched him do it to his parents, his bosses, his co-workers, and people in the church. So I shouldn't be shocked that he is doing this to me. I have a great attorney. I love her. She goes to bat for me. It's not like I have someone waiting in the wings that I want to marry. I just would like to have this final divorce.

My life is good. My son and I are healthy. Regrets: I just regret that my kids grew up in such a dysfunctional home, an emotionally abusive home, and physically abusive for my sons. Three of them don't even walk with the Lord, I believe, because of that. The bad things that happened to me: I lost my church community. I went from one extreme, the patriarchal church where they have all those belief systems, to a mainstream church, a big one in my area. But I think the church sentimentalizes marriage. They romanticize marriage and put it up on a pedestal. If there is any kind of

divorce or separation, as progressive as my church likes to think they are, they're not. Because my husband and I were pillars of the church, we were givers, tithers, involved in ministry, involved in volunteering, then boom! I leave my husband with no apologies. My church turned on me.

I lost a lot of who I thought were friends who sided with him because my husband can cry at the drop of a hat and look like a pathetic, poor victim whose shrew of a wife has left him. He used that to his advantage. I believe I lost my reputation. I lost my church family. I lost a lot of friends. But I tell you what, when you come out on the other side, the friendships who stuck with you are so much richer. I have a small group. Funny, my husband and I were the small group leaders of this group of people. When we separated, I told him, "I don't believe we should be leading this group. We're separated." That made him angry. I stopped going to the group, and he continued to go even though he wasn't leading it. It took them about three months (again, I was not there to temper him). They were going to ask him to leave the group. I went back and I've been with them ever since.

NATALIE: Wow!

JULIE: They told me, "We were about to ask him to leave, and we see now because he allowed himself to be who he is. We see how he abused you because he abused us during Bible study."

NATALIE: That's awesome! You were vindicated a little bit there. That's great.

JULIE: Absolutely. As time goes by, God throws me a bone and will show me something where... His truth is always revealed. I believe truth will always be revealed sooner or later. Although I still can't walk in my main church, I go to a different campus now. If I must go to the main one, I still get people looking at me like "Oh, that's right! She's the one that left her husband." You know the look, Natalie. You don't need to be able to read their minds. Their body language says it all.

NATALIE: Yeah. I also wanted to say there are probably some women thinking, "It's taken almost two years." I think a lot of women going into divorce think that the process is going to take a couple of months and then they will be done. People need to understand that when you are divorcing a true abuser it's going to take a minimum of a year. That would be a fast divorce.

JULIE: I agree with you on that because when I was a part of Flying Free, when I left my husband, we have a mutual friend, Carmen, who I reached out to. I didn't know what to



do. I didn't know where to go. But I kind of saw Carmen's social media and knew something was going on in her life. I reached out to her and she told me about you. I found books. I found blogs and support groups on social media. I was reading everyone's stories and I remember thinking in the very beginning, "Yeah, I'm really sorry it's taking so long, but that won't be the case for me. I'm sure he'll cooperate. I know he would never do that." He did it all!

I must be careful, though, because I don't want to be this Negative Nellie and tell women... I'm talking with a friend who is just starting. I've known her for decades. She lives in Colorado, and she's there. I have to find the balance between not telling her, "No way is it going to be a couple of months." There is a balance. I agree with you. I think we all, or many of us, start out thinking it will be cut and dry. "He'll give me the divorce I want and he'll move on with his life." Well, they don't have a life to move on to. We do. We have so much ahead of us. But my husband has nothing. He has nobody in his life. He's got no friends. His children don't reach out to him. He rents a room from a man in the church, a room in a house. This is all he has: to scheme against me, to make a book on me.

NATALIE: The other thing I was going to bring out was when you mentioned your kids, that one of your regrets was that they had to grow up in that kind of environment and three of them aren't walking with the Lord right now. I can relate to so much of your story, Julie. I want to say to people who are worried about that or who are also experiencing that, how I have come to terms with that is that there are very few families on planet earth throughout history and any culture where they are super healthy: the kids grow up with unconditional love from their parents, everyone is healthy, and everyone is doing great. Most families are dysfunctional because of our human nature.

You said your family growing up was dysfunctional. Mine was also dysfunctional. At the time you think it's normal, but when you get out you think, "Wait a minute. That was really dysfunctional." But that's part of our story. Not that God says, "I'm going to put all of my beloved children in dysfunctional families and I'm going to train them how to be warriors for Christ." That's how some people might interpret that. But I really believe that the world is dysfunctional. We all grow up in the dysfunction, and God uses that to shape us, mature us, and bring us to a place where... He uses all kinds of different things to reveal Himself to us. We all need something different and it's all part of our story. We all have a story we're living, including our kids. Our kid's story is their story. We just happen to be a small part of it.

JULIE: One of the things my husband always did... I would say, "Don't always bring in

scripture. They're not listening to you. Can't you just have a relationship with them?" He always felt like he had to control their spiritual life. I enjoy relationship with these children of mine who don't walk with the Lord. I like them anyway. Whereas for my husband, it is conditional for him. He is constantly trying to shove scripture down their throat. I would beg him, "Please." Then he'd think there was something wrong with me because I wasn't wanting to constantly talk about the Bible with my kids. But when they were younger, absolutely! But they are all adults. They are all free-thinking adults who can make their own choices, and I like my kids. I like them the way they are.

NATALIE: You know what, God likes your kids the way they are, too.

JULIE: That's right. My oldest daughter... I told all the kids except for one and told them I was sorry for my part in their unhappiness growing up. My oldest daughter said, "You know, mama, everything that has ever happened to me in my life has made me who I am today. And everything you did for us kids, even if it was a wrong decision, you did it because you love us. I understand that. I get that. Give my siblings time and they'll get there. They just have to work through this stuff." They do.

NATALIE: What is one thing you've learned through this whole process, if you could go back and tell your younger self a message, that you would tell her?

JULIE: Don't ever let anybody tell you what you can or cannot do or what you are capable of doing. That's what I would tell my younger self because I spent decades doubting myself, not trusting myself. I would tell my younger self, "You trust yourself. You make good decisions. You are smart. You are capable and you do not have to have anybody tell you how to live, what to do, when to do it, or how to do it. You are an adult." That's what I would tell my younger self.

NATALIE: I love that. What piece of advice would you give to a woman who is listening and thinking about possibly leaving for good?

JULIE: Again, if you are a woman of faith, know in your heart that He is going to take care of you. If you are in an abusive marriage or relationship, He does not want you there. He will take care of you. Trust yourself. I stopped trusting myself so long ago. I couldn't even trust myself to decide what conference to go to because I had to make sure it was okay with him. I would say you know what you must do and just trust that God is going to take care of you. I think that's the hardest thing for us to do, to just step out and know in our hearts... We mouth it, we say it, but to know in our hearts that He is going to take care of us. And He will.

NATALIE: Right. Julie, before we end, as long as I have you here, you've been a member of the Flying Free Sisterhood for how many years?

JULIE: Almost two years. No, it's two years this month. Now I am part of your Flying Higher group, which I am loving.

NATALIE: Good. Tell me, how did Flying Free come along beside you and assist you in this whole process of filing for divorce? By the way, I want to give a caveat: Flying Free is not just for people who are filing for divorce. We have a lot of people in Flying Free who are staying. But in this case, my philosophy is that we support women in their own decisions for their own lives, whatever those decisions are. With Julie, we came along beside and hopefully supported her through her decision. Can you give people who have heard of Flying Free but don't really know what it is an idea of it?

JULIE: I belong to several support groups for women leaving abusive marriages. Some are secular and some are faith based. I love them all. I love all the women, thousands of women. But Flying Free was the first group I found through my friend Carmen. It was mind blowing! When I first joined Flying Free, you were on social media, on Facebook. When I joined, I spent hours reading women's stories, crying, and being affirmed. I sat back in my chair. I would throw food to my son and put a video on for him so that I could absorb this. I needed these women in Flying Free. I actually got a tattoo. I read all your articles, Natalie, every single one of them. For one of your articles the graphic is a birdcage with a bird flying out. I got that tattooed on my forearm.

NATALIE: That is so awesome!

JULIE: Through Flying Free I got my tattoo idea, but when people see the tattoo on my forearm, I just say that the caged bird is free.

NATALIE: That's beautiful.

JULIE: That's what Flying Free did for me. You started me on the journey of, "Wait a minute. This was not you. You were abused." I think that's the first time I used the word "abuse" because I knew covert narcissism. I was married to a covert narcissist, but I didn't use the word "abuse" in the beginning. I just used the word "codependent." I tossed that. I'm not codependent. That is what Flying Free did for me. You started me on the journey where I was able to take a deep breath and say, "Thank you, God. Thank you so much."

NATALIE: That's awesome. Julie mentioned Flying Higher. That's a different thing. I don't

want anyone to get confused. Flying Higher isn't available to the public right now. It is just a beta group. Julie got in because she had been in Flying Free for longer than a year. I opened it up to those women. They are helping me to develop a program for women who are divorced. Flying Free helps us to extricate ourselves from external abuse, but Flying Higher is helping women to extricate themselves from internal abuse: the ways we abuse ourselves and hold ourselves back from reaching our full potential. That's what Flying Higher is. [Flying Higher is now available to the public! Apply today at [joinflyinghigher.com](http://joinflyinghigher.com)]

I'm really excited. I am loving that group. I'm learning so much and passing it on to these women. I'm in a certification process with The Life Coach School and getting so many good tools and information. I feel like I'm the mother bird going out and finding all these big juicy worms. Then I come back and am feeding it to everyone in our nest, and we're all eating it together and enjoying ourselves. Not that I'm the mother of these women. These women are all badass, so I don't want you to think these are baby birds in the nest. That was a bad analogy.

JULIE: No, it wasn't. That was good, Natalie. It's taken in context.

NATALIE: We're all feasting together at the table. Anyhow, that's it for today's podcast episode. Thank you again, Julie, for coming on here and being willing to share your story and make yourself vulnerable. It was an incredible story. I know I could relate to so much of it and I know other women will be able to relate as well. I appreciate it. Thank you, Jesus, for everything You have done and are doing in Julie's life and in the lives of everyone listening. Until next time, fly free!