

ARE YOU MARRIED TO A QUIET COVERT ABUSER WITH A HIDDEN LIFESTYLE?

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 78 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have another survivor who is going to be sharing her story with us. Julie, thank you so much for coming on and being willing to tell us about what's happened in your life.

JULIE: Thanks so much for having me, Natalie. This is somewhat of a sad circumstance, a difficult thing to talk about. But I have prayed and sought the Lord on this. I thank you for this opportunity.

NATALIE: Yes, it's not like those podcasts where you get to interview someone about making your home a more beautiful place or something like that. However, it is very encouraging. Some people say these are their favorite podcast episodes because it gives them hope for their own lives. If they can see that someone else has made it and is surviving, then they have hope for themselves. So are you ready for these questions I have for you?

JULIE: I am.

NATALIE: The first one is how did you meet your husband, and did you notice any red flags during the time you were getting to know him?

JULIE: We met on eHarmony. I was twenty-six years old and he was twenty-nine. He had never had a girlfriend before, so I was his first girlfriend. Our relationship was long distance during that time. We lived about two hours apart, so we would spend weekends where I would go and stay with his friends and he would come stay with my friends. Or we would go on adventures in the outdoors like backpacking or kayaking with groups of friends. There was almost this great... I wouldn't say it was a great romance intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, but it was a great physical adventure where he would sweep me off my feet and take me to North Carolina to go backpacking or kayaking.

I would say the first red flag... This is the one example I will give that is more detailed, because I do want to give people a context to understand how this relationship has operated and what I have gone through. The first big red flag was about two months

into our dating relationship. We had a committed relationship at that point. Throughout that week I knew that coming weekend I wasn't going to see him. He was going to go kayaking with some of his kayaking friends down in North Carolina. He wanted the weekend just to hang with them and not...There were weekends where we took a break and just did our own thing.

Throughout the week he emailed me bits and pieces. What I found in the relationship is that I usually get about five percent of the story, and that was the case in this example. He emailed me one day and said, "I'm not going to have my phone on me this weekend, but I'll call you when I get back on Sunday." I thought that was kind of weird to tell me in the middle of the week. And he always had his phone on him. It was kind of a weird preface.

A little later in the week he said, "There's only going to be one other person going now. I just wanted to let you know it's going to be me and one other person." I also thought that was a little weird because he didn't tell me who it was. At this point, I had built friendships with this group of people too. Usually he would have just said, "It's this friend or this friend." Then on Friday at 5:30 as the friend pulled into the driveway, he emailed me and said, "She's here. Gotta go."

NATALIE: Oh, Lord.

JULIE: He went all the way to North Carolina for an entire weekend getaway with a female friend from our kayaking group of friends and spent the entire weekend with her with no regard for me. That was deeply painful, obviously, but what that reflects of our long term marriage is that decisions had been made repeatedly where I only get five percent of the story, I get little bits and pieces of the truth, and sometimes there are even omissions in those truths like he is twisting it. But then the result always is that he is going to do what he wants to do with no regard for how that would impact me emotionally, spiritually, mentally.

Even when he came back he had already told me, "I will call you at 9:45," and I know he doesn't want to talk on the phone past 10:00. So he had already hedged off that this will be a fifteen-minute conversation and not to challenge him on this. Probably most of the listeners on this would think, "Why did you not break up with him?" Of course, that is exactly how I feel now. (Of course I love my children. I wouldn't have my children if we had not gotten married. We'll get into that later.) Of course I should have run for the hills. I did not see how big this red flag was because in my mind I thought, "He's never had a girlfriend. He doesn't know what he's doing. He doesn't know that this is incredibly hurtful when you're in a committed relationship. He's just used to being an

independent single guy.”

But even as a Christian man, I would think that his boundaries would have been better than to go off with a girl one-on-one to a weekend retreat, so to say. He did take pictures that they slept in separate tents. I want to make sure people who listen know it never came across that he was being adulterous, it was more just, “I want to go do this. This is what I’m going to do and I don’t have to answer to you. I can do whatever I want.” Over time, that chipped away at trust.

Overall, his personality was very kind, gentle, and quiet. Because of my childhood upbringing with a lot of overt abuse and early relational experiences and romantic relationships that were more overt, I was very charmed and taken aback by this kindness and gentleness. Throughout eleven and a half years of marriage, he has never yelled at me. I know that is also weird. But he really has not raised his tone. He has not been harsh.

It has all been very quiet, subtle, covert tactics. My hope going into marriage with him was that he would become a more open and connected person (because he was very reluctant in our dating relationship to be very transparent or open) and to have conversations that went deeper than, “What are we going to do on the next weekend?” My hope was when we got married that he would be caught up and swept away in the “oneness” of marriage and that we would have this great intimacy and great vulnerability. That never happened.

NATALIE: So if anyone listening to this is single, bear that in mind. Usually guys will be the same person that they were before they were married after they’re married. I can totally relate to that thinking. As women, we kind of think we will have this great influence on them, that we will help them to be all they were meant to be, and that is our duty and our role as their wife. What about your church or other Christians in your life? Did you get any messages from them that contributed to your view of marriage before you were married?

JULIE: Yes. I loved your recent podcast with Gretchen Baskerville, “The Life-Saving Divorce” author. When she brought up the books that were very popular back in the late 90s, 2000-2002... When I was in college, those were the books we were all reading: “I Kissed Dating Goodbye,” “Passion and Purity,” and “Lady in Waiting.” All of these books painted a picture of submission: you don’t challenge the man, you don’t take the initiative in the relationship toward the man, you let him pursue you completely, and you submit to his leadership in every area and you trust his walk with the Lord to the Lord, and you trust your own walk with the Lord to the Lord and this man will lead you

as a Christian man. As long as you submit to that model, you're going to have this beautiful, lifelong marriage that really will be free of conflict or problems, which is NOT true!

My Christian friends, we prayed and focused a ton on guarding our hearts. That was a big scripture that we would pray for each other, that we wouldn't go chase after these men or pursue but that we would let them come to us. If a man felt from the Lord that he was supposed to pursue us, that it would be so clear. We very much spiritualized even the dating process. If a guy really felt strongly for one of us and wanted to pursue, that he probably was our husband. In a way, at the time in my experience, it can be unfortunate that our blinders are on beforehand. At the time, all I cared about was that he was a Christian man and pursuing me. There was a strong focus on that and even on marriage within the church.

Another formative part of my understanding doctrine and understanding what they call "biblical" counseling approaches in the church, more in the conservative church, is a process called nouthetic counseling, which I'm sure you've heard of, where everything that the church leadership counsels you in is through the Bible. Anyone can do this. They don't need to have a license in social work or a counseling license. Anybody can go to some trainings and do this biblical counseling. Basically the focus in that is that everyone brings fifty percent of the sin to the marriage. It's a 50/50 issue. You've got to look at the plank in your own eye before the speck in your husband's eye.

They also teach that Christ will always redeem a Christian marriage. They are teaching that there is not really a reason to get divorced because you are Christians and Christ will change you. You are always going to be able to be changed by Christ. That's another thing they teach, so there is no room for divorce or going there. It's very much shunned and put into the category of the ultimate wrong thing. The last and most profound contributing view of marriage before I was married was the pastor who married us point blank told us in premarital counseling that he would not marry us if we were open to divorce. So we had to promise him that we would never get divorced.

NATALIE: This sounds so weird! It's such a blatant trying to control the universe. Why do people try to control the universe? How is that anybody's business what other people do down the road? So it wouldn't matter what either one of you did in the relationship, you just could never get divorced. Why? Because this pastor said you couldn't. It's just so ludicrous! I'm sorry for interrupting.

JULIE: It's fine. But it gets worse. On our actual wedding day after our wedding ceremony, after we had said our vows, before our family and friends it was declared by

this pastor that we had promised we would never get divorced, and he even said, "If they have a fight or a lover's quarrel and they want to come to your home in the middle of the night, you send them right back to each other to work out their differences."

NATALIE: Wow!

JULIE: That did profound spiritual damage to me. To this day I do care about that pastor. I want to make that clear. To this day I don't want to expose my husband or harm anyone with this podcast interview. My motive is to help survivors and to share my story, not to sit and talk about all those things. But it did profound damage because what that did was etch in stone on me, "I will never get divorced. That is not an option for me." In fact, that was part of the spiritual abuse I went through beforehand.

NATALIE: Here's the other thing it does: it causes people to feel judgmental of others who get divorced as well, which is not coming from a place of unconditional love and care and empathy for people and for their individual experiences and situations. I don't think that a lot of Christians understand what abuse is or that abuse is a thing or that it is the number one reason why women of faith get divorced or initiate divorce, because they are being abused. They don't understand that. They're not aware of that. It's ignorance, and I understand.

But because of their ignorance, they are just passing on these ideas that are destroying... They're not just destroying us in that we feel like we can't get divorced, but they're destroying us in that I remember feeling judgmental towards a friend of mine whose husband was a serial cheater and was serially cheating with men. I told her, "Well, you can't get divorced." I look back on that now... I get it! I know what it's like to be in that environment and to live like that. I felt judgmental towards her because she was considering getting out of that relationship. I had to go back later and apologize and ask for her forgiveness for that. But it creates all those judgmental feelings in us about other people.

JULIE: Natalie, I can relate to that exact story as far as I had a friend who was in an abusive marriage who I said the same things to. I was, for years, trying to help them reconcile. I've had to go back and ask her forgiveness as well. She is now divorced, but it took ten years of battle with the church and me saying, "I'm never going to support you getting divorced because I know that's not what God wants." Now I have, in turn, as a survivor, gone to her and said, "Please forgive me. It was wrong and I have learned so much since then, that I was a part of oppressing you. I am so sorry." So I understand that humbling. We're not coming here saying we have it all together. We were also a part of... I don't want to say we were brainwashed, but we were part of this following of

"You don't get divorced."

NATALIE: Yeah, it's a system of belief that for many people is rooted in good intentions, but it's really based on ignorance over the reality of what is going on out there in the real world in individual people's lives. We could go down that rabbit trail, but let's get back to your story. You got married to him despite the red flags, despite what the church was telling you, you got married to him. What are some of the ways that he abused you?

JULIE: I won't go into a ton of the nitty gritty details. Some of those details just truly belong between me and a counselor, and also my husband needs to work through his issues, and to protect my children. But I will say that from the beginning I was misled by him in that he, over the eleven and a half years of marriage, has proven that he is more comfortable living with a private, hidden life than to have a vulnerable, transparent marriage. The pattern that repeated itself many times over: things would come to light, he would profess repentance, he would seek forgiveness, and then he would promise to never lie again.

Unfortunately, it was all talk. He just got better at hiding. It took me a long time to realize this was abuse because he never raised his voice at me. In my mind I didn't understand that someone could never raise their voice at you and still do covert abuse that does real and profound damage to the soul, mind, and heart of another person. I was very confused for a long time as to why this hurt so badly and why I felt inside that I was being crushed, like my soul was crushed. I couldn't understand. He never called me names. He never yelled or overtly abused me. I had experienced those things in other relationships, so that quiet, hidden, intentional, covert abuse I can say today has made more lasting marks on my soul than even the overt stuff I had experienced in childhood and relationships beforehand.

Another thing, I know others have shared this on your podcast and I have really appreciated their stories, but I felt as though I was not allowed to be a real person with real feelings and needs. One quick example is that when my mom passed unexpectedly, I spent two weeks in the hospital with her. He probably showed up for twenty minutes a couple of times other than the initial surgery and her actual passing. He was there over a two-week period maybe for twenty minutes. It wasn't that our kids needed to be watched. Tons of people were offering to keep the kids. He just was much more comfortable being reclusive and avoiding connection than being by my side.

NATALIE: Yeah. I'm so sorry.

JULIE: Thank you. It was hard.

NATALIE: What did you do to survive? How did you cope? What were some of your strategies to cope?

JULIE: I would always call one close friend. She knows every single instance of deception and how the pathology displayed itself. Her husband is also a pastor in Kentucky, a conservative Baptist pastor. They have counseled me through this whole time and they have never done damage to me. They have always counseled me with grace, believed me, and believed the major issues that were at hand. I've gone to counseling for the last eight years myself. We attempted to do some marital counseling. He quickly bowed out. He has attempted to go to counseling a couple of times but quickly bows out. We did seek help from the church, although I knew the message was, "Christian marriages can always heal and be saved," and that common myth that "Every marriage is a 50/50 sin problem. My sin is just as much of the problem and I have to look at that plank in my eye before the speck in his." Those were some of the ways I initially tried to reach out to people.

How I internally coped was twelve years of cognitive dissonance. Truly, the reality of my world did not match what I believed about my husband. He was kind. He was gentle. He was patient. But the reality was that he was unable to show empathy or presence when my mom suddenly passed away. There wasn't remorse for repetitive lying. He didn't show any desire to take those necessary steps to get some help to save the marriage. He didn't want a close, connected life with me. He wanted a private life. That's what he wanted, so why did he get married? Why would you get married if you wanted to live like a bachelor?

With cognitive dissonance, the picture in my mind didn't add up to the reality that was consistently being brought to light by God. He was good with the kids. He could describe scripture and doctrine so eloquently. He worked so hard to provide for our family, and he was a servant. He likes to help around the house. I would focus on all those things to counteract the areas of emotional neglect and disconnection and the deception. There were other areas I won't go into, but I believe I lived a lot of our marriage feeling like an object, like I was just there for his satisfaction. It wasn't that I was a human being with real needs.

But when I thought about all the things I'd been taught in the church, I thought "Well, emotional disconnection seemed secondary to what I had been taught for years that was primary: maintaining my vows, forgive everything, keeping our family together, caring for other people and laying my own life on the altar. Laying my life down: that's

what Jesus did and that's what I need to do."

During this pattern of eleven years of marriage, we would have seasons where I thought he was getting better and no discoveries were coming out. During these seasons, we continued having children biologically and adopting children. We had even started the process to do foster care. Parenting in general has been an area that I felt like we could do it well together. In a way that was almost a coping skill. Not that we used our children to cope, but that I felt it was a way we could be missional together even though our marriage one-on-one was not good on paper, like it's not connected. But over here we can serve children without families and be even more on a mission team together. You never want to adopt or try to do foster care to try to fix your life. That's truly not the motive of my heart in doing that. It was that this was a way my husband and I could be a team and be on mission together and be strong because there were good things. But what I realized over time and with discovery after discovery, he wasn't changing. These things were just hidden better.

NATALIE: Was there ever a turning point where you decided enough is enough? Did a lightbulb ever go on? Or was it just a slow, gradual waking up?

JULIE: A lightbulb did go on. Two and a half years ago some major discoveries came out that were more profound than the ones before involving infidelity. I realized I could no longer bear the burden of a marriage with five percent of the truth and ninety percent of hiding. "I cannot do this cyclical pattern of the part of the story where you want to confess, you ask for forgiveness, you profess repentance, and promise to never lie again and then you just continue lying." I realized at that time that I was in an emotionally unhealthy place in my ability to not only parent my children but to care for myself.

I was at that breaking point in my mind where I felt that I was going crazy. Everyone gets there when they are surviving this kind of narcissistic abuse. They get to a place where they are so spun up in a web of lies, they can't see through the webbing. During that period I separated for a couple of weeks where he stayed with a church elder. I won't get into how the church responded. It was a different church at this point that we were at. I won't get into a lot of how they responded, but there was damage done.

It was very much that I was the exposer. I was "wrong" to be exposing and investigating my husband. That was deeply damaging for me. It made me want to not tell the church anything because I was sitting in a pile of rubble. I was crumbling and crushed on the floor and they were telling me, "You're not being strong enough and you're not being forgiving enough." But what I can say is that pastor did come alongside and put in

protections that my husband did agree with to try to hold him accountable, to try to redeem the areas that were broken, and basically to try to decrease any temptation to lie by removing certain things that were the struggle, that were the sin agent, as far as some of the addiction goes.

That happened and it was completely accepted and wanted by my husband. He said, "I don't trust myself. I need accountability." He promised everything was on the table. From that point forward there would be no more lying. I made it truly clear that this was my attempt to reconcile our marriage. "If lies continue, I'm done." This was two and a half years ago. That was my very clear, "This is us actually trying to reconcile. We're not repeating what we've done in the past. Divorce is on the table, but I am willing to try to reconcile this one last time to give it my all. If you continue the way you have in the past, I can no longer shoulder this pattern of behavior."

Unfortunately, a year and a half after that happened (so this past November, after a year and a half of being deceived again), it came out that my husband's heart had not changed and that he had been actively hiding and doing the things that he does for that whole year and a half. I was crushed, but at that point there was no doubt in my mind. "I am done."

NATALIE: So that was just this past November?

JULIE: Yes.

NATALIE: What happened after that, then?

JULIE: Within a week of the discoveries coming out (and I already knew that we were separating at that point) he moved to a friend's for about three weeks while I found a place. Then I separated from him. We are separated. We've been separated for seven months. The kids primarily live with me. They visit him. But we will be getting divorced.

NATALIE: Okay. Did you lose your church then? Or how has that been going?

JULIE: The church we were at then... After the last discoveries we had started going to a different church that a mentor of mine that I've had for about ten years attended. It seemed to have more accountability and discipleship going on, so we decided to go there. We aren't church hoppers, but the last three to four years have been rough in that area of finding a true church that we can call home. But we were there for that year and a half. I came to the pastor and his wife and told them everything. By far, this couple was the most empathetic, compassionate, and loving people during this as far

as they were not hard on me as a victim and they weren't just saying, "Go back to your husband."

However, I felt that since my husband was going to stay at that church and receive counsel from them, I didn't feel like it was a healing thing for me to stay. What has been hurtful with that church in general is that pretty much everyone has gone silent. No one has reached out other than two people who will text me occasionally. But as far as the group of women I went to Bible study with, the women that I was friends with for a year and a half, I have not heard a peep. They've gone completely rogue. I've had to grieve that.

I think there are different reasons for different people in that area. I don't think people are malicious. There are people who are judging, I'm sure, and thinking, "How dare she separate and put her kids through this," and everything else that goes through people's minds. I would say that's been hurtful because even if you don't fully support somebody going through this, you can ask how they are doing.

NATALIE: Right.

JULIE: You can reach out and say, "I'm acknowledging that you are living separated from your husband with four small children with special needs. You are probably really struggling right now. How is your heart doing?" But I think people don't want to get in the weeds. They don't want to get muddy. It's just uncomfortable. So that's been a hard thing.

NATALIE: Yeah. I've noticed in talking to women and even in my own experience, it's almost like you have to... Some women have it amazing. They have amazing churches that are so supportive. But for most women who end up getting divorced, you almost have to make a clean break and start over in a new environment where people don't know you. They don't know your past. It's sad, and yet that's just the reality of the situation. It's part of the package of getting divorced. It shouldn't be that way, but that's the way it is. I'm wondering if you can tell us something that you have learned through this process that you wish you could go back and tell your younger self.

JULIE: I would tell myself that even though there are very well-intended approaches of the church, they can be very harmful at the same time too with the motive of saving marriages at all costs, saving marriages at the cost of the individuals in them. I would tell myself we can't sacrifice people on the altar of the institution of marriage. A lot of people, even Christians, not just pastors, will cherry-pick scripture. Cherry-picked scripture doesn't lead to accurate interpretation of scripture. In too many ways, people

cherry-pick verses on divorce and submission and they oppress victims of abuse in those ways. They oppress us to go back into the arms of our abusers, and that's not how Jesus' love works.

What I would tell my previous self is to read the totality of scripture, to read all of... I love how you shared, Natalie, how you camped out in John and read it and read it, and all you focused on was Jesus and who He was. That is what my plan is for this next year of my life. I am going to read John as if it's my full-time job, and I'm going to read about the love of Jesus because He calls us all to submit to one another. It's repeated so many more times than "wives submit to your husbands." That's one cherry-picked scripture. He has afforded divorce for those who have been unloved in a variety of ways. There's a book called "Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible" by Instone. I think you've talked about it on the podcast before.

NATALIE: David Instone-Brewer, yep.

JULIE: Yes. I have that book. I haven't read it yet, but I went through Divorce Care and the Divorce Care I went to brought that up. I know some Divorce Care groups focus on just two things that are biblical grounds for divorce. But the Divorce Care I was in very much supported this book as the book to read. It will show you that the Bible has a lot more to say about divorce than just what the church is saying. There are things throughout scripture that show this.

I would tell myself it is okay to be a real person with real feelings and real needs. Throughout the eleven years of marriage I feel like I've lost myself in many ways. I'm beginning to now find myself again, and I'm embracing that I am fully human and that I'm a woman who has so much to offer. I have so many good things that over the years have been implied that were bad. One of the things in your workbook that I have worked through is how my husband viewed women or viewed me. I realized he really wasn't fond of my personality. I talk too much. The view is women talk too much, are too needy, and are too emotional. I'm just learning that this is who I am, and I'm a real human with real feelings and real words to share. I'm really okay with myself. I don't need to feel shame that I'm a talker, a verbal processor, and an extroverted extrovert. That's who I am.

To answer that question, I would give myself a lot of loving and tender care. My mom always told me, "Be kind and gentle to yourself." Those words stick with me. She told me that so many times in my life. It is "Be kind and gentle to yourself and love yourself and embrace who God made you to be." That's the crux of building from the ground up when you've been wrecking balled to a crushed pile of rubble. The way I see the Lord

mending me and binding me back together is through that love of accepting His love for me and loving myself enough to fight for this freedom.

NATALIE: Yes, that's beautiful. I love that. Julie, thank you so much for being willing to take some of your time, being vulnerable, and sharing your story. I know this will be helpful to so many women because your story talks a lot about covert abuse. There are tons of women out there who really do believe that if their husband isn't yelling at them or swearing at them or throwing things at them or hitting them that they are not being abused. I can relate to so much of your story in having an ex-husband who was also a great provider and much more of a calmer, behind the scenes, servant kind of a person and all of the cognitive dissonance that provides for you when you also see other things behind the scenes that aren't appropriate. Anyway, thank you again, Julie. For the rest of you, thanks for listening. Until next time, fly free!