

MY HUSBAND CHANGED AFTER WE GOT MARRIED

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 95 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I am excited to introduce you to Barb Spanier. She has been a friend of mine for several years. She was one of the very first women to help me with the beta program for Flying Free, which has been three and a half years ago now. She's been with us since the very beginning.

She was married for twenty-four years. She's been out for six years and divorced for five years. She now works with survivors, helping them get through separations and divorces and helping them post-divorce. She has her own coaching practice called Integrative Coaching For Life. You can visit the website at integrativecoachingforlife.com if you want to check out her services. I recommend her all the time. I'm not doing any private coaching anymore. I do all my coaching within the Flying Free group, so I always recommend people to Barb when they come to me for private coaching. Barb, welcome to the Flying Free Podcast!

BARB: Thank you, Natalie. It's so good to be here with you.

NATALIE: We're going to be interviewing you today not on your coaching but on your story. I want to hear your story of how you got married, how you discovered you were in an emotionally abusive relationship, and how you got out. That's what we're going to talk about today. Why don't we start with you telling us how you met your husband? I'm always curious to know if there were any red flags that you noticed and ignored, or was it just amazing at the beginning?

BARB: We met at a Bible college. I was a freshman and he was a returning student. We met because my boyfriend introduced us.

NATALIE: Oh, interesting.

BARB: Our school was in South Carolina. I was from the New England area, and I needed a ride home. He was from New England, so my boyfriend got us together and he gave me a ride home. If any of you are familiar with the movie "When Harry Met Sally," that was kind of our story. For the next few years, we bumped into each other. He didn't come back to college after that, but a year later we randomly bumped into

each other at a mall in Connecticut. Then we bumped into each other again and again. We had these random meetings.

By the time I had graduated, I was working at the college. He came back through the college and bumped into me. We went to lunch, and six months later we were married. Like, literally to the hour. I realized later we went to lunch and to the hour six months later we were walking down the aisle getting married.

Were there red flags? I don't know that we would have used that term back then, "red flags." I know, as I think back, there was a sense even then (we've talked about that - I have always used that as part of my story) that he wore me down. It wasn't a "I'm head-over-heels" story. It was that he wore me down. He wore me down with flowers, gifts, bringing me different places, and all these things.

I was following the script. We all have a script where we grow up, we go to college, we meet somebody, and we get married. So I was following the script. There were things that stood out to me that I remember saying I really liked. For instance, he would decide where we went out to eat. In a dating situation, there was a part of me that kind of liked that because there was none of this, "Do you want to go here?" "I don't know. Do you want to go here?"

NATALIE: Right!

BARB: Right? Part of me liked that, but then years later that always continued to be the story. So it wasn't a red flag. I didn't know about red flags. But as I look back, I see behaviors. I believe the only huge red flag was the night before we got married. We had our rehearsal dinner, and after the dinner there was a lot of anger because I didn't behave the way he expected me to behave.

In my mind, I was the hostess, so I needed to talk to everybody and make everybody feel welcome. In his mind, I needed to stay by his side. So there was a lot of anger. I didn't know where that came from. I was young. He was twelve years older than I was. So there was a power-differential there. I didn't know what to do with it the night before my wedding, so I got married and moved on.

NATALIE: Yeah.

BARB: There weren't red flags. I was following the script. There were good times in there. We did some real fun things during those six months.

NATALIE: Once you got married, what were some ways that he psychologically or spiritually abused you in any way or used God to control you throughout the course of your marriage?

BARB: I was thinking about this, and there was so much. For twenty-four years it was very systemic. Because this is my story, I think I want to put it in the form of a story, almost like a metaphor. There are these rats they use overseas to find landmines. They use rats because they don't want to use humans or dogs. So they use rats to find landmines because you don't know where they are, and you don't know where they are going to pop up.

But that is what my job was throughout our whole marriage. My job was to find landmines, to mitigate them, to make sure these bombs didn't go off, to diffuse them, to make sure they didn't hit my children, to make sure they didn't hit our friends, to sacrifice myself in the midst of this situation where there was gaslighting. There was so much controlling, blaming, and intimidation. All these things were going on in the marriage, but the script for me was that I needed to find them and to mitigate the situation. I needed to be responsible for them. I needed to make sure that my kids weren't hurt, whether that meant me laying down on them or just mitigating or diffusing.

I think that's the idea of the whole emotional and spiritual abuse throughout the whole marriage. It's that it was systemic. It wasn't an instant here or there. There were a lot of instances. There was a lot of anger. There was one point near the end of our marriage where I thought, "I wish I could just go a few hours without being yelled at, bullied, criticized, or blamed. Just two hours. It would be amazing to just have two hours when we were together in my home to not have that happen."

NATALIE: Wow! I am so sorry.

BARB: It was systemic in all areas. For me, it was like I was a crisis counselor. I was always trying to put out his triggers and always trying to make sure those bombs didn't blow up.

NATALIE: It sounds like it was just constant and relentless. Did he do the same things to your kids too? Or was it mostly just directed at you?

BARB: I made sure my kids did not see a lot of this. It was constant. There was a lot. I'm not going to say there weren't great times in there. There were times that it was really good. There were times of apology and tears, but there was never any change. Never.

In twenty-four years, there was never any change. There was marriage counseling. There was medication. I worked hard because my job was to take care of it. And I worked hard to take care of it. He was never able, in my experience, to change. So there were good times. There were some great times. But for me, I realized I was going to be a great mom in the midst of this, and I was going to work really hard. That's what I did.

NATALIE: Was there ever a time you realized, "Woah! This is actually abusive, and I'm not sure if I can sustain this for the rest of my life"?

BARB: I think I always knew in some instance it was abusive and that there was abuse going on.

NATALIE: Would you have articulated it like that in your mind?

BARB: I articulated it in my journals.

NATALIE: Okay.

BARB: I asked for help in certain situations, but because it was emotional, and it wasn't like he was... For instance, he would break things, but it would be like, a dish. It wasn't like he was purposely throwing things against the wall. So when you reach out to a church or to marriage counselors it was, "Oh, I just broke a dish by accident."

NATALIE: Right!

BARB: So it was, "I am so stressed out. I am so sorry that I wasn't careful." So I did reach out. I tried to get help. I tried counseling. I got therapy. I had us go to marriage counseling. I worked hard throughout! I read books upon books. But nothing ever changed because he didn't change.

NATALIE: Yeah. That's a common theme. We're speaking to women. I know there are men who are abused as well in Christian circles. I've seen it myself. But this audience is women, and I am talking to women of faith who are in abusive relationships.

I've noticed this theme: that the women are the ones who are reading the books and who are asking or initiating to get counseling and to get help personally and for the marriage. It is still a common sign or signal that there is abuse going on, yet it is completely ignored. They end up being told that they are the ones who are abusive. Abusers almost never reach out and try to get help, read a bunch of books, or beg their wife to go to counseling. They don't do that because they don't want to be under

scrutiny. They don't think there is anything wrong. "What's wrong? Everything is great!"

BARB: Right. They think, like in my instance... If we go back to the landmine description, not only do we try to diffuse the bombs, but we also get blamed for the bombs.

NATALIE: Yes!

BARB: Even when we diffuse them we hear, "Well, you didn't work doing this or this. In fact, could you do it better?" You don't even get thanked for putting the bomb out.

NATALIE: Right. "You are the reason the bomb was put there in the first place! So shame on you!"

BARB: Yes. "And shame on you because you really should have done a better job at putting that bomb out."

NATALIE: Yes. It's so frustrating.

BARB: That is the systemic-ness of it in the family and in the church. That is the script that everyone is going by.

NATALIE: Yep. And that script needs to change. That's why we do what we do because that script needs to change. We need to raise awareness. We need to be talking about this stuff. We need to be exposing the script. When the script happens in isolation, nobody understands that this is a problem, and it is going exactly as this problem goes. In order to get the diagnosis and fix the problem, we need to expose it. We need to gather the data together, look at it closely, and say, "Here's what's going on." I'm curious to know what made you decide to get out, because you are a Christian. You ran in some very conservative circles, I know. So what made you decide to get out, and how did you begin that process?

BARB: Great question. A couple of things made me decide to get out. It was getting worse. I was not able to mitigate it, and I was choosing not to mitigate it as well. At this point in time when I was getting out, I had college-age children and a six-year-old. It's interesting, because subconsciously I think I knew I couldn't keep doing this. I was slowly working on building my own business in online education. I had slowly started taking care of myself: eating healthy, walking, running, exercising. I was in great physical shape. I was running three miles four or five times a week. I was getting stronger and more confident.

At this point I realized... First off, my ex traveled for a living. So I knew when he was outside of the home that was when I could breathe. I realized the year I left, before I had decided to leave, that I had already spent eight weeks traveling. I now had a son who was away at college, and I had friends who I could visit. I worked online and homeschooled, so my six-year-old and I could travel. I realized I could not mitigate the damage as well as I had done previously or as well as I thought I had done previously. I started seeing it for what it was. I realized that I was living in a state of mind where I thought, "When he finally dies, I hope he goes first because then I can at least have a couple of years of peace, because my life is chaotic. It is chaos every minute of the time." Yes, there were some good times in there, but you are always vigilant because you know it is coming.

There was a five-week period that I had stayed away. Those five weeks of being away, I wasn't planning on separating. It worked out that I had a friend who needed me, and I could go. It was summer. I realized that I just didn't want to go back. There was something at the end of that time that I could clearly say in my mind, "I have been living in an emotionally abusive marriage." That is when I realized, "Wow! I can do something about this." Part of that for me, when I was away for those five weeks, was that I realized I had support. I had great friends, and I didn't have to walk it alone.

NATALIE: That's wonderful. Did you share with them what was going on and what you were thinking?

BARB: I didn't at first because I didn't even know. Those five weeks I didn't even think about it. Then when it came time to go home I thought, "I can't. I can't go back to living that way walking on eggshells." So I decided to stay a few more weeks. I finally said to some of my friends, "I can't go back." They said, "What do you mean you can't go back? You have a great marriage." I said, "I don't!" I started talking to them about it and they told me, "You are in an emotionally abusive marriage."

I spent four weeks seeing a therapist during that time. It came quickly to me because I had already been doing a lot of work. Within that four-week time, I decided. After four weeks I decided, "I'm done. I'm not going back," because I knew an in-house separation would not be an option. I knew we had tried marriage counseling several times, and it would not work. He could talk his way in and out of everything.

NATALIE: A lot of women go through that phase of marriage counseling. I did that. "Let's go to marriage counseling and see if we can salvage this." Usually the victims get re-abused by the biblical counselors or their churches, which is even more traumatic, and they have even more to heal from when they get out. So you skipped that part because

you already knew instinctively that that is what would happen to you?

BARB: I knew, and to be honest, the therapist I went to was amazing. And she knew.

NATALIE: That is so good. I wish that for every abuse target, but most of them don't have that. It is so sad.

BARB: I knew nobody in my sphere of friends or people who had been divorced – nobody. I was in a very conservative sphere. But this therapist I went to was so good, and she was amazing. She had worked with women who had been in my situation. She was phenomenal. She said, "Get a lawyer. Get a really good lawyer."

NATALIE: So did you?

BARB: Yes. After four weeks and having made that decision I got a lawyer, and I never talked to my ex again because I had a great therapist who said to go no-contact. I had a lawyer who told me outright, "Change your phone number." I had great people who said, "You don't text, you don't phone call. Your only communication is through email." They knew when you are dealing with people with behaviors like my ex had exhibited that you have to put strong boundaries in place and protect yourself, because it is a long, hard road. I got a lawyer right from the beginning before I made any moves or decisions, and he was fabulous!

NATALIE: That's wonderful. Tell us what were some of the hardest, or maybe the hardest, things that you went through while you were going through your divorce process? Then tell us what was one of the amazing things about going through that process for you. I mean, it was awesome just to get out, to be free, and to not be exposed to all that craziness. But was there anything that stands out to you? Bad and good?

BARB: For me, the most difficult part of leaving was that it was emotionally difficult and traumatizing because there was an enormous loss of my local community and church community. It was difficult for my children. My ex had a lot of stalking behaviors. He ambushed me and my child at night with another man. It was contentious and really hard. That was the most difficult part. The most amazing part was the support that I had walking through it. I had a wonderful support system that helped me, so those times when I was struggling, they could help me. They could read the emails and tell me, "Don't even read this one until you can."

NATALIE: Until you've had five cups of coffee? So just a second, though. It sounds like

the good and the bad were... The bad part was that you lost community and people, but then the good part was that you had support. So obviously your support was not from the community you would have thought you would get support from?

BARB: Right. Here's where my community came from. I had gone to a Christian girl's camp growing up.

NATALIE: Was it Camp Cherith?

BARB: It was.

NATALIE: I think you and I have talked about this before.

BARB: Yes, it was Camp Cherith. And those women in Maine surrounded me and walked with me through this process. Now, my local church in Florida did not. They listened to my ex. They allowed him to ruin my reputation. They showed up and spoke for him at my three-day trial.

NATALIE: Wow! Unbelievable!

BARB: Yes. Even my former therapist, who was an elder at that church, spoke for my ex. My child has lost friendships because I didn't follow the script. I didn't follow the script of the evangelical local church that said you stay no matter what.

NATALIE: I'm sorry, but this kind of stuff just gets me so... I've been accused of being angry and bitter about this stuff, but you know what? I don't know how anyone who has any kind of heart, compassion, empathy, or love in them could not get angry about this. This is so reprehensible. This is why: because they are doing it in the name of our Savior. They are doing it in the name of Jesus Christ. I know people who have completely lost their faith in Christ because this is such a twisted satanic use of the church.

It is still so hard for me to wrap my brain around how this happens, but this is reality. This is abuse. The reason we have so much abuse in private homes in the church at large is because the church itself is abusive. The church is abusive. This is not love, people. This is not love. This is nothing. There is absolutely nothing of Jesus Christ in any of this. Jesus never took people, smashed their heads into the dirt, and wiped his mouth with their blood. He never did that! That is what the churches who did that to you, who did that to me, and who have done that to hundreds of women I have talked to are doing.

If anyone listening to this program thinks that is just a one-off example and that this doesn't happen, no, no, no! I have talked to hundreds and hundreds of women that this has happened to. This is a systemic problem in the church. You won't notice it until you raise your head and speak out against it. Suddenly, the wolves will come out in droves to chop your head off. I had to go on a little rant there because it just makes me so angry. I will be angry until the day I die over this issue. If anyone is saying, "She is such an angry, bitter person," you go right ahead and say that. I'm proud of it.

BARB: Because it is. It is systemic and it is happening. Do you know not one person...? People did not reach out to me. It is really interesting that pastors who had never even been in my home were willing to come to my three-day trial to talk about how peaceful and kind my ex-husband was, which was interesting because moments later the judge had to call the bailiff in because of my ex's aggressive behavior in the courtroom.

NATALIE: That had to feel kind of vindicating, right?

BARB: Yes, it was. But in the midst of that, I had great support from these women that I had grown up with who were there and were not as stuck in the fundamental Christian church.

NATALIE: Yes, because the church of Jesus Christ is alive and well – the true church. You just don't always find it in the building. You don't find it in the institution that is out there and has established itself. You find it on the streets. You find it in the coffee shops. You find it in Zoom meetings. You find it in the camps. You find it on that grass-roots level. You find it where Jesus was. Jesus wasn't in the synagogue. He started out there until they excommunicated Him and threatened to throw Him off a cliff. But then where was Jesus? He was on the hillside. He was in the bars and the taverns. He was on the streets. He was where the people were. That's where the church is today.

BARB: You find it in the love and the kindness that people are showing to each other, and I found that throughout my entire walk. I continue to find it, and it's beautiful to continue to see the love and the kindness, which I think as survivors we must learn.

I think that has been some of my biggest learning – to take that loving kindness that other people have shown me and show it to myself. I think as survivors we learned to take all that negativity that was given to us day-by-day, and we learned to speak that to ourselves. So that love and that kindness, I have had to learn to speak that and be loving and kind to myself and to take the love of Jesus and speak that love and kindness to myself, because that is where the healing begins and happens.

NATALIE: Yeah. Barb, what is one piece of advice you would give to someone who is contemplating leaving for good?

BARB: I don't know that I can say one, but I am going to say four really quick if that's okay?

NATALIE: Sure.

BARB: Get a great lawyer. Don't even think about it until you have a great lawyer. No contact as much as possible; only emails if necessary. Build a great support system however that may be. Whether it is Flying Free or local or long distance, get a support system. Most of all, be kind to yourself and work on yourself by building your resiliency because it is a long, hard journey, and you have to be resilient.

NATALIE: Yeah. I like that. All four of those are amazing. For those of you listening, one of the ways (she mentioned Flying Free) that you can get a support system as well as education and personal coaching is through the Flying Free Sisterhood program. Apply today at joinflyingfree.com.

Also, if you are new to the podcast and you'd like to get informed when a podcast episode comes out (which is every Wednesday), you can go to my website flyingfreenow.com and get on my mailing list. I don't spam anybody because I absolutely hate spam. All I'll do is send you the podcast episode link. You can read the transcript or listen. I write an article once in a while, so I'll send you a link to an article if I write one. Once in a while, I also make a YouTube video.

Finally, what I have coming up soon is a brand-new program that Barb is part of. It's called Flying Higher. It is for divorced Christian women. So if you're a Christian woman who has already gone through the divorce process, who is out on the other side, and who is looking at the rubble of your life and thinking, "How do I even begin to rebuild this house?" that is what Flying Higher is all about.

Flying Higher is a little more intense than Flying Free. It's a rebuilding program. It's a coaching program. Barb is going to be coaching inside of that program. I'm super excited! Barb and a couple of other coaches and myself will do a weekly live class. We'll do one live coaching session per week for one monthly price. It's a lot cheaper than getting private coaching, but it's also extremely transformative. That's opening on January 27, 2021. If you want to learn more about it and apply for that program, you can go to joinflyinghigher.com and we will send you some information about that when it opens again. [Flying Higher is now open and available to the public!]

I want to let everyone know what your options are. Your free option is to go to flyingfreenow.com. Get on that mailing list. It's free, no charge. The only thing I ever try to sell you is if you want to get into Flying Free. To apply for Flying Free, go to joinflyingfree.com. If you are already divorced and need something to help support you through that, it is joinflyinghigher.com.

Don't forget that Barb also has her own private coaching practice at integrativecoachingforlife.com. (Did I sound like a radio person there?) At least you guys all have it now. So Barb is over there. You can check out her coaching packages and get some private help from her if you would like. You can also hear her whole Butterfly Story within the Flying Free program, and of course she will be coaching in Flying Higher. Barb, thank you so much for sharing your story here on the Flying Free Podcast. I appreciate your time. Thank you for listening. Until next time, fly free!