

The Flying Free Podcast with Natalie Hoffman, Episode 350 - Understanding Coercive Control and the Harms Inflicted on to Adult and Child Victims

Heads up, friend: What you're about to read is a raw, unedited transcript straight from the robots. That means you'll find some weird words, funky punctuation, and moments that make you go, "Huh?" If you want the real experience (and to actually know what's going on), I recommend reading the polished article, listening to the full episode, or watching it on 1.5x speed with captions on. Your brain will thank you.

Natalie: He doesn't hit you, but that doesn't mean you're not being abused. Today we're gonna talk about coercive control. Dr. Christine Cocchiola is gonna dismantle the biggest myth in the abuse conversation. The coercive control is just one type of abuse, but it's not. It is the entire playbook. She's gonna unpack how abusers, weaponize legal systems, religion, and even therapists to maintain power, how they regulate their emotions, just enough to look like saints in public while psychologically dismantling their victims in private.

And if victims finally speak up, they're called hysterical. They're told they're angry, they are dismissed, or even worse, punish. This conversation is not for the faint of heart, but if you've ever felt invisible in your own marriage, or if you've been gaslit into silence by your church, your courtroom, or your own children.

You need to hear this because understanding coercive control could be the difference between staying trapped and finally Flying Free.

Today I have with me Dr. Christine Cocchiola. She's an expert on the experiences of adult and child victims of coercive control. She's also a college professor who teaches social work and she presents nationally and internationally on the concept of coercive control, and that is what we are gonna be talking about today.

So welcome.

Christine: Thank you so much for having me.

Natalie: Yeah. Let's just dive in by first defining what coercive control is, and I'm curious how is coercive control different from other forms of abuse that we've talked about on this podcast? Mainly, um, emotional abuse, but also physical violence and, and maybe financial abuse.

You know, there's so many different types of ways that, that women can be abused. So tell us the difference and how would you define that?

Christine: Absolutely. I think there's actually a misnomer out there that's problematic. People see course of control as a form of abuse, and even legislation calls it a form of domestic violence, and it's actually incorrect.

It's actually the underpinning of it all. Yes. Why do people, right. That makes sense. Yeah. And so, but a lot. But again, that's the narrative that's out there. And so I hope a big takeaway for your listeners is that if somebody's being emotionally abused or suffering physical violence or sexual violence, I always say it's the foundation of all isms.

Think about racism, sexism. It's about one person or a group of people exerting power and control over another person or group of people. Yes. People don't show up to relationships, punching them. People show up to relationships, coercing and controlling them, taking away boundaries like, like infiltrating people's boundaries, creating a smaller world, which is isolation, intimidation.

They gaslight people, they manipulate people. And then guess what, if that doesn't work really well, then yeah, you know what? I might punch you because that's exactly what happens. If I can't control you in alternative ways, I'm going to use more physical experiences to do that. So, and the really interesting part is that if you're a savvy abuser, right?

If you're someone who can emotionally regulate yourself, you're really great in front of a courtroom, you have a great career. You maybe are a school guidance counselor, everybody thinks you're wonderful. You have learned to regulate your emotions so well that you typically won't punch somebody, but you're gonna use all of the other tactics, the financial abuse, the legal abuse, the weaponization of children.

So again, the underpinning of it all is about coercion and control.

Natalie: Yes. Yeah. So basically what you're saying, I was gonna ask you to give us some examples, but what you're saying is that abuse, that's what abuse is. Abuse is coercive control.

Christine: A hundred percent. And my, my very savvy, smart son says to me, mom, why?

Why not just call it oppression? I mean, you know. Yes. It's like, it, it's, it's, well, it's, it's like servitude. It's a taking away of liberty. It is a liberty crime. When someone, I mean, we can think about all of the atrocities going on all over the world all of the time. You know, when you think about how this happens in micro systems, in intimate relationships, a hundred percent.

But it happens in other systems, the meso systems, it happens in education. It happens in, of course, political arenas. It happens in policies, the macro systems. It happens in governments. Why is there war to obtain land or religious rights or all of these things that's, that's about people exerting power and control over other people that they think they are either, well, first of all, it's always about power, but sometimes it's about fame.

Think about famous people who have done this, right? It's about gaining leverage. It's about fortune, it's about gaining money. We see this all the time with technological disasters. Somebody decides, oh, we're not gonna shut down the BP oil drilling down in the Gulf of Mexico, because if we cut, if we shut down that, then we're gonna lose money.

So, you know what we'll do? We'll just keep on pumping, even though we have signs that there's a faulty system. And then we totally erase a whole like, generation of fishery down there. Like, like do you understand? Like it's always about exerting power and control. It just happens sometimes behind closed doors.

Natalie: Yes. And sometimes we can't always see it. And I, I love that there's actually an elevated awareness of this. It's uh, I mean, I don't know, maybe it's just because of the social media accounts that I follow, but I'm seeing this, um, outcry more and more and more. And I think it's so important that we understand it, and the now my audience are mostly Christian women, women of faith who are experiencing this in their marriages and in their churches.

They're realizing, wow, I, I think this is actually going on in my church environment with hundred percent people who look like godly people on the outside. I love how you said there are some people who are very good at

regulating their emotions. They're very good at coming across, like they're the one who's got it together and like they're the generous one and they're the one giving the benefit of the doubt.

And they're actually, what they're doing is using those skills to actually undermine and take power and control over really, it's a mind, it's a mind. You know what it's like they're mind controlling people.

Christine: Feminist psychologists in the seventies were calling it psychological warfare. Yes. Albert Fireman did research in 1957 on prisoners of war and was able to show how you can be a military man, strapping man in the military, prisoners of war, and you could be so eroded down that you would go from totally denying, sharing military secrets to a total belief and confession, that you actually had done something that you never did.

This is men. This is not in a, in a home where you're gonna lose. Your house, your babies, like your, your like family won't, like, nobody can believe this person is this way. So, you know, I did a TEDx and it's doing very well and it's, it's, I call it, it is all coercive control because the reality is, is that we have people talking about coercive control and saying it's the hidden abuse.

It's not hidden. It's actually right in plain sight. And sometimes, by the way, well, what we know is, so when we think about murders of women, which by the way, 35% of women suffer violence in their lifetime. If 35% of women suffer violence in their lifetime, how many are suffering non-physical forms of abuse that no one's reporting?

Yep. I think that's gotta be close to 70. And how many children are living in these homes. And you know, my particular niche is children. So that being said. When women are murdered, are they murdered in a senseless act of like retaliation or aggression? Or is it, um, like maybe defense or are they murdered because someone could no longer control them the way that they wanted to control them?

So coercive control is beyond the violent incident model. It's everything. Yes. Yes. And in spiritual world, I see this all the time with my clients where, you know, unfortunately, I. You know, God, and, and, and, and being a good person can often be manipulated by powerful people to, and this is why we know women suffer this at a greater rate because women are taught in general our society, well first of all, we're innately born to be caretakers biologically.

You can't take that away from us. Mm-hmm. And then we live in a society that fosters that and then take, you know, ethnicities. Right. People, certain cultural beliefs that also foster that. I was just on a call with a woman from the Philippines and she's like, if I leave, my family will hate me. They will discard me because of Catholicism.

And, you know, the way that she has been groomed to behave and the family system believes it's a full, it's like a traitor in the family system. And then add in that, you know, this is the world we live in. Society has expect women are expected to be behave a certain way.

Natalie: Yeah. It's, mm-hmm. Yep. Wow. Okay. So let's talk about language.

Why, um, why is language so important? You brought up the fact that that, uh, coercive control is often thought of as a form of abuse and not really understanding that it actually encompasses all abuse. How do words and narratives get weaponized by abusers to maintain control? And what role does our language play in reinforcing this whole thing?

Christine: Well, that's a, that's an interesting, I love that question. So I think there's quite a few things. I think in general, what we are seeing, and we do know this happens with all laws, right? Is that abusers are, I think, I'm gonna step back, I think the most, I just talked to, uh, 400 judges in Texas about coercive control, and the reality is, is that what we're missing is a conversation about the pathology of abusers.

Who are these people who perpetrate this abuse because they listen. I was married to one for 27 years and 11 months. They show up at charlatan's. And I was doing, I've been doing this work for 37 years. I started in 19, do the math. Wow. You know, the reality is is that I didn't even see it in my own home now because I didn't suffer physical violence.

Right. Yeah. I used to say, if he would just hit me, it would all make sense. Right? But it's all coercive control, physical violence or not, it's all coercive control. So, you know, we live in a world where the, the people are not really understanding that this abuse shows up in very insidious ways. Often, initially it can show up as love.

As a matter of fact, love bombing is now part of coercive control legislation in the uk. Can you believe it?

Natalie: Wow,

Christine: that's amazing.

Natalie: So

Christine: how it's, so how do we understand the pathology of abusers? Talk about the operational definitions, right? And how do we understand the impact on children growing up in these family systems?

Because I'll tell you what. If I grew up in this family system, my chances of being a victim of abuse are extremely elevated, and my chances of identifying with an aggressor and taking on the traits, maybe not all of them, but taking on the traits of an abusive person are elevated. Are you kidding me? We could end world like problems if we actually understood what's going on in family systems and then in the meso systems and the macro systems.

So. We need to really operationally define who is an abuser. How, how do they become an abuser? What to look for in your courtroom, in the police station, when the police arrive at the door and the, and the victim has called the police and the abuser has a scratch because he took her phone open, right? So now she wants her phone back.

She's maybe recording him or has texts that she, uh, journals. She's journaling, she's keeping things safe, and she scratches him. And now who's the victim? Yeah. Yep. He actually, so stats regarding men. I know there's male victims. I have male clients. Many of them are gay. They're in relationships with other men.

Natalie: But I

Christine: do, I do know what happens to men. However, the stats. Are totally incorrect. It is not one in eight men that suffered domestic abuse. It is not. The reality is there are many men who are using the system and co-opting it to your point and saying they are now victimized. We have course of control legislation here in the state of Connecticut.

It's the strongest piece of legislation. We have a mother whose child, children, all three of them were taken from her and then they fled, but they knew they couldn't go to her because he has a restraining order against her. He won a restraining order against her. They fled to a friend's house. He took her to court and said that she is the of controller.

Natalie: Oh my

Christine: God. This is the system we're living in. It's

Natalie: absolutely tragic. Oh my gosh. Okay, so well, let's, let's talk about that then. Let's talk about the, the, the abusers and their pathology and how we define what an abuser actually is. Um, how do they inflict their harm? How can people recognize who is the real abuser and who's the one that's being victimized?

Christine: Oh, I love that

Natalie: one. Because

Christine: trauma can show up in a variety of ways, right? Yeah. So, you know, when I do a particular training, it's, um, it's a course of control professionals training, because I want professionals to understand what is the difference. So victims and survivors often show up dysregulated and frankly don't always behave in a way that we might think is appropriate.

But ask yourself after years, months, days of suffering, someone trying to control you. It's kind of like a percolating coffee pot. Eventually, it might just be one little pebble. And you might explode. And that is exactly when everyone's gonna look at you and say, look at what you did. Yes. Versus what we know.

The definition, of course control is a pattern of behavior to erode away a victim's autonomy. And so nobody looks at the patterns. Nobody. For me, I work a lot in family court situations. Nobody looks at the parental subsystem. If we took two parents and we put them side by side, was in from the very get go who had more power and control, if that person had more power and control, you had better believe they're gonna fight for more custodial time, even if they never gave a damn about the children before.

Yeah. Yeah. You better believe they're gonna fight to not have to pay as much money. You better believe that they are going to behave in a way where they start to weaponize the children overtly and make the children feel discomfort with the safe parent. These are all the tactics. It's not hard to see if you look at the relational dynamics in the family system, but people don't do that.

And of course judges aren't trained to do that, but for God's sakes, get trained.

Natalie: Yeah, right, right. Well, and I'm just thinking, even when I went to my church, so this is after decades of two decades of dealing with those patterns,

those exact patterns that you're describing. And by the time, after two decades now I'm mad.

I'm mad because I can't figure it out. I can't solve the problem. It's impacting my kids. It's impacting my mental health. And I'm angry because nobody will help me. Everyone that I try to reach out to wouldn't help. Nobody was looking at the patterns. But now that I'm angry and I'm presenting like this, like you need to listen to me now, this is absolutely outta control.

The, because of that energy that I brought to the table, I, they actually, everyone turned that on me then. And made it seem like I was, and I was like, if you look at the last 20 years of my life, who has been showing up, serving in the church, help, you know, raising my kids, basically like a single parent, showing up, bringing my kids to the doctor, doing all of these things, none of that mattered.

None of that mattered. It was only that point of, I love that percolating coffee thing. It was that point of eruption. That was the only thing that mattered to anybody else. And it didn't matter. And I'm a writer. I was writing, I was writing stuff down and keeping track, and none of that mattered. No one, no one cared about any of that.

They just didn't like my anger about it. Right.

Christine: No,

Natalie: exactly.

Christine: Exactly. So I love that you know, you, here you are. Like finally. Like really, when you think about how long it takes a victim to come forward or how many times they come forward, and you finally have the ability, the strength, and that strength, by the way, is fortified with anger.

Yes. The anger needed to be there. Yes. To give you the strength. Exactly. Exactly. If you don't get pissed off, excuse me, sorry. But if you don't get really angry at some point, then you're gonna continue to be subjugated. And that's really what subjugation is about. Right? Subjugation is about this idea that.

We are so worried about other people being hurt by our boundaries that we, we don't put them up, but we also are afraid that they're, that, that they are upset with us. Right? Yeah. And so that's subjugation and that's the percolating coffee pot. And over time resentment builds, and it could be the littlest thing that sets us off.

But when a woman shows up emotional, a woman is treated very differently than a man when she's emotional. And so, you know, a Kate man coined the word empathy because men get an inordinate amount of sympathy when they are troubled or having a challenging time. And they can be angry and punch a punch a hole in the wall.

But the woman, a woman, is a little over the top. She is hysterical. You know where the word hysteria comes from, right. I think I've heard this before, but you'd tell us. Yeah. So it comes from the Greek word uterus, which Freud created when women would come and complain about their husbands harming them.

And he began to call them hysterical. So, um, yeah, so we, there is so much layering of patriarchy here. Mm-hmm. And, and then add in, of course, to your point, religion. Right. Which actually, you know, there are many obviously wonderful parts of religion, but there are also patriarchal norms that are embedded in every single religion.

That's right. And so, you know, it's, it's a huge, it's a huge problem when we are con so a victim has to prove they're innocent, but a perpetrator doesn't have to prove that they're innocent.

Natalie: Yeah. It's crazy. It's crazy when I have people, some once in a while someone will reach out and go, you know, I would listen to your podcast, but you seem so angry.

I don't know how I come across angry in my podcast, but when they do that, I'm just like, I am. I'm angry as hell. That's why I do a podcast. That is literally why I do everything I do, because there is an anger and a rage inside of me about all of this crap that's going on. There's a great song by Sarah Reiss called If I Dare.

Mm-hmm. And there's a line in it that says, you don't have to listen, but you'll hear me mark my words. And that was what? When I walked away from my church, that was what that was. That became my mantra. You don't fine. You don't have to listen, but you're going to hear me mark my words. And I went out and started doing what I'm doing now, and I don't think I'm ever gonna stop because I don't think, I mean the day that my anger over what's happening to women and children in this world stops.

Is the day that I'm dead.

Christine: Yeah. For me it always makes me, I think I'm really angry, but it makes me so, um, uh, distressed. Yeah. That it's something like, so domestic violence, I'll use the words in the, in the research, but domestic violence is the number one killer for African American women to ages 15 to 35.

How are we not? Oh my gosh. Discussing this. Yeah. How, if I told you the amount of cases I have, the amount of mothers I know where family court and these ex dynamics in the, in the parental subsystem, the two parents, their, their subsystem in the family, that those dynamics have exposed child predators.

It's, it's a free access if you're a sexual predator and if one in three girls before the age of 18 are sexually abused and one in six boys and biological fathers are the number one perpetrators, this is the highway, this is the gateway to gain access. You and I are in a great relationship. I love you.

I'll perpetrate on our children or i'll perpetrate on your children from another relationship, and if you leave me, I'll get custody because I'm gonna tell the court. That you are alienating me from my children. I'm gonna use the words parental alienation, and I'm gonna, you tell the court you're an alienator.

When actually our child has had, I have a mom right now. Child has five UTIs in a month. The pediatrician told her to get a restraining order. She lost custody because she tried to get a restraining order. She got the restraining order, and when the hearing happened, the father said she was an alienator in making it up and that she was crazy, that she was making up stories.

She lost custody.

Natalie: That is absolutely

Christine: terrifying. This, this is my, this is my world. This is, this is what every single day. Every single mother. It's either sexual abuse, it's physical abuse, it's always the covert, coercive control. Your mother doesn't love you. She was never around for us. The betrayal trauma that these children are experiencing constantly is just, and that that creates, uh, first of all, whether it's sexual abuse or not, or physical abuse, or not significant anxiety, it creates an inability to have agency in my own life.

It creates more maladaptive coping. I either fawn, I'm subjugated a lot in life, or I fight

Natalie: Yeah.

Christine: Or I disassociate from the world and I pretend nothing's wrong. But the bottom line is I do that. How do I disassociate with substances?

Natalie: Yeah. I mean, you

Christine: know, with self harm, with, I mean. The I, I do believe the crux of our problems are related to family system perpetrators.

Natalie: Yeah. Yeah. Wow. My gosh. How do you, how do you get up every day?

Christine: I just, I mean, because, because this is also, by the way, the most thankful work. When a, when you give a mother guidance on how to protect her child from the predator, when you tell her how my, I have a protective parenting program, and people learn to be a therapist with these children who are so dysregulated, behaving horribly, and when you begin to implement different skills as you have to see it, you have to be able to say, whoa, this is what's going on.

I call it the 10,000 foot view, right? I have a lot of friends who have husbands who are pilots. So the 10, you look down and you're like, okay, I know exactly what he's doing. I know exactly what I have to do. This is really painful for me. I'm a trauma victim. But you know what? The most healing part of my life and me personally, has been healing those two babies behind me.

That's the most how, how do we get better? We get better when we know that our children are okay. Right? Yeah.

Natalie: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Christine: Yeah.

Natalie: Yeah. Okay. So let's talk a little bit more about that. Let's focus on the case to start. I know, um, gosh, this is so important though. I'm so glad you're here talking about it. How does coercive control impact children and their, because again, especially I'm thinking especially of the ones whose dads are.

Subtle who come across like good dads who do good things, and the children crave their dad's attention. They crave to be around their dad, they crave his approval, and he provides that most of the time. But it could be intermittent or it could be, I don't know. There's, there's so many ways I feel like, you know, even I, I deal with a lot of women post-divorce whose husbands, whose ex-husbands

are doing this to their children after the divorce is over and the children are taken in by it, even adult children get taken in by the, their dad's fraudulent persona.

And the, and the, the woman who has, who is still dealing with trying to heal from the trauma of her mind being violated over and over and over again for sometimes decades is now dealing with the fallout, watching her children go through this as well.

Christine: A hundred percent. So what we talk about in, in, in like the clinical world, so I'm a therapist, right?

I've, I've studied child development. What we know is that these abusers are omnipresent. They're always there even when they're not there, right? They've made themselves be like always present. Right? And some children fear the abuser. Okay. Overtly, let me say that again. Some children fear the abuser.

Overtly. All children fear the

Natalie: abuser. Yes. Oh gosh. I'm so glad you said that. Yes, it's true. That's why they're doing so, so much of the things that they're doing.

Christine: A hundred percent. So, so whether the abuse is over, like if I don't do what dad wants, right? Or if I don't, that whether the abuse is over or it's covert.

There's a, a dysregulation in the child. They have learned at a very young age. To watch the room. Yeah. To feel the room to feel what their mother is feeling or their, whoever the abuser is, right. They have learned to feel that in their body and they regulate their behaviors as a result of that. So then you take like, so the all abusers are authoritarian.

When I say that to your listeners, I just wanna be sure they know like that's like Hitler, like, like a totalitarian ruler, right? Everybody in the family knows we kind of gotta do what he says, we kind of gotta do it right. Maybe we can pacify him a little bit, but overall we better do what that person wants.

Mm-hmm. And of course, children thrive with authoritative parenting, which rhymes with give, where there's more choice, they get agency, et cetera. But what abusers often do is even if they've started off authoritarian, which is the scary dad, the bear in the home, right? The wolf in the home. Even if they've started off that way, they figure.

See, they're savvy. They figure out by age 10, 11, 12, tweens and teens, oh, wait a minute. If I start to be permissive, oh, hook, line and sinker. I've got this child baited. Because what do tweens and teens want? More freedom, access to more goods and services, even young adults. All of them. So the abuser, I, I have a, a YouTube, it's called in the podcast, called, um, my podcast called Perfect Pray.

But my, I have a YouTube episode called The Lure of Tweens and Teens. 'cause they literally lure them in then they might have been really scary and frightening for a long time. And, and we'll talk about the guy who isn't, but they might have been. And then all of a sudden they switch. They're still scary and frightening.

On the, on the down low. But now this kid knows, wait a minute, I actually can, I don't have to come home at 12 o'clock. My mother makes me come home at 12 o'clock. I'm 16 years old and I have a 12 o'clock curfew. Are you kidding me? My father lets me stay out till whenever my father supplies me my weed. My father gives me a car.

My father lets me take the car. Even though I had bad grades. My father doesn't care what my grades are, or my father cares very much what my grades are, and I'm gonna get an A, but because of that, I'm gonna be rewarded in a way that is beyond, it's not. It's an external reward. It's not an internal reward.

Right?

Natalie: Yeah. And

Christine: that's what happens with these children, is they learn to look externally for validation instead of internally, which really creates a competency issue in their growth. So how can I be competent to speak in front of a crowd? When the only way I've ever felt good is if I've been rewarded for doing whatever it is in the family system.

And I've been rewarded in a way that has subverted the protective parent's parenting. Yes. In every single dynamic. So that's the scary guy. I'll take the fun guy. Well, he never was authoritarian. And then you have a protective parent who's trying to create structure and boundaries, and maybe it's time to get a part-time job.

Or you need to, you know, you need to clean up your room, or let's clean up the dishes after dinner, whatever it is. And that permissive parent is like, oh, you don't have to do that. Don't worry about it. You know, don't worry about it. And

again, what is the goal? The goal is to take away competence. And competence leads to an ability, inability to have agency.

If I don't feel competent in the world, I don't have voice. I don't have the ability to assert what I need. I certainly don't have boundaries. And guess what? I'm easier, more easily controlled. That's a, that's a slam dunk for an abuser. Take away a child's ability to be competent in the world, which takes away their ability to have agency.

Guess what? I can get them to do whatever I want.

Natalie: Yeah. Gosh, this is so good. Okay. What about, what about a dad who is really passive? Mm-hmm. Like just, um, I mean, not engaged. I mean, there's some elements of what, what, what'd you say? Not engaged, really. Like Yeah, yeah. Not engaged. I mean engaged when they are too loud.

When the kids are too loud or when they're bothering him or interfering with what he wants to do. But not, but otherwise not engaged at all. And, and yet there still is a fear in the kid. Like, I'll just give you an example in my real life. Like there, for example, one of my kids won't go, he doesn't wanna do his homework at dad's house.

So he wants to make sure he does his homework with me at my house, but not at dad's house. Now I have my theories about why that is, but I, but I can't prove anything. But there is like this visceral fear in this 13-year-old that he can't do homework over there, and yet his dad is extremely passive and, and, uh, blows up on rare occasions.

Christine: My question is, is your child afraid that maybe they need help with homework? Yes. Okay. Yeah. You better not ask me for help. Right. Well,

Natalie: he will, he will help his kids though.

Christine: But he'll get,

Natalie: but it's, he gets very on edge and um, it's a, it becomes a thing. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Christine: Right, right. You're safer. It's safer to get homework done with you, with dad.

I know there's going to be some kind of a reaction and honestly, when you were starting to describe it before you said it was your situation, I was saying that's actually sometimes the best case scenario and the reason for that out of all of the abusers. Yeah. And, and it's a horrible situation, no doubt about it.

I'm not trying to minimize, but in that the child actually knows you are safer to do the homework with, right. Yeah. And the child, and here's the child also knows that that other parent, it's pretty clear, isn't really there for them. Yeah,

Natalie: so

Christine: versus the abusers, like, oh, I'll do your homework with you and I'll, you know, this, your, this child you're speaking of knows pretty clearly that dad is not reliable.

The other problem with this is that at your child's core, they know that dad does not love them unconditionally. That they are not valuable. So what, what abusers like to show us, and they did it with, with the adults, is that we're not valued in the family system. We don't matter. Mothers don't matter.

Maybe, maybe it's that overt, but also like, yeah, no, we're not important, and they teach children that they're not important. Sometimes overtly, always covertly. In your case, it's over. It's pretty clear. Yeah, that's interesting. I'm not important to dad. My schoolwork's not important. My dad gets angry if I have a question or if it takes up too much time away from maybe something we're supposed to do.

It's pretty overt, but that is a betrayal to a child. Yeah.

Natalie: Yeah. Okay. So I'll tell you another, I'll give you another little example. I'm, I know I'm only giving these examples because I feel like there's other people like me out there where it's more subtle, it's not as obvious, and they don't, they always, I feel like I am able to help those people the most, probably because that's my experience, but so.

One of my kids, I, I ha I found a recording. He was 10 at the time, and he came home and he was telling me, dad, he was crying and saying, dad doesn't love me. I know dad doesn't love me. And we were trying to get to the bottom of it. We, we couldn't get to the bottom of it. He got very upset. The more questions I asked, so I needed to back off.

But I had him listen to that. He's, it's several years later now. He's an older teen. And I had him listen to that and I said, do you remember when you record when you said this? And he, and he, because he gets along great with his dad now, and there was all kinds of problems before. And he goes, no, I don't remember that at all.

Mm-hmm. And I said, do you remember like not wanting to go over there and like being afraid? And he is like, no, dad's great now. And so, and that is, that is has been the pattern. It's like they get into their, just like you said, they're into their tween in teen years now. Their dad is not giving them extra, um, freedoms or anything like you described, but they still feel safer over there now because I think 'cause he is not as irritated with them.

Um, he's turned down, he's figured out to turn down the volume.

Christine: Yeah. Yes. I call it a volume. Like, like, like they, they, they might, they might start off as a 10 and like intensity. And now he's figured out, oh, you know why? Because he has more control over them. That's really why.

Natalie: Well, and, and all of the other kids, I had nine children.

All of the older kids, they all have great relationships with him now. Now they do. Yeah. And, and they, they, it's like they are aware that he's got issues, but they, but they want, they just want to, they're good kids. They're good kids. They just wanna have a relationship with dad. They actually initiate with him.

They make sure that when it's his turn to have the younger kids for a holiday, they make sure they go over there and spend time over there on the holiday. They go out of their way to make sure that he is taken care of. And it just blows

Christine: my

Natalie: mind.

Christine: Well, he's, he's the connoisseur, uh, victim, isn't he? He needs attention.

He needs everyone to take care of him. He needs everybody to rescue him. And so this is what abusers do. And it's really interesting because children become their number one rescuers after us. Right. We no longer are there, so they turn to our children. You have a whole family of children. Right. And it seems to me,

you know, I, I guess that may, I just wanna be, so one of the things that I coach my.

Protective parents on is that, and it's so ironic 'cause I literally just made a video before our call that said three things you need to know about the abuser. One, they do not love your children. They never did. Yeah. I believe that. I 100% believe that. Right, right. And so, you know, the reality is, is that we do a great job of trying to protect our children from the abusive behavior, but actually we're doing too much work.

We need to let the kids feel the pain. Yeah. 'cause when we don't let them feel the pain, they actually, I call it, um. Disintegrated intuition. They actually become disintegrated from their intuition. Their body was telling them, your son, who doesn't wanna do his homework at his dad's, his body is telling him, this doesn't feel safe.

I don't wanna, you know, this doesn't feel good to me. You're better doing it here. His body's telling him, and imagine, not that you do this, but imagine a mother saying, no, you have to do your homework at your dad's. I don't have to sit here every night and do homework with you. Do it at your dad's. What have we just done?

We have asked our child to walk into the wolf stem.

Natalie: Yeah.

Christine: And we're told them, dis, your dad's there for you to do it. He's good at math. Have him help you. We have disintegrated their intuition. It's actually gaslighting, but I don't call it gaslighting because gaslighting has malicious intent. Yeah. Our intent is not to be malicious.

Natalie: Yeah.

Christine: Our intent is to maybe help, you know, we wanna believe this person is actually decent. Yep. Yep. And, and, and I don't believe in black and white thinking. Black and white thinking is extremely harmful. The only time black and white thinking works is with these individuals because victims and survivors are so kind in giving and we want to believe the best in people.

That's, they chose us because of that. They didn't choose some person on the street who was gonna be like, no way. I'm not dealing with that. They chose

someone who is that? We have research that affirms it. We are highly agreeable. We are conscientious. Ask your listeners to take the big five personality test.

I bet you they score high in agreeableness and conscientiousness. Mm-hmm. Abusers score very low in agreeableness and very high in neuroticism. They get neurotic and obsessive about creating pain. So the reality is, is that we work hard and then we work hard to protect our children. We don't want them to believe this person is a bad person.

This is where black and white thinking is necessary.

Natalie: Yeah. That

Christine: person has, is character logically disordered. They are harmful, they are manipulative, they are gaslighting, they intimidate, they isolate. And they did it when you were 5, 8, 10, 12. And maybe they're on better behavior now, but they are still the same person.

And so, you know, I always tell my children, listen, any relationship you want, as long as there's boundaries and it's not in a private space because I don't trust that person in a restaurant or something like that, at this point they're not there. But the point is, is that I don't prevent it. But I also call, as we say, my dad always says, I call a spade a spade.

Natalie: Yeah. That is a black spade. Yep. Yep. That's so interesting. I come out of a family of origin where, um, now I look back and I really believe my mom was, had some issues and she was emotionally abusive. And I instinctively knew that if you stepped out of line. You would get in trouble. But I didn't, I didn't step out of line.

I stayed. So I wasn't sure, you know, I wasn't sure what would happen. I just had this feeling. And then several years ago I did, I stepped out of line by exposing a couple of things, and that was the last time I've, I've ever talked to her. She, she and my sisters, both, everyone in the family, my dad had already passed away, cut me off.

And that's how I knew. Mm-hmm. And once I saw it, even though every part of me wanted to not believe that this is true, I had to go into what you're just talking about, black and white thinking. I had to just make conscious and I have to keep making that decision. Like, no, this happened. I knew this all along.

I knew it all along, and I am not going to throw myself under the bus anymore. I'm not gonna do it. Yeah. Yeah. I, I would. I would be happy to have a relationship again if there was a, an awakening. But with these kinds of people, there is never going to be an awakening. There isn't.

Christine: No. And too many victims and survivors wait for that awakening.

Yeah. In particular in partnerships, which is, I mean, I certainly did, you know, I met him when I was 16, so I was with him 35 years. And to your point, I'm so sorry you experienced that in your family of origin, but I, I want your listeners to know I didn't. I came from a loving, my parents are 64 years married this October.

Amazing. Like we, my siblings and I joke about how adorable and loving they are and how loving they were to us wasn't perfect. It wasn't perfect. That was wonderful. But the setup was that I didn't know what red flags were in an abusive relationship. I only knew gr green flags, number one. And number two, I was like.

Well, I was like a fawn, like, like literally, like, everybody's nice, so why not? Everybody's nice, right? Yeah. Isn't everybody nice? Are, are, you know, isn't the world filled with good people?

Natalie: I mean, right now, I mean Yep, yep. No, I, I can totally see it happening both ways because I mean, in my family, I would've told you back when I got married the first time that, that my family was perfect and amazing and a wonderful Christian family.

That's what I would've told you. So, but, but, but yours actually was, and yet you still, it, it, it doesn't matter either way. We were both very naive and went into the whole thing, just believing the best about people and wanting to just give and, you know, make ourselves vulnerable and build a beautiful life with somebody.

And we just believe that, that, of course, that's gonna happen.

Christine: Well, Sandra Brown calls 'em super traits. We really, truly do. I mean, if the world were made up, uh, not, we're not perfect, believe me. Right. But if the world were made up of people like us, we wouldn't have war, frankly. No. Nope. I mean, you know, we wouldn't have these types of world problems.

I don't know if it's Iceland right now that has more females in power than anywhere else, and like literally it might be Iceland. It's definitely a country. It's a

Natalie: Scandinavian country. I know what you're talking about. Yeah. And they've gotten rid of like poverty,

Christine: like crime,

Natalie: like,

Christine: I'm sorry.

Natalie: You know what, it's, it's that people, it's that people like us, we can see our perspective.

Yes. But we can also see another person's perspective and we care about it. Mm-hmm. And so even if that person, it turns out to be an abuser, like I can think of the abusers in my life. I think I care about their perspective. I care that they're stuck in that body. I care that they think these things. But now I also have had to learn, I have to start caring about my perspective too.

My perspective also counts. Mm-hmm. And there has to be a place in a re and if it's gonna have a good relationship, there has to be a place where both people care about both perspectives so that you can work together mutually to, you know, come together and work through things. And that is never, ever going to happen with an abuser because they do not see from anyone else's perspective.

They can't. They can't. And that's why they don't change. If anyone's listening to this and thinks, well, my guy can change. I'm telling you, I, and, and I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but he can't, if he's an abuser, he cannot change and he will not change. And you can send him to whatever, however many, uh, you know.

Retreats or men's abuse recovery programs that you want to, and yes, they can learn the new masks to put on to look better. But they're also being equipped with more language and more information and more manipulation skills to more covertly control. Coercively control you in ways that are more under the radar that.

You may or may not miss at that point, but they're not going to ultimately change.

Christine: Right. And I think it's, I think like that is so important that part of the conversation, because I think first of all, victims need to realize that there is a such thing as trauma bonding, where our brain literally, they can see on MRIs, has neurological responses to the intermittent reinforcement, the good parts.

Yeah. And so we hold onto those good parts thinking that actually that's who the person is. And that's actually performative to lure you in. And you might say, well, he's not an abuser. Like, I mean, he, he does this or he does that. Ask yourself, are you being, are you being called names? Simple things. Like if, does he call you a name every once in a while when he is angry?

Does he mock you? Does he call you a name you don't like, by the way, even if it's something that you agreed on 20 years ago, right? Yeah. Is, um, you know, are, are you feeling like you're not seeing your loved ones as much, or your family and friends? Have your friends changed? You're not, your world is getting smaller.

Like, these are really important questions because abuse, again, doesn't have to be overtly evident to everybody in the world. And you need to ask yourself. And I, I ask victims and survivors all the time. I want you to sit for a moment and I want you to write, and this is called, I call it retraumatization theory.

Like literally sit down and write down all of the horrible things he's done. Okay? The that's gonna traumatize you. But that is your reminder of who he is and what he's capable of, and every time you're like, oh, maybe he's not that bad. We had a good dinner out last week. I want you to go back to that list.

I want you to slam it into your, you need. That's the breaking of the trauma bond is an awareness that there is a pattern of behavior that continues to happen. Some of your listeners might say, well, you know, he does show me empathy. Well, that's called cognitive empathy. Abusers have an ability to actually intellect intellectualize empathy.

They know how to behave. If somebody passes away or if you're sad about something, they might be able to give you some support in that period of time. The question is, is are they able to effectively empathize with you in a way that feels very attuned to you, not just once. All the time.

Natalie: Yes. And if

Christine: they aren't capable of doing that all the time, they are a cognitive empathizer.

And that cognitive empathy is a cover. So people like to say, these abusers don't know how to empathize. That's wrong. They do. They actually are really good at cognitively empathizing of taking up the torch for something that may draw attention to them in a good way. And then we get, we get tricked by that.

We get fooled by that. And then, you know, I think the other thing to keep in mind is that yeah, when they move on to someone else, yeah, they're gonna be happier. You know why? 'cause they get better at their job.

Natalie: That's why. Exactly. Exactly. Wow. I just wanna point out something else too. 'cause some women, especially some Christian women who maybe grew up in Christian homes where, you know, maybe their personality is very compliant, but then they also have that religious programming that says, yes, this is very godly.

They may be in a relationship where they don't ever rock the boat. And, but they instinctively know that, you know, like they would never do that because there is some danger there, right? But they, but it's easier for them not to rock the boat because it comes more naturally to them. But if you ask yourself, you know, could, what if I did say no to that?

What if I did say I would actually like to go to a different restaurant, or I would actually like to paint the wall a different color, or I would actually like to, you know, move, not, I don't wanna buy this house. I'd rather buy a different house. If you say that, what's going to happen? And if you don't know, try it and see.

And that's how you can know, you know, those little things are gonna be the gi, the, the giveaways that your husband is not actually as wonderful as you think he is. But he's only nice because you are in his control. Accommodating. You're, you're accommodating.

Christine: Yes. Yeah. You accommodate and everything's fine.

You don't accommodate and things get a little bit awry. And frankly, maybe this is a great question for your listeners. How many of your listeners are actually suffering with autoimmune illnesses?

Natalie: Oh, yeah. 'cause when

Christine: we are constantly accommodating other people and subjugating ourselves over and over and over again, that lives within the body and creates all kinds of ailments.

So ask yourself, is that a hip issue, a hip issue? Or is that, you know, the fact that you are ha you're suffering from, you know, maybe your Lyme disease hasn't gone away, or you have other chronic fatigue or chronic illnesses, ask yourself, is that because you literally never, ever get to voice how you truly feel?

That's a problem that leads to early death, by the way.

Natalie: Yes. Yeah. Which is why I always say this. Any, any kind of abuse, even if he's never hit you, it's still physical abuse because your body is absolutely being impacted in profound ways. You just can't see it. You can't see it on the outside. A

Christine: hundred percent.

That's why I like using course of control as the underpinning of it all, and if you identify your suffering course of control, it is creating every single illness that we know occurs with any abuse, because again, it aligns. Think about people who suffer racism. I mean, how the intergenerational trauma of being harmed in such a significant way as a result of the color of your skin and how that creates long-term impact.

Generation after generation. Yes. After generation. Right? Yes. I've, this is the same idea.

Natalie: Yeah. And, and that I've heard that it actually gets passed down in your DNA, your DNA changes mm-hmm. And gets passed down to your children and their children. Absolutely. It's, yeah. Wow. Mm-hmm. Okay. So what can protective parents do?

And what kinds of mistakes do they make? You know, uh, I mean, I've made mistakes in trying to protect my kids and protected them in the wrong ways. I think, and I, I, I'd like to talk about that too, for people who want to avoid some of those same mistakes and what is appropriate and what is the best way to protect our kids.

Christine: Sure. So I think, you know, there's a variety of things. I say that to protective parent. I could talk about this subject for an hour, and I know we have an hour. So I would say that the best therapists for our children are their safe, protective parent. The problem is, is that sometimes children go to therapy and the therapist will inadvertently gaslight them into believing that their father.

Mother, whoever the abuser is, does love them, that they're just a little angry or maybe, so we teach children to actually believe that an abusive person isn't abusive and we actually want them to repair relationships with them. And we tell victims all the time to leave, yet we make, we force children into custodial time with an abuser.

I mean, could you even like that? Yeah. Like blows my mind, so, yeah, yeah, yeah. So what can, what can we do? Remember that every single moment you have with your children, you're not parenting the same children. Children who live and this type of family system have suffered unacknowledged child abuse period in some form or another.

It can be overt or covert, but it is a psychological trauma that research shows us over and over again is the most elusive. Type of trauma and the most unidentified type of trauma.

Natalie: Mm.

Christine: So the first thing I would ask all protective parents to do is to literally armor up for that, for that idea that your child actually is being abused.

Even if they're share, even if they never talk to the abuser, even if they're sharing halftime, even whatever it is, they are actually actively being abused because gaslighting, manipulation, intimidation and isolation are abusive behaviors. They're tactics used by abusers. I would also say that a lot of these kids get dysregulated and overwhelmed, and then we are actually acting as if they're a typical kid and they're not.

Mm-hmm. Like again, look through the course of control lens, treat your child as if they walked in the door after a visit and they're misbehaving or they won't empty the dishwasher and all these things. And it's not that they don't need to have, you know, structure and boundaries in place, but what if they walked in the door with a thousand paper cuts?

How would you treat them? Great. Their brains are actually actively being broken every time they go off to the abuser's house. And your goal is to, because when we try to take away abusers attachment to what's healthy, to good things, we are fracturing the brain's ability to regulate, to create human connection to cognitively process.

We are fracturing in a variety of different ways. Every time your child comes home, your job is to reignite and fortifying attachment with you, and that

means. Looking at them differently, understanding that they're suffering, understanding their behaviors are not them. Oftentimes it's a recording. They're being told to behave a certain way, understanding that they are, it's living in their body and they need a place to exert it.

Um, and, and also just now responding differently. Like, wait a minute. That kid has a thousand paper cuts, or, or that kid has broken brain. How am I going to treat them? How am I gonna parent differently? And that's exactly the work that I specifically do. How do we parent differently, these children, and then.

And then what we're doing is really, again, reigniting what kids need more than anything is a secure attachment to a healthy parent. Yeah. And we're reigniting exactly what the abuser is trying to eradicate. And we do that with positive memories. We, we, we truly just understand that they are not their chronological age in all aspects.

Developmentally, they've been compromised. You might have an 18-year-old and you're like, gosh, they're spoiled breath. They're acting like they're 12. Well, that's because actually developmentally, their brain reverts back to some of that dysregulated behavior. And so treat them like that. And the more that you meet them where they are and you co-regulate with them instead of react to them, the more we co-regulate, the more that they can settle.

And feel safe and can actually begin to grow and get healthy when they're with us. And then when they go back to the abuser, you're gonna have to do it all over again. Yeah. And the more that you are consistently able to do it, the healthier they will become. I actually have a children's book coming out every moment of every day, and it's for children who don't wanna go with the abuser and how do we, how do we help them regulate in their body because.

That's our, that's our role is to understand that they are suffering abuse every moment that they're with that abuser. Yeah. And until we actually rip that bandaid off and acknowledge that we are not helping them, and the systems don't even get it. The systems they're so far behind.

Natalie: Yeah. Oh, okay. So first of all, I'm so interested in your book.

When is that coming out?

Christine: I hope October. Um, it's, I'll have the cover and I'll be posting it on social media in the next week or so. And I don't know when this recording is going out, but I'll be doing that shortly. So yeah, this

Natalie: is going out in November, so it will be ready. Okay. So the book will be Oh, yeah.

Out excited about that.

Christine: It's a children's book.

Natalie: Yep. Okay. So, um, I guess I'm, I'm wondering like, I think. Some parents are, I mean, I can kind of hear them talking in, in their brains are, are saying, I don't know if I can do that. I feel triggered myself when my child gets dysregulated and maybe they haven't had the support that they need to you, you know, someone to co-regulate with them or maybe their therapist is actually like, what I experienced so many times I was actually re-traumatized by, you know, by different therapies.

And so, um, maybe they haven't had a safe place. They, what is your thoughts on just them doing their own healing as well in order to be able to provide that safe place for their kids?

Christine: A hundred percent and I probably have to get off in a moment. So, um, oh, okay. I have a, I have a two o'clock. I hope that's okay.

No, that's

Natalie: totally fine. We can end it quickly.

Christine: Okay. So I, I would always say that we always have to be working on our own trauma, right? And getting as much support as possible. And the more that we're able to regulate ourselves and understand our experiences, the more that we can be there for our children.

I also kind of describe it as being an actress on stage. So this was happening to me during COVID. And the kids were coming to my house periodically, if at all, and then started, then they started coming more, thankfully. But the point is, is I was like pretending that like I wasn't, I wasn't mom anymore. I was therapist.

And when they were coming home, I was actually treating them the age that I thought that they were and more like maybe my girlfriend's child because I had to per, I had to act because my brain, and that's what we know about the brain, the brain is so compromised from trauma that it gets into a, a rotation and it doesn't know how to get off unless we trick it.

We actually have to trick our brain. And so tricking your brain into believing that you're safe, well the only way to do that is to actually create a theater a little bit, right? Yeah. And pretend. And then the more that you do that, actually, it's so remarkable. I wish I could talk about this. The more we do that, the more our brain heals.

Natalie: Yeah. And

Christine: of course the more that we're performing like that, the more our children's brain heals. So there's a lot there.

Natalie: Okay. Okay. Really quick before you go, tell us where they can find you if they wanna, because I, I wanna find, I, I know you want Instagram, but I wanna know more about like what, how can I connect with you more?

Christine: Sure. So Coercive Control Consulting is my website, but also I, I, it's called I Know Your Heart. You can find it by just putting in I Know Your heart.com. Okay. Because protective parents know their children's hearts better than anyone. And then I have a protective parenting program and I'm on Instagram and LinkedIn and I also have a, if you have any professionals listening who wanna get trained, I have a 14 CE training program for professionals because, um, we need more professionals doing this work.

After they do that, they get on my website, if they're a therapist, they get on my website. Um, really just trying to push, push it all out there. And so, and of course I have the book Framed Woman in the Family Court underworld, so,

Natalie: yeah. Yes. Which we have talked about on this podcast before. Alright, I'm gonna let you go.

Thank you so much. I'm gonna close with some other thoughts, but I'm gonna let you go. Thank you so much for being with us. Thank you so much, Natalie. Have a wonderful day. Bye. Bye. Okay, I'm going to wrap this podcast episode up myself by just saying this. First of all, that was incredible. I think it's one of the most power packed interviews I feel like I have had in a long time.

And, um, yeah, I, I hope that I will definitely put all of her links in the show notes so that you can check it out. I definitely plan on checking out that professional's training. And I just wanted to say too, for those of you who are parents, moms, and you are dealing with this, and if you had those thoughts in the back of your mind that I just mentioned a few minutes ago, like I feel like I get triggered.

I don't know how I can show up to be that kind of parent when I feel like I am constantly feeling dysregulated. Part of that is if you're still in your abusive relationship, it is really challenging. It's like, it's like, uh. It's like being in a house that's on fire. How can you heal or, you know, heal from your burns if you are actually living in the house that's just constantly causing burns all over your body, right?

You need to get out of the house, first of all, and then you need to be in an ICU for a while and you need to get those burns treated and while your burns are being treated, if someone comes in to visit you and they tickle you with a feather, you are going to scream out in pain. That's just the way it is when we're healing from abuse, however.

People do heal from it. I've been working with women for almost a decade now, helping them to walk through that process. I wrote this book called *All The Scary Little Gods*, and uh, eventually here, maybe even by the time this episode is released, I'm gonna be offering that book free, the audible version of it, free for anyone who wants to listen to it.

And then I've put together a framework that basically takes all the epiphanies or the major shifts that I had to make in my mind in order to move from being this little girl who believed completely different than who I am now to being who I am now, to being an adult woman who believes very differently and experiences life in a very different way.

And I wanted, you know, I wrote my story to show that, to show 'cause I, so many women have written to me and said, that's my story, what you wrote. But also because it took me many, many years to walk through that process. I wanna make it possible through the Flying Free program and through the framework that I've created to, for women to be able to walk through that process in a shorter amount of time and in a, in a more profound way than I was able to do that, okay?

So that it doesn't have to take so much time. It doesn't have to take so much money going to therapy, for example. It doesn't have to take so much, um, emotional energy. You can actually create those, those brain shifts in your mind really. Within a year, within a year's time, and obviously I'm still growing and changing.

My life has changed a lot even since I wrote that book and published it two years ago. Um, a lot of things have happened since that time. I've gotten divorced again. Very un some very unexpected things have happened in my life

in the last two years, and yet, so, so I'm only saying that to say that we continue to grow and change.

We continue to see things we didn't see before. We continue to, um, have to navigate life and make decisions and come up against challenges and that's never going to change. But the version of me today that has been able to face those hurdles is a very different version of me than I was 10 years ago when I went through this the first time.

Actually, it was a little bit longer ago than that. So. That's what I'm saying. And, and the, the amount of time that it took for me to, um, make some big decisions this last year was a matter of weeks instead of years. I would say the same amount of years that it took to make a decision several years ago is how many weeks it took me to make a decision this time around.

And that's, and that is only because I'm a different person. I think differently. I feel differently in my body. I'm showing up differently in my life. And that's what I wanna help you with. So if you're interested in doing that work with me, you can go to join Flying Free dot com and complete an application.

That application will help you kind of see if, and, and the, the page, the information page will help you see if this is for you or not. Are you ready for this kind of work? Maybe you are, maybe you're not. But if you are, I'd love to have you join us. Alright. That's all we have for today. Thank you so much for listening, and we'll see you next week.

Until then, fly free.