

The Flying Free Podcast with Natalie Hoffman, Episode 360 - How Emotional Abuse in Your Christian Marriage Impacts Your Spiritual Health - Emotional Abuse 101 | Part 5

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: Emotional abuse in a Christian marriage doesn't just damage your mental health. It corrodes your spiritual foundation until you can't tell the difference between God's voice and your abuser's voice anymore. So let's talk about it. Welcome to episode 360 of the Flying Free Podcast, but this is also part five of my series called Emotional Abuse 101, everything you need to know.

And today we're gonna be talking about the spiritual devastation of emotional abuse. And I'm not just talking about your church attendance or whether you're reading the Bible or not. I'm talking about what happens to your very soul when the faith that's supposed to bring you life starts bringing you death.

Instead, you know that internal GPS, we all have that inner sense that tells us that something's wrong, that lets us know that we might not be very safe. That tells us we need to start paying attention. That is an important part of how God made us. Just like our nerves are there to let us know if something's too hot or too cold, or it's cutting our body or whatever, so that we can react and try to get away.

We also have an internal safety warning system. If you dismiss your own internal knowing, when you've been taught that to trust yourself is not to trust God, and that's where some real spiritual damage begins. I wanna tell you about how this happened to me by giving you an inside peek into two traumatic experiences that I had with Bible counselors many years ago.

And to do that, I'm gonna actually read a chapter of my book, all The Scary Little Gods. It's chapter 58 called Bible Counseling. And when I'm done reading this chapter, I wanna give you three ways that your spiritual warning system gets hijacked and turned against you and the damage that it does to you when this happens.

Then at the very end, I've got something I wanna give to you for free if you're interested. So you're ready. This is chapter 58, called Bible Counseling. In May of 2014. I wrote in my journal, I have been a child my whole life and I need to grow up. I'm afraid to walk away from people who drag me back to being a child because they are the God figures in my life.

If I rebel against them, I'm rebelling against God himself, and then he won't be with me. Do you see the twisted thinking, wanting God has kept me playing this child role, but that isn't what God requires or wants, is it? What if I can have all of God and none of the controlling people in my life who would hold me down and wipe me out so they can feel better about their own brokenness?

If only I've been fighting and claw to be an adult, it's time to stop. I don't need anyone's approval. God is calling me to freedom and adulthood. I was starting to get it, but I still had a couple more years of banging for help on human doors just to make double, triple, quadruple sure that God wasn't there.

That summer I heard about a female member of our church, Carla, who was getting her new Setic counseling certificate and looking for people to clobber, uh, help. I decided to see if she could help me. The Athletic counselors are trained in a method of counseling that teaches all of life. All of the answers to life's problems can be found in the Bible alone.

So Carla informed me right up front that she would not be able to offer me her wisdom or support if I was thinking of a divorce. The Bible was clear that divorce was sin and God hated. At that point I should have run, but instead I assured her that divorce was off the table and I only wanted help dealing with my own sinful reactions to the things my husband was doing Insane.

I knew she would like that answer, and she did, so I was accepted. After a couple of sessions, it became apparent that she did not believe I was being abused. She told me that abuse was a quote, strong word to use, unquote, implying that it was too strong in my case. She said that she had a great deal of experience with quote, real abuse that involved physical injuries, implying that my experiences were petty by comparison.

I had emailed some things to my husband and in an effort to be transparent, I copied both Carla and Pastor Don, who was helping John so they could monitor our conversation and offer their feedback. These emails between John and me disclosed ongoing behaviors that hurt me, and although I tried to be objective, I let some of my deep frustration of over two decades peek through.

Carla told me in our next meeting that I was rude to my husband in one of the email exchanges and it shocked her what she didn't like my root. I asked her what specifically was so shocking, and she gave me an example where I had been sarcastic tail between my legs, my melancholy part woefully admitted that I should have left that one sarcastic comment out of my email to John.

Bad girl. Interestingly enough, she did not express the slightest shock over the 22 years of criticism, silent treatment and dehumanizing behavior. My husband had put me through and was continuing to put me through right before her very eyes. She could see that John still wasn't responding to me or my efforts to communicate on a basic level, and he wasn't making any efforts to get his family back.

It didn't seem to bother her. I began to wonder if perhaps this kind of behavior was expected of males in Christian homes. Maybe I really was the crazy one who never got the memo. In one session, she told me, you've gone on and on about this stuff already. Can we move on to something else? Stunned. I made a mental note to be careful about what I said to her, or she'd get annoyed and scold me like a child.

She got irritated just talking about John's repetitive behaviors with me. How did she think it felt to live with them? For over two decades, Carla gave me several homework assignments that involved looking at Bible verses and explaining what they meant and how they related to being a good Christian wife.

I was pretty sure I had read four or five times the number of books and Bible studies on that subject than she had, but I dutifully completed all the assignments and turned them in on time. I felt like a child in grade school again, hoping my teacher would like me if I did everything she said. One of the assignments she gave me was to reach out to three people who knew me well and ask them what they liked and didn't like about how I related to them.

I suspected she was fishing for evidence that I was a problem child, but I cooperatively asked Marcy, my Mar Marcy, my adult son, and a friend from church. Their replies were short and sweet. They said, I was honest, funny,

relatable, willing to admit my mistakes, a good listener, easy to talk to, and empathetic regarding what they did not like about me.

My sister, Marcy Lightheartedly, said she didn't always like my advice, but I was her big sister. So she expected advice now and again. My adult son said he thought the assignment was dumb, and my church friends, my church friend said I was too decisive and used too many words when trying to explain things.

Good to know my kids would probably agree. Carla also told me to ask John these same questions. John was a classic stone Waller and generally responded to less than 10% of anything I wrote to him. So I wasn't sure he would respond, but lo and behold, this time he responded in lightning flash fashion with a lengthy email deal detailing the myriad ways I failed to relate.

Well, he prefaced his answer by writing that he hoped and prayed God would communicate the truth through him. Quote. Grace. God bless his soul. I will spare the reader all the negative details. John believed God wanted him to communicate to the Bible counselor, but here are a few. I wasn't able to see my sin.

I wasn't able to forgive my husband. I didn't trust God. I expected too much of my husband. I was disrespectful, rude, and demanding. I was also negative controlling and selfishly wanted attention. I always accused him of things he never did. I made assumptions about him and unfairly judged him. Then he said he was afraid of me and others were afraid of me as well.

First he said, was my mom what? She would've scoffed if she knew she wasn't afraid of anything or anyone, let alone dumb old me. The next one on his list was my youngest sister Alice. I think he was confused. I was terrified of her, not the other way around. She like mom was unflappable and had no problem giving me the stink eye if I so much as looked at her the wrong way.

Yes, I was scared of her stink guy. The third person on his list was his favorite elder and personal fan, George. My best guess was that George thought I was, quote, fierce unquote because I had a vagina, and yet words still came out of my mouth. Fourth was Pastor Luke, who had groomed me in my early twenties.

His fear actually made sense. I had some things on him. I would later join a group of women to testify against him in an investigation that would force him to retire from that church so I could see how I might be scary to Pastor Luke. And finally, John named a woman from church who believed I should homeschool, wear skirts and not allow my daughters to go to college.

And I was now rebelling in all those areas. I could maybe see how she might be scared of me to her, I was a rebel and maybe rebels are scary, but honestly I was intimidated by her. She seemed so perfect by our church's standards, and now I was considered an insubmissible wife. The worst possible label for any woman to to wear.

Looking back on the, this years later, I'm aware that any licensed therapist worth their salt would see this move on. John's part as classic D-A-R-V-O. Davo deny attack and reverse victim and offender. We weren't dealing with a licensed therapist. We were dealing with a woman who was getting a certificate in Nu Bible counseling, and she didn't see a damn thing.

When these assignments were completed and turned in, I noticed she wouldn't comment on them. That's how I knew they were useless. Busy work. As her compassion for my abuser became more apparent, a familiar panic flooded me with shame and an irrational longing to disappear into the ground. I had come to her for help only to get another noose around my neck.

I sent her a respectful breakup email after a few of going in circles. During my time with her, Carla recommended another Bible counselor for both John and me to see together as a couple. John did not want to do more marriage counseling, but George and Pastor Don were pressuring him to do whatever he needed to do to save the marriage, so he agreed to go If I did the work of setting up the appointment.

Since I was still feeling responsible to pull the weight in our relationship, I set up the appointment and we drove separately to meet with the new counselor. Why did I keep making the effort and trying to find a solution? I wasn't a glutton for punishment. I just wasn't giving my rude part the credibility she deserved yet.

Rosie and Miss Judgy pants, those are parts inside of me that I explain in the book. We're still running the show, but even they were running out of steam. However, on this particular day, I brought my rude part along in my back pocket, and I let her do whatever she wanted to do right at the very beginning of the session.

The Bible counselor invited John and me to share how our sin had contributed to our marriage problems. Ah, yes, I was familiar with this approach. My entire life was one anxious concern about how my sin was contributing to the entire world's demise. My melancholy and izer parts were wired to scour my inner

world, locate my sin and blame everything that was happening in my life on myself and my failures.

Melancholy kept insisting that I deserve to suffer and die. Rude. Kept raising her snarky head from my back pocket to audaciously. Declare no, suffer and die. In the past, Rosie Melancholy and izer would sit in the Bible counselor's office, or the pastor's office, or the elder's office, and they would cooperate.

They would dutifully answer the questions, always ready to throw me under the bus. Sometimes melancholy would offer exaggerated confessions of sin and of Green Gables style. If only this new person would help me and provide some relief, but not this time. This time I put rude in charge and she sat stubbornly, staring at the carpet, refusing to speak up.

She would be as silent as John always was. This time I would let John be the first one to confess. I wanted to see what would happen if I changed the pattern for once after a long silence the Bible counselor asked. So who would like to go first? More silence. He looked at me questioningly as if John's silence was normal man stuff, but my silence indicated rebellious stubbornness.

The counselor was determined to root out feeling uncomfortable by the counselor's. Silent stares. I caved a little and admitted. I usually answer questions like this first. I've EAs easily wallowed in my sin my entire life. I can confess to pages and pages of sin. I'm so familiar with it. I'm constantly saying I'm sorry and begging for forgiveness and expecting very little in return.

I made this appointment because my ability to confess my sin is not the issue in our marriage. His inability to confess his is the issue. So let's start there. And I turned to look expectantly at John. Now lest you think that I felt confident and in control. Let me clarify that. I did not. I was shaking like a leaf inside my body felt nauseous and dizzy.

At one point, the room swayed and darkened, and I thought I was going to black out. I put my head down and sucked in air. The Bible counselor asked me if I was okay, and I sheepishly told him. I felt a little sick and I could hear the critical voices of John and Mom in my head saying. What a grand stander.

Always being dramatic and making a big deal out of nothing. There is no such thing as a panic attack. People are just making that up to get attention. I wondered if the counselor was thinking that too. I took some deep breaths and my vision normalized, but my heart was still pounding. John confessed to a couple of vague sins, like I don't always listen very well and.

Sometimes I can get upset when she is hounding me about things. The Bible counselor seems satisfied. John had confessed good boy. Then came my turn, but I wasn't biting, rude, pushed freak to the side and said, don't you see how general those confessions are? And half of them are about how he is the victim of his wife.

He's turning this all around. I'm not gonna do this anymore. I'm not gonna pour out confessions of how terrible I am. I am looking for help. My husband chronically mistreats me and nobody will help me. My voice was desperate and forceful. I leaned forward and begged. I just need someone to see what is going on here.

I need someone to believe me. I need you to stop looking at me and all the reasons why I deserve to be treated like this, and I need you to address his issues. The counselor leaned forward too and his eyes narrowed on mine. Do you wanna know how I feel right now? And he waited for an answer. Taken aback.

I meekly said, okay. His eyes stared me down. As he said. I feel like running a million miles per hour in the opposite direction. You are like a buzzsaw, Natalie. I can see why your husband doesn't wanna be here and why he is running in the opposite direction from you as well. Do you wanna talk about this?

I had no control over my mouth, my body, or my brain. At that point, my insides were utter chaos, white noise. There was a massive food fight on my bus, bus of parts. To understand some of these things, you have to read the beginning part of the story, but. Loud sobs spontaneously ripped out of my gut, and it was everything I could do to get my arms to cooperate and pick up my purse so I could stand up on my jelly legs and wobble to the door to leave.

I drove our van home in the pouring rain, and all I remember is scanning the sides of the freeway for a good place to drive the van off a place that would guarantee I would not survive. Little Natalie was howling in agony, begging me to be done. She could not do it anymore. Please, dear God, let the pain end.

I don't know how I got home. I found out later that John was telling people Natalie quit on two counselors in one year. At that point, I decided to give it a year. Pray for a miracle. Then file for divorce if nothing changed. I stopped going to our church and began visiting a different church. I also found a new pastoral counselor who seemed to understand my situation better.

I say seemed to, because eventually I'd have to quit on that one too. And that's the end of that chapter. So there are three ways. That I hope this chapter illustrates how our warning systems get hijacked with this kind of brainwashing. First of all, the Bible is weaponized against victims, and then you start associating the Bible with pain and condemnation and fear.

Maybe they quote Ephesians five about submission. Every time you try to have a voice, maybe they use one Peter about your behavior, winning him over without a word as a reason that you should never address your problems. Maybe they remind you that the virtuous woman rises early and works hard every time you're exhausted.

So the Bible is weaponized against you, and because you believe that the Bible is God's word, you start to believe that God himself is against you. By the way, do you know what the Bible itself says is the word of God? The Bible does not say that the Bible is the word of God. The Bible says in John chapter one that Jesus Christ is.

The word of God. So I really try hard not to say, call the Bible the word of God anymore, because the Bible explicitly and clearly does clearly say that Jesus Christ is the word of God. So anyway, prayer stops being a conversation with your loving father, and it ends up becoming this desperate attempt to change yourself enough to stop the pain.

Worship doesn't bring you closer to God. It triggers fear and shame because you always feel like you're failing to measure up. And this creates spiritual trauma. It is a very real psychological phenomenon where your faith, the thing that should be your refuge, becomes a source, another source of harm. Now, the second way your spiritual warning system gets hijacked is through the distortion of God's character, and this is where it gets even more insidious and I think very blasphemous against who God is.

You, you are not blasphemous. I'm saying that the programming and the lies that they're telling you are blasphemous and they are taking away your peace and joy in Christ. You don't just lose access to the Bible and to prayer. You lose your accurate understanding of who God actually is. Women in emotionally abusive Christian marriages begin to see God as a mirror of their abuser.

If your husband is critical and impossible to please, then God is now critical and impossible to please. You might intellectually go, no, God is love. I know God is love, but inside your feeling that you've got this inner fear about God, not, not, not, uh, not being able to please God either. You know how I know this is

true, because you're probably thinking, oh, if I got divorced or if I left, then God wouldn't be very pleased with me.

That's how it works. That's how, that's how they keep control. If your husband withholds love until you perform correctly, then then you probably believe God withholds love until you perform correctly. That's why you wanna volunteer for things. That's why you're trying to be a good servant. That's why you're trying to fulfill all of your Christian duties because you think that God is going to love you if you do those things and he's not.

If you don't. That's all just a hog. Bunch of hogwash lies. One woman told me, I used to think God was watching me with disappointed eyes, waiting for me to mess up so he could withhold his affection. It took me years to realize I wasn't even describing God. I was describing my husband. This is spiritual identity theft.

Your abuser steals God's voice and replaces it with his own. And because he is using biblical language, all this nice flowery Bible verse language, and then church authority oftentimes to get on his side and do it with him, you don't even realize that it's happening. You really do think that this is God talking to you.

You genuinely believe that you're unworthy of God's love and you internalize the shame and the guilt, and the sense that you are fundamentally broken and disappointing to your creator. The third way that your spiritual warning system gets hijacked is through isolation from your faith community. And here's what makes this particularly devastating, the spiritual abuse and emotional abuse create a feedback loop that keeps you stuck.

The emotional abuse damages your mental health. So you're experiencing anxiety and depression, maybe symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Your brain is in survival mode. You can't think clearly, you're constantly in fight or flight, but instead of recognizing this as trauma, you interpret it through a spiritual lens that has now also been distorted by abuse, by spiritual abuse.

You think you're anxious because you don't have enough faith. You think you're depressed because they've told you you're not grateful enough. You think you're struggling because they've told you you're spiritually weak, so you try to fix it with spiritual solutions. This is called spiritual bypassing.

You pray more, you read your Bible more. You serve more, you submit more. But those things don't heal trauma and they don't fix an abusive relationship.

And so nothing changes. When nothing changes, you guess who you blame. You blame yourself. And you also blame God while I'm doing all these things, God and nothing's changing.

How come you think And so then you think, well, I'm not doing it right. I'm not, must not be faithful enough. I must not be surrendered enough. Or we think God sucks. God doesn't hear me. Maybe God isn't powerful. Maybe there is no God at all. And the cycle continues. Your mental health deteriorates, your spiritual health deteriorates, and you can't see your way out because the very tools that you need to, to help you heal, like your faith, your community, your trust in yourself, all of these things have been compromised and stolen from you.

And when you try to explain the chaos you're experiencing, others on the outside can't see it anyway, and then they further invalidate what's happening to you. Peter Levine says that trauma is what happens to us in the absence of an empathetic witness. This is really the theme of the entire book, all The Scary Little Gods When nobody believes You.

That is about as isolating as it gets. So how do we heal? First, you need trauma-informed therapy, not from a licensed therapist, not Bible counseling from an unlicensed lady at church who took some Bible classes and then told you that she could do Bible counseling with you. That is about as irresponsible as it gets.

You need someone who understands that what you're experiencing is not a spiritual problem to be prayed away. It is real psychological harm that needs real therapeutic intervention. The anxiety, the depression, the PTSD symptoms, these are legitimate responses to sustained trauma. But second, you also need spiritual rehabilitation.

You need to untangle what is true about God from the lies that you've been taught about God. You need to learn how to separate biblical truth from the twisted version that's been used to control you. So this isn't about abandoning your faith. You can if you want to, but you don't have to. This is about reclaiming a true and better faith.

Women who successfully heal from spiritual abuse go through a process of both deconstruction and then reconstruction. They have to deconstruct the harmful teachings they received. Sit in the grief of that and the anger of that betrayal. And then from that place of coming out to the other side, carefully rebuild a faith that is actually based on love and grace and truth, a faith that is life giving.

And you need exposure to what healthy faith actually looks like. You need healthy biblical teachings, not the performance based control oriented version that you've been living, but the but faith that's rooted in love, grace, safety, and mutual respect. That might mean finding a new church, or it might mean taking a break from church altogether while you heal.

It might mean modern day churches. That's a modern day construct. That's not what the original church was created to be. The church of Jesus Christ is made up of people, not people inside of a building. It might mean reading, different authors, listening to different voices, learning to distinguish between toxic theology and life-giving truth.

The God that I've come to know through my own healing journey is nothing like the God of emotional abuse. God does not use fear to control people. He doesn't withhold love until you perform correctly. He doesn't gaslight you or make you doubt your own reality. God says, come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I'm gonna give you rest.

He doesn't say, try harder and maybe you'll finally be good enough. God says There is no fear in love. Perfect love cast out fear. You don't have to be afraid. You don't have to be afraid of displeasing me. Not even if you get divorced. God sees you. He knows you and loves you, not the version of you that perfectly is submissive and never rocks.

The boat, the real you. The one that's struggling and hurting and angry and confused. One of the most healing things that women can experience is encountering God as God actually is not as God has been represented by their abuser or their faith community. I'm not gonna pretend that this kind of healing is quick or easy.

Recovering from spiritual trauma can take years. You're not just healing from emotional abuse. You are reconstructing your entire spiritual framework and foundation. You're learning to trust your own voice again, you're learning to distinguish between guidance from the Holy Spirit and condemnation from your abusers, and you are rebuilding your relationship with God from the ground up.

So here's my gift to you. I'd like to let you listen to the entire audio version of all the scary little Gods for free. Just go to [scary little gods.com](https://scarylittlegods.com) to sign up. If you wanna get the, if you wanna help support this, this work, and you wanna buy the book, you can get it on Amazon in a paperback format or Kindle or Audible.

The, the version that I'm gonna give you is not, you can't download it, it's not on Audible. You have to listen to it online, on the page that we have set up after you've signed up. But if, if you wanna any of those other versions, you will have to pay for those. And, um, and that will support my work. But I wanna give this to everyone so that people who don't have the finances.

To, um, purchase it, can still listen to it. And then if you're ready to go deeper with me in your own spiritual rehabilitation, join me and hundreds of other Christian women inside the Flying Free Kaleidoscope. I am going back to school to get my graduate degree in theology. I have a lot of training in, in Bible study and um, I have been a great lover of the Bible my entire life.

I would love to help you. That's just one of the areas that I will help you grow and heal and rebuild inside of Flying Free. You can learn more and complete your application by going to join Flying Free dot com.