

SEXUAL COERCION AND BETRAYAL IN MARRIAGE

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 298 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we are talking with Anne Blythe. Anne is the producer and host of the BTR.ORG Podcast and BTR stands for Betrayal Trauma Recovery. And she's also the author of a book called—and I love the title of this book—it's called Trauma Mama Husband Drama. So you'll have to check that out on Amazon. She's also the creator of the BTR.org Meditation, Living Free, and Message workshops. And we'll put all those links in the show notes.

Now, after years of attempting to stop her husband's pornography use and anger issues, she turned her attention to establishing emotional and psychological safety for herself and her three children. And as she learns in real time... I love this, because aren't we all learning in real-time? And we never will arrive at all of the learning. So it's important that we keep doing that—she shares her journey as she's going to help women safely and effectively separate themselves from their husbands' or their exes' emotional and psychological abuse and sexual coercion in order to establish peace in their homes. So welcome, Anne, to the Flying Free Podcast.

ANNE: Thank you, Natalie. It's an honor to be here. I really appreciate it.

NATALIE: So we want to talk with you because we don't really touch on this subject very often at all on this podcast, so I think this is a really important conversation to have periodically. I didn't have this kind of experience in my relationship, but a lot of women that I know do have this issue, and this is your area of expertise. So why don't you tell us what is sexual coercion? What does that look like, especially in a marriage relationship?

ANNE: Sexual coercion in marriage is extremely common, but it doesn't mean it's healthy. It's where, through societal factors, through manipulation, lying, any number of unhealthy things, a woman feels either obligated to have sex with her husband, like it's her duty and she needs to do it, or there's this hidden threat that maybe he'll have sex with someone else or that his “sexual needs will go unmet,” and due to that, she is the one who is keeping him sexually pure, let's say, or faithful.

It also comes into play when she thinks she's giving a very enthusiastic “yes” in terms of consent, but because she's not given all the information that she needs to make a good decision in this case—for example, he's been soliciting prostitutes, he's been having affairs, he's been using pornography and masturbating—she's not aware of any of these things that are maybe outside of her sexual boundaries. If she knew about them,

she'd say, "Oh, you know what? I'm not interested in a sexual relationship with you." But because she's been obstructed from learning this information, it's been purposefully withheld from her, that's also sexual coercion when she enters into... I want to say marriage.

It was funny—I was talking with someone this morning about this sex piece, because if they wanted to exploit or manipulate someone to be a housekeeper, then they would just have a housekeeper. Sex is always an element when it comes to marriage. So that's something to keep in mind. Even if he's withheld from her information that he's using porn and masturbating—let's just say that—and they're not having sex, and he's telling her, "The reason why we're not having sex is because I'm not attracted to you," but he's not giving her all the information. "But I am having sex with these other people, I am masturbating, I am doing these things over here," but he doesn't give her that information, that's also a form of sexual abuse because he's blaming his lack of sexual interest in his wife on her psychological abuse rather than telling her the truth.

"You know what? I can't have sex with you because I've already masturbated to porn three times today." And so instead of telling you the truth, I'm going to say, "You know, I just don't find you attractive anymore," which is a severe form of psychological abuse.

NATALIE: Oh, yeah, and so shaming. Well, I'm just curious: How many women do you know that you've helped where their first clue that something's going on is that they end up getting an STD?

ANNE: That is actually not as common as you would think. It's super common for them to get an STD, but it's not as common for them to discover it.

NATALIE: Okay, But that would be their first sign.

ANNE: Yeah. Usually they go in for testing after they've realized because even with their yearly OB, because they're married and they think their husband's faithful, they never ask for an STD test and there's no reason to get it, because on that form that you fill out with your OB or your gynecologist—I can't remember which one is which—but anyway, that doctor, they ask, "Are you sexually active? Do you have more than one sexual partner?" And so they're not being regularly tested when they're in a monogamous—well, what they think is a monogamous—relationship. So it's pretty rare for them to discover that they have an STD, but it's pretty common for them to actually have one.

NATALIE: Okay, interesting. Well, and I know the women that I work with are coming from a Christian background and a lot of them have this teaching that they've been

way it was before.

ANNE: Even in the equality thing, the misogynist will interpret that as very transactional, right? So, "Okay. Even if she doesn't want to have sex, I kind of paid for it a little bit. I went to work. I did my job. My job was to go to work and bring home the paycheck and mow the lawn. And your job is to make dinner and do the laundry and have sex with me. So you owe me this," which is literally the definition of coercion.

NATALIE: Yes. And also, a lot of these women, too, at least in my circles, a lot of them chose to stay home, so they're thinking, at least my own mentality was, "This guy married me and is providing for me, so, therefore, I also owe him because he's providing for me so that I can stay home and raise our children." Not thinking that my raising the children and homeschooling them and making the food and cleaning the house and doing every other job was actually also literally contributing to the paycheck and to our economy, our family economy. We weren't taught that or at least, that was not my mentality.

ANNE: Well, and to owe someone sex in a transaction, either for money or for whatever reason, that is the coercion. I've talked with many sex trafficking victims and one of them very acutely told me the money was the coercion. "I 'consented,' but I was in such a bad situation and I was presented with this money, so of course I'm going to do it," but the money was the coercion.

Same thing in this situation where you feel like, "Well, I owe him." And sex should never be part of a transaction of goods and services. That's not what it was meant for. It's for a partnership. It's for equal partners in an act of loving care. Whether or not someone owes someone something should never enter into the equation, and if it does, it becomes coercion. So many women have experienced... I don't know of a woman who hasn't experienced this.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree. At the beginning I even said that. I said, "I don't really think I experienced this," and as we're talking, I'm like, "Oh yeah, yeah, never mind about that." Okay, so in what ways is pornography also a form of sexual coercion?

ANNE: So pornography comes into play where a woman, her impression of her husband which has been carefully managed by him, so he has intended to give her this impression. Maybe he puts on a white shirt and tie, he goes to church every week, when the pastor or the preacher—maybe he is the pastor or preacher—says, "Thou shalt not use porn," he turns to you and says, "Oh, yes, this is good. This is really good," so the image that he has carefully crafted gives you the impression he's not a porn user

and you think he's a certain type of man.

And when you discover that he is in fact using porn, soliciting prostitutes—I'll just throw that in there, having sex with other women—that is the coercion in and of itself. Having a secret sexual life or living a double life where you have purposefully withheld part of yourself from your spouse, especially when it comes to sex. I mean, even if it wasn't about sex—money, it could be about anything—is not good, right?

But when it comes to sex, that part is especially tricky because a lot of women would think, "I don't want to have sex with someone who is soliciting prostitutes. I don't want to have sex with someone who views pornography and masturbates." I felt uncomfortable when I discovered my husband's porn use. I couldn't change my clothes in front of him. And before I couldn't have cared less. I was like, "Whatever." And it was like, "Oh, like he's looking at all these women naked? I don't want to be just another one of those women that he looks at. That's gross. I don't want to do that."

So the idea that he has withheld information from you in order to manipulate you to see him a particular way is a form of coercive control. It's a domestic abuse issue, but it's also coercion in that you're not able to make decisions about the relationship when you're not aware of the reality of his character.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's so good. We don't think about that. That's so important. So how is pornography abusive in other ways?

ANNE: I believe pornography is abusive just in general, the pornography industry. It's built on coercion. Like I said, I've talked with sex trafficking victims who were filmed. I've also talked to a lot of—and this is surprising to people—wives who were secretly filmed by their husbands while they were having sex or in the shower, and then their husbands posted it online in order to make money for porn. So when they post it, they'll say, "Oh, of course this is consensual because this is my wife and this is what we do." They have no idea that that woman doesn't even know that that camera is there.

NATALIE: That is absolutely insane.

ANNE: So luckily there are a lot of lawsuits right now that are bringing this to light against Pornhub. I've interviewed several of the attorneys who are on these lawsuits who are having women come and say, "Hey, this video on Pornhub, or wherever it is, is when my rape was filmed. That's what you're watching."

NATALIE: I'm so glad that they're coming forward and finding these things.

ANNE: Yeah. So I think at one time—listen to my podcast episode about this; I cannot remember the stats—but it was actually that a lawsuit forced Pornhub to take down a large portion of their inventory, but then they just have people keep putting it up there. So the coercive nature of pornography in general, I like to think about when I was doing pornography addiction recovery with my husband. I was so proud of him. I was like, “He is the most incredible pornography addict. He is in recovery. I’m so proud of him. He’s overcome so much.” And we actually would do public speaking and we would go all over touting how incredible he was to overcome this addiction.

And I did not know that I was being lied to and that I was being coerced and that I was being emotionally and psychologically abused at the time. So when I hear pornography performers say, “I love my job. They treat me so well. It’s so great, it’s been really good for me,” I just remember where I was. And I remember publicly, one of the biggest speeches I gave was in front of 1,600 people in a conference center. It was big—not like huge. But to lie to that many people to their face when I didn’t know that I was, and I was happy to be there, reminds me of those women.

But a lot of women are coming forth. They’re very dark and they’re hard to watch, but a documentary about the Playboy Mansion, about these women who, at the time they were living there, said, “We love it here. He treats us so good. This is so wonderful,” and then later, they’ve come out and talked about how abusive and coercive it was. So just the entire industry is built on misogyny, coercion, psychological abuse, and sometimes you can’t see it until you’re out of it. And while you’re in it, you think it’s great.

I’m sure women listening went through a phase where they actually thought their husband was a great guy. They couldn’t figure out why he was yelling at them or they couldn’t figure out why this one weird thing was happening, but in general, they thought, “I’m so proud to be married to him; I’m grateful for our family,” not knowing the situation that they were actually in.

NATALIE: Yeah, I can 100% relate to that. It was like one side of me knew that this weird stuff was going on. I don’t know if my ex husband was into porn or not. I never found anything. I have no reason to think that, but there was other stuff going on in our relationship. But then I would put a spin on it and just put a rosy spin on everything and just focus on the good things, and as long as I did that, I could feel better in my body about how everything was going.

But yeah, it wasn’t until I got out that I was like, “Oh my gosh, that was so twisted and gross.” Even as you were talking, I was like, this applies any kind of abuse across the board.

ANNE: Yeah. So I firmly say the pornography industry in general is abusive. So if you are watching it and participating, you're part of what's causing the problem because you're purchasing the basically documentation and evidence of women's abuse when you're doing that with porn.

NATALIE: That's good. Okay, so why would it be important to think about your abuser's porn use from a domestic abuse lens rather than believing or pursuing couples therapy or pornography addiction recovery and thinking that that's going to improve things? You said that you did all of that and you saw all these changes, supposedly. Talk about that a little bit.

ANNE: So if you come at these issues from a domestic abuse lens, the approach is completely different. Because if you go to pornography addiction recovery, they will basically say, "This is a good guy who has an addiction, and he was just caught, sort of, in this sinful thing. It's not necessarily his fault, and can you be patient with him while he works through his issues." Same thing with couple therapy. I'll talk about couple therapy in a minute. But in terms of pornography addiction recovery: So the approach is you have a sick husband, basically, and he's been sort of trodden down and put upon by this sinful world. And it's the sinful world's fault, not his. So let's just be like nice to him, kind of.

Some pornography addiction recovery therapists have required abuse victims—this is the wife—to sign a sex contract that she'll have sex with them every week, for example, which is sexual coercion. It's actually pretty common. They'll say things like, "Don't decide anything about the relationship for a year." And you're like, "Okay, so what do you mean by that? Like, I can't separate, I can't get to safety—what are you talking about?"

So because the victim of emotional and psychological abuse is put in a position to support her abuser, it's bad from the very beginning. From a domestic abuse standpoint, the first thing is safety. Emotional and psychological safety. What is that going to look like? That's not always going to look like divorce. Also, divorce is not the solution to emotional and psychological safety. And when I say that, it's because so many women divorce and are abused post-divorce for years and years and years and years and years, and people don't understand that.

Safety has to be the top priority both pre and post-divorce, and also whether you get divorced or not. So as long as you're emotionally and psychologically safe, then divorce can or cannot be part of that equation in terms of boundaries that you set to separate yourself from the abuse, but that is what the pornography addiction recovery industrial

complex does not understand.

And so instead of starting with okay, let's get her to safety first. What does that look like? Great. She's now separated from the abuse. Now he can't manipulate her. He can't lie to her. Maybe he's still doing it, but she can see very clearly what's going on. She's out of that abusive fog. Now she can kind of make decisions. She can see what she wants to do. She can wait from a safe distance forever.

I mean, we have women at BTR who, they do not want a divorce, but they know he's unsafe. And so they've separated themselves and they're at a safe distance and they're just observing their husband from a safe distance as he just continues to make these bad choices. But then she can also see, is he "recovering" because he wants to do it rather than a grooming tactic to just keep her close to him? And they can do that both pre or post-divorce. So at BTR, we never actually talk about divorce that much. I mean, we will if someone comes to share their story. But safety always has to be the top priority.

When it comes to couple therapy, couple therapy is ethically a couple issue. You've got two people and they both have issues and they've both come into this therapy in order to sort of give and take. It takes two to tango thing. So we're trying to tango, so you have to do your part, and you have to do your part. There really isn't a space in couple therapy for, "Oh, it only takes one not to tango," which Sarah McDugal said that to me one day. And I was like, "Yes, that is it. That is the thing." It only takes one to ruin the tango, and they're not accounting for that.

And also, all marriage and family therapists come from a Family Systems core philosophy, and that is, "You improve this and the whole family improves and everybody has a part to play." So they don't actually get any abuse training in general. Some of them may get abuse training because they're interested in it or from their local state or something like that, but it's generally not a part of marriage and family therapy. I mean, it gets a mention, like, "This wouldn't work in an abuse situation."

NATALIE: That blows me away, because this is prevalent in our world, so why would that not be a huge chunk of their training? I don't get it.

ANNE: Well, you think it would be the top part. Because they come from the Family Systems point of view.

NATALIE: But they can still come from that point of view and also get training to see who qualifies, and, "Who do we put into that category and who do we say there's a

different track for your situation over here?"

ANNE: Right. Because in this situation, we have a victim and a perpetrator, so they're not on equal footing. You have a compulsive liar, someone who always lies, and then you have someone who always tells the truth, and you're looking at them like, "Okay, well, can we meet in the middle?" It's like, no, we can't meet in the middle because his goal is to cause chaos, make it confusing to figure out what's going on, and she's trying to get resolution. She wants a problem to be solved. He's like, "I don't want my problem solved because then I can't use porn. Are you kidding me? Like, no, no, no, no. I don't want to stop."

You think about like, "I don't want to stop eating chocolate. I really don't." If someone was like, "Hey, you've really got to stop eating chocolate," I'd be like, "Uhhh." Luckily that's not a social taboo, so I can readily admit to everyone that I am not going to stop eating chocolate and it's fine, but they feel the same way about their porn use or about their secret sexual behaviors that they're doing. It's just socially taboo to say it out loud. They're not going to tell the therapist, they're not going to tell a bunch of people.

So a lot of women go to couple therapy with someone who is cheating on them and they never find out. The therapist doesn't discover it. And this whole process, she's more and more abused, and it's absolutely devastating for her when she finds out she's been in couple therapy with someone for six years, ten years, and that he was using porn that whole time or that he was soliciting prostitutes that entire time.

And many women, the therapist might ask them to their face, but the women ask them to their face and they're lied to. So if your husband can lie to you, he can also lie to the couple therapist. So it's very, very complex.

NATALIE: Okay, so how in the world do you begin to heal from something like this?

ANNE: The first step is knowing what emotional and psychological safety feels like and looks like. So that's part of what I teach in the Living Free Workshop at BTR is just a basic understanding of emotional and psychological safety. A lot of women, maybe a therapist or maybe clergy will ask them, "Do you feel safe?" And because they haven't been punched in the face, they're like, "Yeah, he's never punched me," or "Yeah, he's never hit me." But they don't realize, "I am afraid of him." And he might not even ever get angry. But being afraid is not something that any woman should feel in her marriage. She could feel mad, she could feel frustrated, she could feel a lot of things, but terrified of your husband is not one of them.

NATALIE: Or even just, like, if you're at home and you're anticipating him coming home from work and you're feeling this low-level anxiety, that's a sign. Sometimes we use words like "terrify," and some people are terrified, but sometimes I think a lot of people are just feeling that low-level anxiety, and they don't even really know why because the abuse is so covert, and the controlling factor and the jabs, the emotional criticisms, are so underhanded, but they know, they're bracing themselves and their body for the criticisms, for the underhanded jabs that are going to come their way that are going to actually make them feel like they actually are a problem, like they maybe actually did do something wrong, and they're not going to be able to see it's actually him who's doing the naughty thing to you, not the other way around. They might not see that at first. So I just wanted to point that out.

ANNE: That's exactly it. So rather than trying to be like, "Okay, I'm going to get his password to his phone and I am going to find porn," or "I'm going to like try to search his computer," or "I am going to hire a private investigator and find out where he goes after work," something like that, rather than trying to gather evidence of his misconduct, focus on your emotional safety because you don't need to know the reason.

So a lot of women like you, where you're like, "I wasn't aware of his of porn use," for example, there's a lot of women who, he was doing that, but they would never know because he's hidden it. So, in order to heal, instead of worrying about knowing exactly what's going on or trying to get proof of it or thinking, "Well, the Bible says that I can't get divorced unless this thing happens, and so I'm going to just try to find that thing," getting punched in the face, for example, focus on that emotional and psychological safety first: knowing what that feels like, knowing what it looks like, and then realizing, "Okay, this is not what it is." And then slowly setting boundaries over time to distance yourself from that.

And if he genuinely is an abuser, you will start to see him kind of escalate over time. So as you take little steps back, he'll just escalate more and more, which I'm not telling women, "Hey, do you want to get abused more?" That's kind of what it sounds like, but it is the way to realize what is reality.

So the Living Free Workshop takes people through just step by step, how do you, in tiny ways, separate yourself a little bit more and a little bit more so you can know exactly what reality is? And then you can start making decisions based on that.

But the first thing is getting to safety because you cannot heal from an injury... If someone hits you on the head with a stick and it gashes your head, you can heal from

that for sure. But you cannot heal from it if he is continuing to hit you on the head with a stick if you never even have enough space to put a bandage on it, if you never even have enough space to let the wound close.

So what I find with pornography addiction recovery or couple therapy or other things is she does not have safety. She's not safe. She's still being metaphorically injured with the stick if we're going to use that metaphor, and so she can't heal and they're wondering why she's not "over it" or why she can't forgive or something like that when they don't realize that it's ongoing and it's continuing and she's still suffering from it.

So safety is the solution, it's the end goal, and it's also the way to heal. I'm kind of a "harp on the same thing all the time," the emotional safety. But it's very difficult. It's a long road to get educated about safety, it's a long road to see what is emotionally safe, but it's not complex, if that makes any sense. If we always have our eye on safety, we'll get there eventually.

And the good news is that is what victims do from the very beginning. All victims resist abuse. If they go to couple therapy, they're doing it as an act of resistance. They know something's wrong, they're trying to get help, they don't know what it is. If they decide that they're going to go on a diet, that's an act of resistance because they're trying to stop the abuse.

So if you're listening and you're like, "Ah, I did the wrong thing. I went to couple therapy," I want to say good for you. You knew in your heart that you needed to resist this. You were making an effort. And there wasn't someone out there, nobody that you turned to was like, "This is abuse. This is what you need to do. Take Anne's Living Free Workshop over at BTR." They didn't say that. They said, "Go to couple therapy." And so you're not dumb. You're like, "Okay, I listened to other people's advice. I go for help." You just didn't know that it wasn't helpful.

So every form of resistance will teach you something. So if you're at the point where you're like, "Okay, I get it now..." Not, "I get it now," but "I learned through hard won experience through my resisting abuse in going to couple therapy, that that form of resistance, no matter how hard I tried, is not as effective as these other strategies." So learning the other strategies is really good.

NATALIE: Yeah. Oh gosh, that's so beautiful. I love when messages can get across to victims that help alleviate some of the shame because the journey out is so messy and there is so much... We've got this other person beating us over the head with their abuse and then we've got ourselves beating ourselves over the head because we're

trying to get out and nothing's working, and we have to hear messages that are more empowering than that, because just the fact that you are still surviving and getting up every day and putting your clothes on and taking care of your kids and basically taking the responsibility of the relationship and the world on your shoulders is a Herculean effort on your part, and you deserve to be praised for that and encouraged for that, not beat up for that.

ANNE: Exactly. Also, "You did the right thing. You went for help. You nailed it. Good job."

NATALIE: The other person wasn't trying to make a bid for connection.

ANNE: Right. And also, "That person that you went to help for did not know what they were doing, but that's not your fault. You're not a professional. You're the victim." I just talked with someone yesterday who had gone to the police for a protective order violation, and the police officer was like, "Well, what do you want me to do?" And she was like, "Your job. You're the police officer. I'm doing my job. I'm the victim. My only job is to get help. That's it."

And so that the helping professionals or the people that you go to help for, that they don't do their job or they do not know what they're doing, is not a reflection on you. And sadly, they're trying to make it a reflection on you. "You know what? Had you done everything right, you could have gotten out of that." And it's like, "Well, I did do everything right. I went for help. I got educated the best I could, but I didn't know that the therapist I was listening to didn't know about abuse."

So it's just more and more ways that perpetrators and people who don't understand abuse are putting the responsibility in the wrong place on the victim to solve the problem. And it's just so much pressure and so much pressure. And that's part of why I wrote *Living Free* and the *Message Workshop* was because on my own journey, there was a point—and I think so many victims get to this point—where you realize, "No one's coming for me. I have to save myself."

NATALIE: Yes, I talk about that too.

ANNE: All the people who were supposed to help you—"I'm supposed to be able to report," or "I'm supposed to be able to tell someone"—they're not helping. And that is not a reflection on you, it's just a reflection on society in general. The good news is you can save yourself and there is a light at the end of the tunnel. But it's hard to crawl out of that cave of all the societal scripts and all the things that are surrounding you to keep you where you are.

NATALIE: Exactly. When you describe that as like crawling out of a cave, I think we have to remember too that people like police officers, pastors, therapists, those people are in positions of power, and a lot of times, abusive people, they gravitate towards those positions in our culture because they want to be in power. So they're going to identify with the victim's perpetrator, in many cases, and project their own entitlement feelings towards women on the victim and basically reabuse her in the exact same way that her perpetrator is.

And I think that's why it's so important to understand the abuse tactics that people use, because when you start going, when you go to that police officer or you go to that pastor, you will start seeing tactics being used against you from these people. And it's very jolting because we think, we have this kind of childish idea that, "Mr. Police Officer is going to help us."

ANNE: I don't think it's childish at all. At the bottom of every newspaper article in my state that is about domestic abuse, it says, "Report." I don't think it's childish. I think everyone has been like, "Oh, it's so easy in 2024 for an abuse victim to get help, even if it's 'just' emotional and psychological abuse. You just go and you get help and as soon as you identify the abuse, no problem. Everyone will come to your aid, and there are all these hotlines you can call."

That is not how it actually works. You call the hotline and they're like, "Oh, there wasn't a crime? Mmm, sorry, I don't think I can get you a protective order. Oh, there was no physical evidence? Well, good luck." The general public thinks there are all of these resources and they're not. So sorry to interrupt. Women have been taught that. They're educated about it and they think that they're going to get help.

NATALIE: That's really what I'm saying is it's our programming, whether it's religious programming or our cultural programming, we're programmed to believe certain things, and then it leaves us in a vulnerable position. So just knowing this, just even walking away from this episode and being armed with the fact, even just being aware that, "Oh, if I go to the police, it's going to be a crapshoot whether or not I get a good police officer who actually cares about me as a person and cares about women."

And sometimes you will. In all of my experience with dealing with my kids and a divorce and all custody stuff, I ran across both types of social workers, both types of police officers... Well, I honestly didn't find a good therapist. Actually that's not true. After it was all over, I did find a good therapist for one of my kids, so they are out there. But I'm just saying that we can't just assume that just because they have a title that they're going to be safe, so I think that's important. I like that you're focused on safety. "Do I

feel safe with this person?" If you don't feel safe in your body with someone, then there's something happening. You might not know what it is, but there's something happening and it's real. I think it's important to understand just because you don't know what it is doesn't mean that it is not real and that it's not impacting you in some way.

ANNE: Yeah. The Living Free Workshop has a lot of actual exercises that are like, "Okay, let's get in touch with your body so that you can get back in touch with your intuition." Because abusers, like your husband who's the abuser, but also a therapist who doesn't understand abuse, they're all kind of trying to separate you from that. "No, no, no, that's not what's going on here. You need to calm down," kind of a thing. And so to just refamiliarize yourself with your own, I call it your sacred internal warning system. We have exercises to help women tap back into that so that they can realize, "Oh, I don't have to go back to that therapist. And not only do I not have to go back, I don't even need to tell him why. I don't need to do anything. I just need to cancel my appointment and never see him again. I don't have to give people explanations. I don't have to do any of that. I don't have to have reasons. This doesn't feel right to me, I'm going to go with what feels right right now."

And sometimes it's a little off. And it's not our fault. It's just a little off because we've been manipulated for so long and we've been in the dark for so long, and that's okay. On our journey, we will grow closer and closer to what it actually means. I wouldn't say that our internal system is off, I would say the way we interpret our warnings is off. So, for example, a woman might be warned, "This is dangerous, this is dangerous," and rather than realize, "Oh, it's dangerous, I need to step away," her interpretation might be, "Oh, it's dangerous so I need to go talk to them." Does that make sense?

So that's when I say it's a little off, the interpretation of what to do about the warning or what the warning is about can be off, but the warning itself is never off.

NATALIE: Yeah, I can think of a perfect example. I remember when I was talking to a Bible counselor at my church, I knew there was something off the whole time. And when I decided that I needed to stop seeing her, I felt bad for her. I felt like I was being mean to her by just not seeing her anymore. And so I basically went into fawn mode. So even though I was not in a safe place, and she said horrible things to me, but what I did was I went towards her and basically fawning to keep myself safe. And I had no idea that you could just not contact someone again. You could just literally not contact them again and be done with them.

ANNE: Right. So your sacred internal warning system was giving you the correct

warning, but due to societal scripts and manipulation and all of that, the way that you interpreted how to respond to your own internal warning system... Probably because everybody tells you that. I mean, the first thing someone will tell you if you find something about your husband that is super alarming is, "Well, have you talk to him about it." And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Let's not do that yet. Let's do some homework. Let's figure out what's really going on. Observe from a safe distance for a little while." Then you can decide when you're safe, "Do I actually want to talk to this person or not?"

This is someone who's shown an evidence of emotional and psychological abuse. With safe people, you don't have to do that because they're safe and they've shown if something happens... Like with my sister. Some weird thing happens, I'm like, "Oh, I got to talk to her." Talk to her, resolves immediately, no problem. This is when you have a history of weird things happening. If you've got a history of this, at some point, realizing, "Okay, wait a minute, talking to them is not going to lead me to safety right this very second. I need to take a step back and observe and figure out what's really going on because all I ever get from talking to them is more manipulation."

NATALIE: Yeah. In Christian circles, we'll see a lot of, especially leaders, will always point people to that chapter in Matthew that says, "If you have something against your brother, you have to go and talk to them first," and what they're not understanding is the context of that situation. They're applying it to all kinds of egregious situations that no, that is not what was being communicated in that section. But abusers will use that as a way to keep drawing the victim back into the cycle so that they can continue to abuse that person.

ANNE: Living Free gives women an alternative. Therapists don't really have another alternative, especially couple therapists. You're concerned, you've got worries, so they're like, "Improve your communication," because it's like, "What else do we do? I don't know." And so giving women the safe alternative to like, "This is how you determine what to do without talking to them," is really important when you don't know exactly what you're dealing with. Or if you've had a history of thinking, "Talking to them seems great, but it always comes back to bite me." You could have a really good conversation where it feels really good with an abuser, but just watch those patterns.

"Oh, this is resolved. Everything's working great," and then like two weeks later, he's acting like you never had that conversation? That doesn't happen with healthy people. It doesn't even happen one time with a healthy person. Two weeks, yeah, two weeks later, a healthy person could say, "Remember that conversation we had? I changed my mind, and this is why." They're never going to be like, "What? What conversation? I don't

know what you're talking about. You must have memory problems.”

NATALIE: Because their heart is for you and for the relationship. I know you have one offering that we talked about on the back end a couple months ago about writing messages. Can you talk about that a little bit?

ANNE: So I was abused post-divorce for eight years through my ex undermining my kids and writing super abusive messages. My ex is an attorney, and his messages were just pristine. He never swore, he like always wrote the “right thing,” like, “How can I help? And what can I do?” but if you knew the context, you would know that what he's saying doesn't even make sense. It's not true. It's not resolving it. It was a mess. And it actually escalated to the point where he was canceling medical appointments, undermining their schoolwork, undermining their extracurricular activities. Just very, very intense abuse of me and my children.

And I took him to court. I had forty pages of documentation of not just all the emotional and psychological abuse, although I had so much of that, but also I actually had pictures of bruises. I had that and I had an active protective order. And the court, after that, granted him more custody than he had had before.

NATALIE: What? Oh my gosh, I can't wrap my brain around how this happened.

ANNE: It was really bad. So I talk a lot about abusers in court. I've kind of become the post-divorce abuser whisperer in that I can kind of tell what they're going to do. Because what happened was that I was like, “Okay, the court's not going to help me. Nobody's going to help me. I can only rely on God.” And I started studying the scriptures, and one of the things that kept coming out over and over was that Jesus is our Savior, and He's our Deliverer. And so then I started focusing on deliverance, and I was like, “Okay, how am I going to connect with God, or how am I going to get answers from God, in such a way that I get delivered? That He delivers me, but also I know I'm going to have to do something. I highly doubt He's just going to deliver me without my action.”

So, this research that I did, I also, from all different religions—I'm Christian—but I got books about casting out devils from all different religions, because I thought, “I'm not possessed. I don't know what his deal is, but he's for sure an evil spirit in my life that I should be able to cast out as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I should be able to be like, ‘Be gone,’ and he should just leave, according to the scriptures.” So, I took that seriously, and I was like, “Okay, I am going to be able to do this through the power of Jesus. How do I do it?” I ended up going to Jerusalem to study deliverance and study how Moses

brought... I went to Egypt, I did all this. I was really intense about it.

NATALIE: You were really diehard serious.

ANNE: I went to Mount Nebo and kneeled down and tried to talk to Moses. By the way, I did not talk to Moses, but I tried. I was like, "Moses, come help me. How do I do this?"

NATALIE: No one could argue that you were not sincere.

ANNE: Oh yeah, I was really serious. Anyway, so through that, God just, into my mind came these strategies to use. So I used them and it was partly what to do boundary-wise and other things, but it was also how to write messages. And so I started writing these strategic messages to my ex, and around a year of practicing these strategies and doing these strategic messages, I actually was able to have my ex sign a legal document basically giving up all custody and not having legal say. I have legal say. And he just signed it. And a year before that, he fought me in court. So I was like, "What?"

So then I was like, "Okay, am I a fluke? This is weird. I'm going to try and duplicate this with other women." And as they've been using the strategies, they're like, "Oh my word, this works so much better. It works so much better." And the good news is these messages are perfect for court. You look amazing in court. I used these messages of the women that I helped deliver in the Message Workshop. So you can actually see my real life messages and their real life messages and our strategic responses.

And one of them in court, this is, I don't know, a couple months ago, he was like, "She does this and she does this." And the judge said, "Well, where's the evidence?" And he was like, "It's in the messages!" So he hands the messages and the judge was like, "What are you talking about? She just wants to co-parent with you." So it's awesome because there's nothing that they can get you for.

The strategies take a while to implement, and that's the hard part. There's no quick fix. There's no, "Oh, write this one message and you'll be delivered." For me, it was a year. And for most women, it's around that time. And also learning how to do it takes a while and figuring out because everyone's different. Everyone's situation is different. And so they're just principles to use, but women do need to figure out, "How do I implement these principles in my specific situation?" which is going to be a little bit different than other women's. So having a BTR coach kind of help them through that is a good idea.

But I do know that the strategies and the tools are awesome. And I also know—because you're a podcast of faith, right? Women of faith listen to your podcast—that they were

God given to me. There's no way I would have thought of doing these things. And they were really risky. When I went all in on my strategy, I was like, "Holy cow, am I really going to do this?" I actually had an attorney help me with the strategy even though we never went to court. So he actually sent the paperwork over. But I said, "Do you think this is going to work?" And he was like, "No, this is not going to work." He was like, "No, no." And he almost didn't want to do it. I said, "I'm paying the bills. I know this is going to work. You got to send this and this is how you have to write it." I actually wrote up the paperwork, and he was like, "No, this isn't going to work."

By the way, the message that I wrote was basically, "Oh, this client of mine, Anne, she's the worst. I know you hate her and I don't blame you. She's so terrible."

NATALIE: Oh, it's a little bit of reverse psychology. Kind of aligning with him.

ANNE: Yeah. And my attorney was like, "I can't ethically send this thing. I'm your representation." And I was like, "I'm paying you. I want you to throw me under the bus." And anyway, he was like, "That's never going to work," but it did. And I know that these strategies would work even though they seem so counterintuitive. And the reason they seem counterintuitive is because no therapist is ever going to tell you, "Oh, communication is bad with these people." Communication's always good with a healthy person. And so just these counterintuitive things like, "No, you want to keep it vague. You do not want to be very clear in your message about what's going on because they don't want a resolution, and then you're just giving them a ton to come back with you."

So every guardian ad litem, every custody evaluator, every whatever, they're going to say, "Be very clear in your messages." And I'm like, "Nope." There are so many parts in the scriptures that are like this. Christ doesn't give people a straight answer.

NATALIE: Right. The parables were all were very cryptic. He would say, "He who has ears to hear." They were only for certain people because those people were ready for it, so their spiritual ears were open for it. Other people weren't ready to hear that, so they were meant to be confusing and strange.

ANNE: Yeah. And, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's." There are so many examples from the scriptures. The Living Free Workbook has a whole section in the back that is the scriptural foundation for where I got the scriptures from. I just put it in the back as an appendix for if Christians are interested in looking. Because at BTR we're interfaith. So usually I receive things in a spiritual manner and pray and test them and stuff, but I'm testing them with atheists, with agnostics, with Jewish women, with women of all different faiths. And so when I actually present the material, it's very secular and I do

that on purpose so that anyone can implement them. And then if people want to know kind of how I came to it, they can read the stuff in the back.

NATALIE: Yeah. Well, I'm a firm believer that all wisdom is God's wisdom.

ANNE: Me too.

NATALIE: The whole world is full of the wisdom of God. And people, whether they believe in God or not, can discover it and come across it and stumble across it and enjoy it even, and write books about it, even, and not realize that it's actually from the Creator. So your podcast, you said that you do a lot of stories, survivor stories. So how do those stories help women who are listening come to their own place of emotional safety?

Because sometimes I've heard people say, "Well, I don't really want to listen to other survivor stories because then I get triggered and it makes me nosedive into a bad place." I do survivor stories on my podcast too, but I have heard that feedback sometimes. Although I also get the opposite feedback, which is, "I feel like I'm not the only one now, there's such a relief that I'm not." So just talk about that a little bit. What is your thought about that?

ANNE: I think that stories are more helpful than being lectured to for so many reasons, but one of them is that it's a place of equality. We are in this together. We both were resisting abuse in ineffective ways, but we both were trying. We both have good hearts. We both wanted our marriage to work out. We both wanted to protect our families. And then this is what happened to us along the journey.

The triggering part is interesting to me because I have my own personal feeling about this and it's different than other people's and it's okay. I feel like leaning in to the pain is the only way out.

NATALIE: I agree 100%.

ANNE: And so for women who are like, "I felt bad and so I pulled back," I don't want to challenge them. I want to say "I want you to feel safe. I want you to feel like that you're okay and kind of cradled in grace. But avoiding truth is not going to be the way out. Avoiding truth is how we got in this mess in the first place. Not that you were avoiding it, per se, because I think you were actually probably trying to get to truth, but he has been avoiding truth, for sure." So I don't know, because my personal inclination, and probably yours as a podcaster, and mine too, is when someone says something, I want

to go deeper.

If I hear someone else having a discussion somewhere and someone says something, rather than being like, "Oh, tell me more," which is what maybe you and I would ask, I hear a like, "Oh, oh, okay, I got a thing." But just knowing that trigger may be your indication that this is some truth coming your way and it's going to be painful, and that is the way out. It may be helpful.

And it's also okay to listen up until the point where you can't maybe do it anymore and then take your break and come back when you're ready. There's a lot of books that my mom recommended or other people recommended, not necessarily abuse related, but where I thought, "I don't like this book." I put it on the shelf and then two years later I read it and I'm like, "This is the best book in the whole world. I absolutely love it."

And so I think just leaving grace for victims who just aren't quite there yet. They're not ready for whatever reason. And trust in God's timing that in the right time they will be led to the resource that's the most helpful to them. And if it's not my podcast, if it's not Natalie's podcast, hopefully it'll be something else that speaks to you, and that's okay. I guess I'm okay with knowing that the stories that we share on my podcast are not going to speak to everyone.

I also think that abuse education does not create abuse. So women who are like, "Uh, I kind of want to listen, but I don't really want to listen because I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill." That saying, "If you're a hammer, everything's a nail" kind of a thing. Like, "I don't want to just start saying this is abuse when it's not." It's been interesting because a few people have said, "Well, listen to the podcast and see." They've listened and they've been like, "It wasn't triggering, but he more stories I listened to, I realized this isn't my situation. I don't relate to this." And I'm like, "Well, cool. This isn't abuse, then. Great."

So it doesn't create abuse out of nothing. And I think that also might be a trigger for women is they think, "This is going to make things worse," rather than realizing hearing truth and sharing truth is always going to make things better even if it's painful.

NATALIE: Yeah, I remember when I first started reading books about emotional abuse, my husband at the time found one of them and he told one of the people at church who was trying to help us, he said, "Yeah, she's reading these books and they're putting ideas in her head, and now she's got this idea that I'm emotionally abusive." And luckily this person was really wise—she was also a therapist. She said, "Well, it's interesting because I've read those same books and I never got the thought in my mind that I was

in an abusive relationship because I'm not."

ANNE: That's the perfect answer.

NATALIE: So that's another way of thinking about it. I just want to go back really quick. You were going to say something about a place of equality, and we were talking about stories, you like to share stories on your podcast. What were you going to say about that? Because I think you were going to go somewhere with that, and then you kind of went down a different rabbit trail.

ANNE: Sorry.

NATALIE: No, no, that's good. It was a great rabbit trail.

ANNE: If I don't go the direction, then feel free to chime in. I think a place of equality is the right place to approach this from. I think if someone says something like, "Well, that would never happen to me," or "Well, you must not have done this, that, and the other," the place of equality is where our strength comes from. It's where our empathy comes from. It's where our compassion comes from. And hearing other women, it helps us be more compassionate with ourselves because we see our own... You're never going to tell that woman while you're listening to her story, "Oh, you dumb dumb. You didn't do this right." At least I'm not because I empathize.

You're going to be like, "Oh my word, I can hear it in your voice how hard you were trying. And I know that because I did that." And suddenly the empathy that you might feel for her is also the empathy you're going to feel for yourself. And so I feel like the best people to help women heal from abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, sexual coercion, are other women who have been through it because the judgment and the shame are out the window and you're among friends. You're among women who understand, women who've been through it, and that feels better. It's safer because they really do understand. That's what I was thinking when I said "equality," but if you were thinking something else.

NATALIE: No, that's where I was thinking you were going. Growing up the way I did, I always put people who were in positions of authority or the experts on pedestals too. And then there was always like, "Well, I'm this low life down here and they're the person who knows everything," and there was a shame factor and also a power dynamic, I think, as well that it really kept me stuck in many ways.

And I feel like when we can learn from each other who have been in that pit, like you

said, there's that camaraderie and then it removes the power dynamic, it removes the shame, everything you just said. And I think that's important. When I think about even some of the best advocates that I've seen out there doing this work, they are the ones that have been through it. You can tell by their demeanor and by just the way that they come across, you can tell they're in this with you. They can remember. No matter what you say, even if they didn't go through that particular, exact situation, they went through a version of it. And they remember what they were thinking and feeling when that happened to them, and they don't think that you're stupid for going through that or for thinking those thoughts or for being stuck in that place because they were there. They've been there before. So I love that.

And I love that when you're sharing each one of those people's stories, you're going to be able to pull... There's so much collective wisdom in the stories of people because everyone sees it from a different angle and heals from a different angle. And the more that you listen to those collective stories, the more we rise up with a collective wisdom, I think, that comes from God. So it's amazing.

ANNE: I was going to say, I recently had some researchers on my podcast and they had been researching betrayal trauma, and they had an official research project where then they wrote their research up in an official paper, and I don't know if it was peer reviewed or whatever, but they're PhD people that have to like follow the rules or whatever.

And I said, "How many women did you interview for this?" And they said, "Thirty." And I thought, "Cool. I'm grateful that you're doing this research." And then I looked back at my podcast. I've done over three-hundred long-form interviews with victims. Not just that, but interacted with victims all over the world on social media. I get stories every day. I talk to people every day, all day long. Literally eight hours a day I am talking with victims.

And so for me, because it's my job and I do it all the time, I don't have the like trauma in my body so much anymore, if that makes any sense. So sometimes I'm a little flippant. I might be like, "Oh, you were raped," and they're like, "Oh!" and I'm like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I should have said that with a little bit more care." But I'm talking to women all day long about this.

But I thought that was interesting because they'll say, "She's not an expert because she's traumatized. She's not an expert because she got divorced. She's not an expert because she's not a therapist." I'm not a therapist. "She's not an expert because of this." And I'm like, "Okay, all the reasons you just said are the reason I am an expert." I am an

expert.

NATALIE: When you said thirty people, I'm like, thirty people, that's nothing. How could you get any information out of only thirty people out of eight billion people on the planet?

ANNE: That's what I thought too.

NATALIE: So I don't know what the big deal is about that. But people will ask me questions and they'll be like, "Is there any research on this?" And in my head, what I'm thinking is, "Well, I don't know any research, but I do know from the thousands of people that I've talked to that there's this overall general pattern that keeps happening over and over again. I can tell you about that, but I have no proof other than that, like you, I just talked to thousands of people and this is what I'm hearing over and over and over and over again. So pretty sure it's true."

ANNE: You are the walking research paper. We've correlated all these stories. We see patterns. I've got a book coming out soon that will be about why the pornography addiction recovery industrial complex is abusive to women, and I'm excited about that. But it's from all of these places that I've gathered all this information. When people ask, "Who are you to say this?" I say, and I say it so proudly, I say, "I'm Anne."

NATALIE: I love that.

ANNE: And I just leave it at that. But I wish every woman felt that way that they could say their name. And they say, "Oh, he's not abusive; how do you know?" And if they said, "Hey, I'm," and they said their name, "and I know. That's all I need. I don't need a research study, I don't need a police officer to tell me, I don't need some court of law to come in. I know." And the more we can be in touch with ourselves and grounded and know, the more powerful we will be collectively.

And that the collective power is what I'm more interested in. The power that comes from truth, from empathy, from compassion for each other. That is like the true power of God, which is super exciting. I get chills when I think about that.

NATALIE: Well, Anne, this has been an amazing interview. I want to thank you for your time. And I remember that you had something that you would offer people if they came over to your website, and I can't remember what it is now. Do you remember what it is?

ANNE: I think that just Steps to Safety. So if you go to our website, there's a pop up

window or at the very bottom, you can just join our community. It will immediately send you a PDF of Steps to Safety, which are like, "Do this and don't do these things." And they're kind of the exact opposite of the thing you're going to expect, which is cool, and they also take a minute to process that and do that. One of them is how to get educated about abuse, for example.

It takes a minute. You can't get immediately educated about abuse. It takes a while, which is why you and I podcast. You can't integrate all the information all at once. It's basically just like, "This is how you start your journey to safety." So go to our website and anywhere that has a place for you to put in your email, that PDF will come to you.

NATALIE: I just remembered. I feel like it was something about like if they found pornography on their husband's phone what to do. Is this the same thing?

ANNE: Same thing.

NATALIE: Okay. Because what would you do? Some people don't know. I don't really know what I would do.

ANNE: The first thing people think is to be like, "Look, look what I found on your phone." That's not what I recommend. So if you go fill that out, it will say, "Do this." Because the things you think of doing, which you've probably already done before, are not going to lead you to truth if the person is purposefully trying to keep you from the truth. That's the thing to remember. If you are looking for truth and the person that you are trying to get truth from is intent on not telling you the truth, then confronting them is not going to be part of your safety strategy.

NATALIE: Right. They'll just spin a story. And usually what I've seen is a lot of times we will want so much to believe that story because it aligns with what we already truly want to believe about that person, good things. To believe anything else would just completely upend our lives, and we don't want to go there.

ANNE: Well, and talk about resistance to abuse, that's still a safety seeking strategy. Because the family unit feels like the most safe thing, and so to injure that feels unsafe. So this is what I talk about so much, is your internal warning system is going off and you know there's danger, but the way that you're interpreting it, because you've been manipulated to react in a way that's not safe, is not the most effective thing at all times. But your intent is always safety. It's always been safety. You've always been resisting. So just to realize like, "Oh, he's manipulated my own warning system."

NATALIE: Yes, that's so true. Every human being is wired to always be safe. It's part of our DNA. So you're right. If you can stop and think, "Why do I think this way? Why do I keep doing these things? How does it relate to me being safe?" you'll always be able to get to an answer there.

ANNE: Exactly. So the Living Free Workshop has like a workbook and stuff, like I said before, that really takes women through, "Okay, this is the feeling that I'm getting. What is the interpretation that actually makes sense?" It's like your kids. I am constantly telling my boys—I have two teenage boys—"If someone's kicking you, run away from them. Away! Don't go toward them." And my favorite saying is, "He who fights and runs away can run away another day." That's always what I'm telling them. They can live to fight another day. But I'm like, you can run away another day. Nothing about going toward danger is making sense. You need to run away from danger. But it's a safety thing. You think, "Oh, he kicked me? I'm going to kick him back. That's going to be safe."

NATALIE: Or say, "Oh, could you please stop kicking me?" You give him feedback. "That really hurts me when you kick me. Could you please stop doing that?" And that doesn't usually work, not with an abusive person.

ANNE: Yeah. We have an awesome video about this on our YouTube channel. So it's the Betrayal Trauma Recovery YouTube channel. It's awesome. It goes through like, "Oh, please stop stepping on my foot," but he keeps doing it. And then in the end what she does, and then she's actually able to get some distance. It's really good. I think that your listeners will like it. But that idea of doing that.

So anyway, anywhere on our website, you put that in, you're going to get a PDF that explains that. And then Living Free Workshop is at btr.org/livingfree. It's not on our regular website navigation. So you actually have to go to btr.org/livingfree to get there, and that is the workshop that really helps women understand this. It's awesome.

NATALIE: Okay. Thank you so much again, Anne. And thanks for listening.

ANNE: Thank you.