

NEURODIVERSE MARRIAGES

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 301 of the Flying Free Podcast. Our guest today is Dr. Stephanie Holmes. She is an ordained minister, an author, an autism researcher, speaker, and certified autism specialist. She's also the owner and founder of Autism Spectrum Resources for Marriage & Family, and she and her husband, Dan, are co-founders of the International Association of NeuroDiverse Christian Marriage. And they have a podcast called NeuroDiverse Christian Couples, which is fascinating. And by the way, I will make sure that I include links to all of those resources in the show notes. Let's just say welcome, Stephanie. Thank you so much for being on the Flying Free Podcast.

STEPHANIE: I am very excited to be here. Thank you for having me.

NATALIE: So we were having a little bit of a conversation before we got started because I have a child who was diagnosed on the spectrum and then I have a couple of children that I have wondered about, and then of course, in the Flying Free Kaleidoscope, which is my private program, there've been many women who've come forward and I think either their husband was diagnosed or they believe that their husband's on the spectrum. But I've never had a guest on the podcast actually specifically address this issue.

So let's just start off by asking this, because a lot of people in the forum will say, "Well, since my husband has this thing and he can't help it, I mean, this is the way he's God made him, so do I need to just suck it up then and just accept his behaviors and try to learn how to live with them? Or how do I make sense of what's happening to me in the relationship if it's related to something that's not really my husband's fault?" That's the thinking. So can you talk about that a little bit?

STEPHANIE: Absolutely. I think that's going to come down to the therapist and the clergy that you're talking to. So I think for some, if they're of the mindset that you have to save the marriage at any cost, then the answer would be yes, you just suck it up and move on and submit and do better, which is not sustainable or advice I would give.

Then there are therapists who are, "neurodiverse trained and aware" who tend to want the wife to over-accommodate for the autistic spouse. "Well, this is just how he or she is. You just are required to do this and this. Just don't express your needs." Teaches a lot of adaptation without teaching the autistic spouse how to do some adaptation and relating back to their neurotypical spouse.

So I am really excited that I came across some research by Dr. Jim Wilder that talked about the neuroplasticity of the brain, specifically in the joy and relationship center of our brain, and that's called the orbital prefrontal cortex, which we know is underdeveloped in the autistic brain. But the really cool information and research that I have found is that if a person wants to be a more relational and joy-filled person, they can learn to turn the relationship circuits on. Now, it doesn't make them "less autistic," but you can be more relational.

So as I am speaking and working with my clients, I say to the person on the spectrum, "There is no pass from the fruits of the spirit. So as long as we both shall live, we should both be working on becoming more Christlike and developing those fruits in our life, and I don't think your neurotype gives you a pass for that."

NATALIE: I love that. When I think about my youngest son—he's 12; he was diagnosed when he was 2—he got early intervention help from several different people and lots of different kinds of therapies and he had that help, concentrated help, for his entire childhood up until just a year ago. He started going to a private school a year ago. Now he doesn't have all of those autism centered helps.

But he is extremely relational, extremely kind and compassionate and affectionate, and that's just interesting that you said that they can turn that part of their brain on. I think part of that has to do with possibly those early interventions helped him to do that and build those relationships with people and those connections and learn that it's good. It feels good to do that. Learn what kinds of behaviors actually promote certain kinds of responses in other people and that those are good things, so that's very interesting. So I love that you're also a pastor, right? Or you have pastoral training—is that correct?

STEPHANIE: I am an ordained minister. I work more like parachurch ministry. I've never been on staff at a church in any way, shape, or form. I've done Christian school guidance counseling and things like that. But mainly I consider myself like a minister to the church, and I do feel called to the Christian marriages and families, especially impacted by autism and their marriage and family.

NATALIE: I think that is so necessary. I recently was talking to some of my friends and saying, "I think we need missionaries in the church. I think that's where we're missing missionaries."

STEPHANIE: And sometimes I feel like I've got to be an evangelist and a prophet to the church as well.

NATALIE: Yeah. It's kind of a crazy world that we live in right now. Okay, so you used to be a licensed professional counselor and you had your own private practice. Can you tell us a little bit about your background and your education and how that influenced your work with couples who are neurodiverse?

STEPHANIE: Yeah, so I always have to start out with a confession. When I was getting my license, licensed professional counselor, I did subscribe to the old ways and the old Christian books about duty, sex, and submission and all the things, because that's what I was taught. And not realizing I was kind of under some of that myself, not because my husband was putting it on me, but my own training through... We kind of figured out it was the high school that I went to. It was an independent, Fundamental Baptist high school, which my husband did not attend. He went to public school. And so I got some teaching and training that he did not get growing up.

And so a lot of that kind of formed my early counseling, and I was kind of a by the book person with biblical manhood, biblical womanhood, and all that kind of stuff. And I was kind of in that for about the first ten years of marriage. And then my daughter is diagnosed on the autism spectrum back in 2005, and so I just thought our marriage was really hard because I have a child on the spectrum. And then my second child would have ADHD and both of them had needs. And then it was like, "Okay, I'm doing all the things. I am a licensed Christian therapist. I'm doing all the things, I'm doing all the church things, and life is hard and our marriage is hard, and this doesn't seem to really work, applying all these rules."

And so we have like this major shift, my husband and I and our marriage and family, that we're going to do what's best for our family system. We're going to love the Lord and divide up chores and do things that fit for us in the way that our family needs to work. And that was the best decision ever. But I'd continue to be kind of crippled and plagued by some of these ideas that I've only really been deconstructing over the past five or six years in reconstructing actually on God's Word and not Christian self-help books.

So as we were kind of going through our own journey, many people would say I was a pioneer or a trailblazer, but there weren't the resources that I wanted for my family, for my daughter. So I decided to shift my practice to become the resources I wish that I would have had, that my marriage and my family and my daughter would have had. And then that led me completely into coaching more than counseling.

But since COVID, there's just such a need—there's so much more uptick in diagnosis—there's a need to get across state lines and in other countries, and that license keeps

you bound to your state. So I moved into coaching and pretty much 90% of who I work with is marriage and families impacted by the autism spectrum.

NATALIE: Wow. You mentioned before we hit the record button that Christian men on the spectrum, it's particularly difficult to get them to change. Can you talk about that a little bit? Why would that be?

STEPHANIE: So, one of the criteria of autism is some cognitive inflexibility, and some of that comes in then belief sets. And so in a conversation I had actually with Sarah McDugal, she said she finds that autistic men tend to really be drawn to high demand, high control religions and faiths where there are rules and protocols in place because that makes sense to them. "These are the rules, it's predictable, this makes sense to me. I do this, you do this, and this is our roles," kind of a 1950s style home, which is usually what most of them have grown up in if they're my age or older, and so that makes sense.

And so cognitive inflexibility as part of autism, when you apply scripture or your church community or things your pastor has said into that, and you believe as the autistic male that you are head of the household, and how you determine scripture is what is true and accurate, and then your wife needs to submit and be in this role, you can see how that system works for that person. And so getting that person to give that up and changing beliefs is about the hardest thing you can get anyone to do in a therapeutic situation because beliefs are really ingrained in a person. And especially a faith tradition, when someone sees men and women in a certain way based on their definition of scripture, that is very hard to get a shift in an autistic Christian man's way of thinking.

NATALIE: Yeah, because it's not just chosen beliefs that they have selected as an adult. It's tied into God. It's tied into something transcendent. And even for those of us Christian women who are, like you mentioned, deconstructing, who are thinking about deconstructing, that's hard enough because again, those beliefs are tied into God and what we believed was solid facts. And then to be told that actually some of those things weren't facts... God can still be there, but some of the things we learned about God maybe weren't facts, they were just ideas, I can see that that would be difficult. I like the word "cognitive"... What is it?

STEPHANIE: "Cognitive inflexible."

NATALIE: "Inflexible." Yeah, I can see that when I think about the people that I know who are on the spectrum. Okay, so did you experience spiritual abuse? You said you're

deconstructing or you have been, so is there some spiritual abuse in your past? You mentioned a Christian school that you went to. Tell us about your experience with that.

STEPHANIE: It was so interesting. My husband and I have been on this journey together because he's like, "Why are you so suppressed or oppressed? I'm not oppressing or suppressing you." And I was like, "Okay, I think some of this is in my own way of thinking about how I grew up." So we were thinking back that really nothing from the pulpit was ever taught from the pulpit. Maybe some things about men and women, but very rarely. It was really in small groups and books that would be used about being a helpmeet or created to be the helpmeet and what a true Proverbs 31 woman is and submission and obedience and "don't work outside the home."

And our church that we grew up in started to become, although we're charismatic Pentecostal, had a very strong homeschool, quiverful movement in there. So I'm not down on homeschool. There were some people who homeschooled for reasons because their kids were multi-talented and they wanted their kids to experience all these things, and that's great. But there were some IBLP, quiverful type people, and those would tend to be the women that would start to teach the women's classes of which I never fit in.

I cannot remember the name of the book. I wish I would, because I would shame it on this show if I could, but there was something in the book, the teacher's telling about domestic violence. And in the book, it said, "If you're experiencing domestic violence, you get your children to safety, but you endure the suffering to bring your husband to the Lord."

And I was a licensed professional counselor, and I'm like, "No, no. You do not have to endure domestic violence for any way, shape, or form. You are allowed to separate." And so we'd be getting into this combative discussion. And I wasn't trying to run the show, but I was like, "This is bad information. And what book did I sign up for to be in this class?" And the femininity—you had to do your hair a certain way and dress a certain way. And there was this woman in the class, she was a biker chick. And so she starts coming to church with dresses and all that. And I'll just call her Sally, I was like, "Sally, are you comfortable in those clothes?" And she's like, "No, but to be the godly, philical, feminine woman..." And I was like, "But you look like you're in costume. You don't look like you're comfortable. You used to wear leathers to church and that was perfectly okay."

And so when I would ask these questions, I would usually get asked to leave the class or "Stephanie, if you're just not enjoying the class..." And I was like, well, can you create

change within, or do you just leave the system? And so that was a big part of my motherhood/wife training. But growing up, I was in Christian school from 1st grade to 12th grade, and my high school years was in that IFB high school. You have to wear skirts below your knees. Our cheerleading skirts were below the knees. Your shoulders couldn't show. Your clavicle couldn't show. If you got a prom dress, there were like twelve rules that you had to follow before you could wear... And don't make your brother stumble. Lots of purity culture shoved down our throats.

I remember the Bible teacher one time had a makeup artist come in a mixed boys and girls Bible class to show girls how to properly put on their makeup and was speaking to the boys like, "And if they don't want to do it this way, then they're a harlot, then they're a Jezebel, then they're not godly women." And we're sitting there, some of us who haven't done our makeup the way that the lady is telling, and so it's like, wow, this is highly uncomfortable.

He would make the girls do skirt checks all the time, just randomly in class, get up, you have to bend down and touch the floor with your skirt. It was just like crazy stuff like that, mind games. And he was just a Bible teacher. He wasn't a pastor or ordained minister. He was just a high school Bible teacher, but because he was Baptist and I was Pentecostal, he decided he was going to break me.

And so usually he would try to make me cry every day and I wouldn't give it to him. So if I didn't give it to him, then he'd find some kind of other way to kind of torment me throughout school, like throwing my lunch away or embarrassing me by just like walking into a class and saying something to me. Totally another class, just calling me out for no apparent reason.

And so that stuff I would call spiritual and religious abuse because he was a person in authority and people were intimidated by him and would do things. If he said "boo," people wanted to please him. And so I think that really is what I would call spiritual and religious abuse.

And then also, one of our pastors was a prosperity teacher. And so usually when people think prosperity teaching, they think the "name it and claim it" and blessings. But there's also a dark side of prosperity gospel, and that is someone gets sick or you have a child with autism, it's your fault because of your faith. You didn't pray enough, believe enough, do all of the things. And so instead of learning how to support people with kids with needs, it's like, "Oh, of course, Stephanie, man, because she's working outside of the home, that's probably why she's not being blessed."

NATALIE: Oh my goodness, I can relate to that. I didn't work outside the home—I was trying to obey all the things too—but I had the audacity to start making soap and then selling it.

STEPHANIE: That's scandalous right there.

NATALIE: Totally scandalous. And so then when my daughter who, she was later diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, when she was violent in our home and we would have to call the police, that's what the conclusion was.

STEPHANIE: It was the soap's fault. That's some magical soap right there.

NATALIE: "If you weren't selling soap, she wouldn't be like that." It's really pretty insane when you step and think about it. Okay, so let's talk about divorce for just a minute. Have your views on divorce changed then—I'm assuming they have—especially since you began counseling? Maybe tell us how that metamorphosis happened, because sometimes that's a big leap, especially for Christian women who were raised and programmed to believe that divorce is not even supposed to cross your mind, let alone be a consideration for you.

STEPHANIE: Absolutely. So as a licensed professional counselor, all Christian schools, all Christian training, definitely that the only valid reason for divorce was adultery. And then if you experienced any other... I definitely was an advocate for domestic violence and sexual assault. "Get out of the marriage, but you can't remarry because it's not adultery. Get safe and get out, but you shouldn't remarry." That was definitely a strong belief. And that I would try to maybe orchestrate like separation because the state that I was licensed in was North Carolina, which did have a one-year legal separation, which would protect the women. Well, unless it was domestic violence and you're stuck with this person for a whole nother year.

So it was still trying to save the marriage a little bit at all costs, but still having this high advocacy because since I was a little girl, it has been not okay for abuse of women and children or animals. I've always been an advocate. I wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't even want to be a counselor and the Lord stopped that and brought me into counseling. But I just always had a high advocacy piece in me. So I'd never thought that women should stand for that, but at the same time, it's like, "The marriage, the marriage, the marriage, the marriage."

And as I've grown, understood the Bible and teaching, and my husband and I had actually studied under people who like look at Hebrew and Greek, and "That's not what

that word means, and that's not how that should have been interpreted," that so many things that have been put together and what we call marriage theology, there are about eight or nine verses in scripture that get taken together, and, "This is what the Bible says about marriage."

And it's like, "Yeah, but it says to love your neighbor as yourself. So if you're supposed to love your neighbor as yourself, shouldn't you love your spouse as yourself? I mean, if you're supposed to love your enemies, then shouldn't you love your spouse and not treat them like an enemy?" So there's all other kinds of subtle context that really changed for me, and that people say, "Well, then you're pro-divorce." And I said, "I'm not pro-divorce. I am so pro-marriage that if does not reflect the love of Jesus Christ and the image of God in it, is it really a covenant marriage? I've turned that question back a little bit on you," you know?

NATALIE: Exactly. You can't call an abusive marriage a "Christian marriage" and think that that's bringing glory to God. Honestly, it's blasphemous to put the word "Christian" on a marriage in which one of the partners is being abused.

STEPHANIE: Yeah. And I want to say too to listeners, I have a lot of teenagers and young adults that I'm working with who are deconstructing and leaving the faith because their mother stayed in that marriage. Now, I honor anyone who chooses to stay for various reasons. I know there are several reasons why someone may choose to stay in this relationship, for insurance or health benefits or you don't have the money and resources, so I'm not shaming anyone.

But a lot of times Christian women think, "I'm doing something noble by staying in this marriage." So there's this, "If I do this, it's going to really show my children how much I love the Lord." But the children are growing up with, "How come you didn't love us? If your God would call you to be in this situation and your God would expect us to live in this situation, then that's not a God I want to serve or be a part of" is the other part that's coming out from this generation who's grown up in it.

NATALIE: Yep, I'm seeing the exact same thing. And the other thing I'm seeing too in women who get divorced, when their children are older and they've been immersed in that kind of thinking for a long time, some of them will leave, but some of them will stay and double down on it. And then when the woman decides to eventually get out, thinking, "Okay, my kids are grown up, I raised them, now I can get out," now she gets out and finds that her children turn on her for not continuing to stay in that abusive relationship because they are now in their minds, they've turned into their dad. They became like their dad. They grew up and thought and began to realize or were

programmed to believe that abusing women was normal.

STEPHANIE: And sometimes we as women cover and buffer and over-function because it is so important to us—we want our children to have a relationship with their dad. Because there's all the books out there, like, “If the girls don't have a relationship with their dad, if a boys don't have a relationship with their dad...”

And so we want that so bad in the Christian community, which are good things, but we cover and we duck and we hide and we're putting the relationships together, we're setting up those activities, and it looks to the children like dad is more active, involved than perhaps he is because we want that relationship sometimes more than the dad wants that relationship.

And then when dad sees mom start to disengage, you can see—whether autistic or narcissistic—kind of turn all the attention towards the children. And now, “Mom is the one who is asking us to do things, but dad's letting us get away with A, B, or C. And we're getting to that age where we can choose if mom or dad separate or divorce,” and who are they going to choose? They're going to choose the one that lets me do what I want. And that could be because of passivity or because we've all ganged up on mom and mom is the problem. So it's really dicey and so highly complex whether it's narcissism or autism. And then there is the combination of both, which is even far more complicated and dangerous.

NATALIE: And so I have nine kids and my oldest is 30, my youngest is 12. But of those nine, there's a mix. It's a mixed bag of who kind of sided with dad at first—luckily that one has eventually turned around—and then who just leaves the faith altogether. I've had a couple that have just left the faith altogether. So you can get a mixture of both types of responses, even in the same family.

I was just talking to someone in the Kaleidoscope last week about, because she brought this up, she's like, “Well, I really want my kids to have a relationship with their father,” and the father is very abusive. And I said, I think we need to talk about what a father is. Just because a man shares his sperm with a woman and fertilizes someone and creates another human being, that makes him a biological father, however, I know biological fathers who don't really deserve the term “father.” And I know fathers like my kid stepdad, who's never actually been a biological father, but they have been a father to children and helped raise them. And I think that the way we think about the word “father” and the way we define that is really important when we're talking about who we want our kids to have a relationship with.

I mean, if our kids want to have a relationship with their dad, then they can. I don't think we should be stopping that. But I don't know that it necessarily has to be our place to actually go out and actively pursue and try to make those connections between our children and their abusive father. I think that actually probably does more damage than good for in those children's lives.

STEPHANIE: It does, but we've been programmed that that is our mantle as the wife and Christian mother is how our kids are doing and behaving and achieving and relating to their dad and doing at church and relating to me and respecting me—all of that is a reflection of who I am as a godly woman or not. And so there's a pressure, and I think women put it on each other in the church. Instead of being crown polishers, we shame each other into, "Who's doing what and who's not doing what, who's working outside the home, who should be only working part time, who should be doing this, who should be homeschooling, you should have 15 children," all of these different things that have come from really religion and not really faith.

So sometimes even when I'm working with my clients, I won't say "Your Christianity, your faith," I'll say "Your religion," because I think there's a distinction between your religion and what the Christian faith actually says about men and women and relationships and family systems and how we're supposed to coexist together and love each other and work together as a system versus one person over-functioning to kind of keep everything together.

And that can happen a lot in a neurodiverse relationship. Especially what I'm finding is if a couple gets married and they know—your son who will get married knowing and my daughter who's twenty-five and got married knowing—they can have different discussions about different needs and things when they're getting married and start off in a different place.

But when you're forty and fifty and you've had twenty, thirty years of undiagnosed autism, and you're like, "What the heck is going on in this relationship? I've done all the things and I can't get this to work, and I just can't get him to engage. Why is he always out there with his coins or fixing the car? He doesn't want to be with the family," that is so damaging because it's neglect.

And what I want to say, this abuse does have an intention piece to it, but if you've experienced trauma, it can be intentional or unintentional. If someone is neglectful, rejecting, not giving you compassionate care because they're clueless, because they don't know better because they're on the spectrum or they're narcissistic and they want to hurt you, it is affecting you and your brain the same way whether it's being

done with intention or not.

And so we can't give a pass. So once we know this label, circling back to something you said in the beginning, a neurodiverse relationship can work if both parties are willing to look at this neurodiversity, accommodate each other, learn about each other's brain, and learn to serve each other with the capabilities that you have. There are some expectations to change, but it doesn't mean he gets everything and you get nothing. That's not a sustainable, functional marriage.

NATALIE: Okay, can you tell us some of the features of autism that make a marriage more complex, even if it doesn't fall into the category of abusive? Which, actually, I want you to talk about that too. What would someone look for if they were going to say, "Okay, now we're not just dealing with things that could potentially change, but now we're dealing with abuse and..." This is a really big question, I guess, but if you could unpack that for us.

STEPHANIE: I'll talk about my book a little bit, because I think we're going to go into those three sections. And the first section of the book, I kind of lay out all of the criteria of what is autism, adult autism, what are the features, and what are couples experiencing? And I call it "the tale of two marriages" because my husband's marriage was going quite fine. My marriage was miserable. And again, when you're not at the pain point, even if you're a nice, good person, which my husband is, he just wasn't in a pain point. So there wasn't a lot of motivation to change until we took on the journey together.

In section two we talk about like what can change, and that can be how we communicate with each other, executive function skills, when to accommodate and when are you over functioning? And then the third part is sadly, when does this turn to abuse? How does scripture and religion get involved here to turn these features into abusive situations?

But some of those characteristics we kind of talked about, one was cognitive inflexibility, and that's seeing things through a black and white lens. What can sometimes look like a narcissist, but it is slightly different, is an autistic person, it comes from the word "autos" which means "self." And so an autistic person self references versus a narcissist is more like selfish. So a selfish person is like, "I see needs, you have needs, I know you have needs, but I would choose not to give you your needs, and we're going to do all the things that surround about me because it's all about me," and that's kind of a more narcissistic.

But the autistic bit is like, "I only have one frame of reference, mine. I don't know that there are other frames of references and perspectives out there. I don't know how to be in your shoes. So if it's good enough for me, I don't understand why this isn't good enough for you. If I don't need that much connection, I don't understand why you need more connection." So if you're living on the other side of that, it feels the same, but that is that difference with autism is the self referencing, cognitive inflexibility, we call theory of mind, which is that ability to take another person's perspective and give empathy and compassionate care.

And people on the spectrum do have empathy. It is a stereotype and a myth to say that people on the autism spectrum don't have empathy. If you don't have empathy, you've got a personality pathology. But the struggle could be, "I don't know what to do that would help you in the moment." And so it might be like, "Oh, hey, my wife is really sad and crying right now. I see she's sad. I get that. You know what? She's been talking a lot about she hasn't had time to get the car oil changed. I know. I know what would help her. I'm going to go change the oil in the car. The wife's like, "What are you doing right now changing the oil in the car? I am crying and I need A, B, C and one, two, three." "But I am helping you because you were overwhelmed."

So it's more like that, more than the narcissist, like, "I know what you need, I see what you need, but I'm going to purposely withhold that and not let you have it so that you know and I know that I'm withholding it from you." So again, if you're on the other side of it, it feels the very same way. It feels very painful.

Other things might be with executive function if there's kind of a spectrum. There could be like more of the absent minded professor. "I don't know where my keys are, my hat is," things need to get out the door and you kind of feel like you have a fourth or fifth child that you're having to get all of their items out the door, or it could be like this really strict professor—rules and roles and schedules and, "This is how we do things," very black and white, and, "Don't disrupt me in my schedule. When I'm busy, if you interrupt me, I'm going to dysregulate because you aren't predictable." And so those are kind of some of the main features.

One of the diagnostic criteria is an inability to maintain relationships. So, "I've acquired my wife, I've got my mate, but I don't know how to keep the relationship going. I got you. You got a ring on it. It's not love bombing, but it's like, you were my special interest. I learned everything about you because I really am madly in love with you and I want to be with you," but then we get married and it's like, "Okay, let's get into our rules and roles and play house. And I'm going to go to work and I'm going to come back." And then the wife's like, "Oh my gosh, as much as he was passionately pursuing me, what

happened? I've just been put up on the shelf."

But the interest switched, the roles switched. And so that can feel like really crazy-making to the neurotypical spouse. So those are some of the features that can be part of adult autism spectrum.

NATALIE: So let's say that a woman is living with someone who's not narcissistic... I can just hear what they're saying right now. Some of them are out there going, "Oh my gosh, my husband's not abusive. I guess maybe he's on the spectrum," because they're like ships in the night. I know that I did that a lot. I would interpret some of these things... Because I couldn't wrap my brain around that my ex husband was selfish because there's so many other things he did that were not selfish. And yet there were so many passive aggressive things that he did. It was such a weird combination of so many mixed things all mixed in there together. So it was very covert.

A lot of my people that I work with are dealing with this really covert, questionable stuff, where they're thinking, "Maybe he just doesn't realize. Maybe if I explained it better or if I could lay it out for him, maybe we could have a meeting of the minds," and then their minds never meet. I can see some of them, it would be almost a relief to go, "Oh, he has autism, okay. Well, that all makes sense." Even if it was autism, what do they do with that? And what do they do with the neglect that they might be experiencing or the fact that their autistic husband is actually not interested in changing at all and thinks that everything is fine the way it is? "And why are you complaining? I give you everything. I go to work. I provide for the kids. I take you on vacation in the summertime. What are you complaining about?"

STEPHANIE: All very good questions. Usually women are googling if their husband's a narcissist or not, and then they might find autism or they might find narcissism. And so what I find is when the women come across autism as a label or formerly called Asperger's, it's like, "Oh, thank goodness. There's a label, something that defines it. It's not just me. It's not just something that I wasn't doing correctly, A, B, C." And so there's some relief.

And then you study it and it's like, "Okay, but there's not treatment. This is a brain neurological. Okay, now I had hope and now I'm hopeless." And then it's like, "Okay, how am I going to bring this up to my spouse?" especially if you're an authoritarian or hard complimentarian home where he's the head, the priest, the mantle, the everything. And if he doesn't want to look into it, he doesn't have to look into it.

There is nothing you can do in a tone, standing on your head, say it naked—there's

nothing you can do that is going to make that person react or not react. I mean, you can choose your battles and choose your time. Maybe pick a podcast, maybe pick an article, but his reaction is not on you. If they're not willing to look at this behavior, to look at their identity, to hear, because here's where I say this is an autism thing and it's a character thing: For any person of any neurotype, when someone comes to you and says, "You are hurting me. This is causing me harm. The doctor says I have an autoimmune issue because of the stress of this marriage. We need to change this," and they're not willing to look at that or they're like, "No, that's not my experience," or "I disagree with your assessment," that's a character and a spiritual problem. That is not autism.

So we can't blame everything on autism. There is a set of criteria that make up for autism, but fruits of the spirit and the lack thereof, that's a spiritual maturity problem. I'm coming to you and saying I am hurt and I am being harmed in this marriage and the person doesn't want to do anything about it? That's a character and a will problem. So don't rest easy in that everything is autism because you're giving way too much of a pass.

NATALIE: Yeah, I agree. Well, and also I think sometimes there's a resistance. If you were really thinking, "These autistic characteristics? Yeah, I think he is probably on the spectrum," he's probably not going to want to be on the spectrum, you know what I mean? He's probably not going to be like, "I'm not going to look into that. Why would I go in and get diagnosed with that? I'm sure I don't have autism. I don't want to have autism," so there's going to be that resistance too.

STEPHANIE: And usually the more highly intelligent that person is and the highly successful, or if the person is, say, a Christian college professor or head of a mega church, they're going to be less likely because the stigma has been for so long that autism is related to cognitive challenges because up until a few years ago, it was Rain Man and Forrest Gump and characters who couldn't live independently, so to speak. And so some people just don't understand as much about adult autism.

And we've called this in research "the lost generation" for those who are thirty-five and older who got missed because of the old way that we used to look at autism, and they didn't need school supports. And so usually if you don't need school supports, then you miss diagnosis too because it's more social/relational.

But if you're my age or older and there is that person that always knew how to do the tech and run the films, they are probably kids on the spectrum. An assistant to the teacher sometimes.

NATALIE: Exactly. They're the gifted students. Not that all gifted students are on the spectrum, but I think there's probably a lot of gifted students that are. In fact, maybe you know because of your research, I've heard some big names, big, very successful people that are believed to be on the spectrum. Do you know anybody off the top of your head?

STEPHANIE: I just made a PowerPoint presentation and I was only putting people on there who came out and publicly said they were on the spectrum. So Elon Musk is one. He kind of came out on Saturday Night Live. Dan Aykroyd, Sir Anthony Hopkins, is on the spectrum. Some historical data on Alan Turing, who is the father of modern computers. Albert Einstein we say is neurodivergent. Was he ADHD or autistic? So a lot of names in science, a lot of names in math, but also in the creative arts. Hans Asperger's himself said, "To make advances in art and science, a dash of autism will do." So we have that.

I was having a discussion with some secular, non-Christian researchers, and they're like, "I just don't understand your niche, Dr. Holmes, because people on the spectrum, they're so analytical, they wouldn't be faith based." And I was like, "Oh, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Let me tell you what we have in Christianity. We have ancient languages. We have Greek and we have Hebrew. We have ancient maps. Those are really fun. We have doctrine. We have philosophy. We have rules. We have protocols. We have big debates and discussion over what a verse could mean or not mean in a certain context. Oh, we have many things that the autistic person would love."

NATALIE: What did they say?

STEPHANIE: They're like, "I had no clue, but that makes so much sense."

NATALIE: Yes. Well, and we have parameters and rules and rules that feel safe and feel like, "Yes, this is the way the world works. We have the answers."

STEPHANIE: And you have a choice. You have a choice too, like, "Do I want a faith tradition that is very structured, that has an agenda, and we follow along in a book?" And you've got, "I don't want no rules, just rights," so to speak, and it's just all experiential. You can pick "What kind of marriage rules do I want?" I mean, especially in America, we have all the choices like a buffet. Maybe some other countries do not have as much choice and freedom in that, but here in America, we do. You can just pick your religion and cherry pick your beliefs and just join a church that fits your beliefs.

NATALIE: It's so true. Wow. This is so interesting. It's insane. Okay, so let's talk about

your book. You have a new research based book coming out in 2025. Is that correct? What month is that again?

STEPHANIE: March.

NATALIE: Okay, so early 2025. You mentioned it earlier. Who's your audience? Who are the people that are going to want to for sure go get your book and read it?

STEPHANIE: I'm hoping two, very distinct audiences. I'm hoping for anyone who is in a neurodiverse marriage that they can see it and find hope and talk about some of these things, untangle the threads of what's autism and what's faith and what's maturity and all of that. So, I'm hoping if you suspect you are in one or you are in one, then here is your guide that is not only research based, it's lived experience. And there's seven other authors who also have lived experience who also are research based that we're going to give you practical tips and guides.

If you are a marriage helper, you are a clergy, chaplain, counselor, coach, biblical counselor, Christian counselor, and you do not know how to work with a neurodiverse couple, let me tell you, your traditional approaches are not going to work, and not only are they not going to work, they're going to be harmful.

And so if you use emotionally focused or keeping the couple together at all times, that is usually not safe for the neurotypical person. So you're going to have to learn a different way to work with this couple to not demonize the autism, but neither to try to neurotypicalize the autistic person, to help this couple figure out the expectations of what will work with their family system without you putting your ableist spin on it. I call it Christian neurotypical utopian marriage, which doesn't exist anyway, but if you're going to try to put a neurodiverse couple in that, you're setting them up to fail.

So I'm hoping it'll also be a guide book that if you truly want to know and understand how to work with these couples within autism, faith, and marriage, this is the first book of its kind that can help guide you in understanding.

NATALIE: I, for one, am excited to read that book because again, it's coming across in the Kaleidoscope on a regular basis, this issue. So I'm so glad that you wrote it. You'll have to reach back out to me when it comes out and we'll have to get you back on here on the podcast.

STEPHANIE: Well, pre-orders are now available. You can help me out a lot. We are trying to get it in Barnes and Noble and Books-A-Million. We're really trying to get it in the big

bookstores versus that online one, which my publisher said I'm not allowed to say that word. But the big bookstores, we'd like to get them in physical bookstores, which is really dependent on the pre-order status.

NATALIE: Okay, so can people pre-order it on Amazon then?

STEPHANIE: They can, but also Books-A-Million, Target, Barnes Noble. It's available for pre-order pretty much where books are sold.

NATALIE: So you want them to order it from those bookstore places because those orders are the ones that are going to get those people to go, "Oh, we should really carry this."

STEPHANIE: Yes, because what Amazon's going to do, they're going to print on demand. That's how they work. But the big bookstores to actually get physical books in the store, they want to see how the pre-orders are going if they want to actually stock their shelves with the book.

NATALIE: Okay, so I think I have a link to your website where your book is. Do you want me to link people there to go pre-order?

STEPHANIE: Yes, I can actually send you the link that goes right to Uniquely Us where you could pre-order it. And I'm actually doing a drawing right now that if you pre-order it and you screenshot that to me, I'll enter you into a drawing up to \$129 prize. It's probably only going to be a couple hundred people. So your odds will be really, really good. You can maybe win a consultation with me or win one of my courses.

NATALIE: I'll make sure that I have that link and put it in the show notes for those of you guys who are listening. And then the last thing I wanted to do is ask you if there's anything else that you wanted to share with them or any other resources that they could look into as far as your work goes and how they can connect with you.

STEPHANIE: Well, certainly on my page, Christian Neurodiverse Marriage, we have a blog and a YouTube and a podcast that comes out, but I wanted to share something which is actually what connected me. Someone connected me to you and All the Scary Little Gods. I was talking with a colleague who works with non-Christian neurodiverse couples. And I was talking with him and I said, "Sometimes you ever get like really disappointed or really discouraged because there's such a high divorce rate or they just don't seem to make change?" And he looked at me and he said, "Actually, I don't experience that as much as you do. I think that's your faith niche."

And I was like, "I don't understand." And he said, "Stephanie, my guys know that if they don't shape up, their wives will leave. There is no divorce isn't an option. There is a pain point. Your clientele have the back door sealed. I mean, they leave and they leave community, they lose family. If they don't have working skills, they lose finances and resource. But my guys know they better shape up or she will ship them out." And at first I got really offended by this, but I was telling someone, "That's what Natalie writes about in *All the Scary Little Gods*."

But he says, "It seems to me some of your Christian women think, 'If I pray enough or do enough and draw my God's attention to me, He will rescue me. He will come down and magically change my husband. It's dependent on me.' I know you're not like cutting yourself and sacrificing your babies or anything, but that sounds very much like pagan worship. It just happens to be God."

And at first, I felt very offended by that. And then I thought, "Actually, no, that makes a lot of sense from an outsider's perspective looking in, when he has dealt with faith women on why they stay, that if they could just do enough and draw God's attention to them to radically change the situation." And I was having that conversation with a friend and she was like, "That's exactly why you have to read *All the Scary Little Gods*. That's exactly what Natalie said."

And that was brought to me by a secular person, just an outside view looking at Christian marriage. That's really important to share that we can get into that mindset. Even with a loving God, Heavenly Father, we can kind of approach Him like in pagan practices.

NATALIE: Oh, 100%. Also when I think about what you mentioned, "Isn't it discouraging to see the rise of divorce?" when you said that, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so encouraged by the rise of divorce in the Christian community," because what it means is that we're saying "no" to what we talked about earlier. We're saying "no" to blasphemous marriages that blaspheme the name of God.

Whenever you say "no" to something, you're always saying "yes" to something else. So if we're saying "yes" to blasphemous marriages, then we're saying "no" to Christ-centered, godly Christian marriages. We are. And if we say "no" to the blasphemous marriages, which means there's going to be some divorce going on, just like there's some surgery going on when we got cancer, there's some chemotherapy going on, but then what we are saying "yes" to is health. We're saying "yes" to godly Christian marriages. And I can't tell you how many women I've seen walk through those horrible divorces and then down the road—not that everyone has to do this or that everyone does do this—but

many of them do end up finding healthy marriages and end up experiencing some of their healing in a healthy relationship that they never, ever would have experienced had they not had that back door open up for them.

STEPHANIE: You can imagine for me the guilt when I'm around other Christian coaches and therapists and talking about the numbers and I'm like, "Yeah, I have more get divorced than stay together." That is so guilt-ridden.

NATALIE: You should be so proud.

STEPHANIE: Leslie Vernick helped me because I saw her as a coach when I was starting to get to a national level because I really needed someone at that level to kind of help me. And I was like, "Leslie, I feel so guilty when it didn't work out or the person's walking out of the marriage." And she said, "Stephanie, just like the physical body, when the head and the heart are dead and the person is on life support, is there really life in that person? No. When the head and the heart are dead in a marriage, is it really a marriage?"

And I was like, "Oh, you're telling me I'm like a hospice coach and counselor that sometimes has to stand there and unplug the marriage with them? Oh, that's dreadful." She's like, "But it's a role that is necessary." And for all of my clients, I don't tell anyone to go or stay, but the decision that they make, I try to help support whatever that is for them because I don't have to live with the consequences. And to be that, sometimes that makes some people in the Christian community not comfortable or okay with that, but I just keep thinking, "Leslie Vernick said sometimes you have to be a hospice coach, and you've been there with them through the death, and sometimes it's time to pull the plug. And you're not pulling the plug. If they pull the plug, you're just going to hold their hand while they grieve through that."

NATALIE: Yeah, the only tweak I'd make on that is, because that really is depressing, because we tend to think of death as being, "Well, that's it then," but I use the metaphor of the butterfly, when it goes into that chrysalis, it's no longer a caterpillar, and it's not a butterfly either. It's neither a caterpillar nor a butterfly. It is a packet of goo. And that's the only way that it can then transform into what it was meant to be, which is a butterfly.

So instead of thinking yourself as a hospice person, think of yourself as a butterfly doula. That's how I think of myself.

STEPHANIE: Okay. I like a butterfly doula. That sounds much happier.

NATALIE: Exactly. And the more butterflies that you help to give birth to, that's something to be really happy about and rejoice in and celebrate, I think.

STEPHANIE: All right. I'm going to get there. I'm still deconstructing and reconstructing some of this, Natalie. I'm a work in progress still.

NATALIE: That's so awesome though. I just want to thank you so much for being on the Flying Free Podcast. This was a great conversation. I think much needed, and I can't wait to have you back. We'll get you back when your book comes out. We will definitely encourage people to do pre-orders. You know how people are about buying something. Like, if I want to eat a marshmallow, I want to eat the one that's sitting in front of me right now. I don't want to eat the one that's going to come to me six months from now.

So some of them will be in that space, but then there's others that will be super excited about pre-ordering your book just to support you and your work and this whole conversation, which is a bigger conversation that I think is probably going to continue to explode as so many conversations are right now in the Christian world.

STEPHANIE: Absolutely.

NATALIE: Thanks again.