



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** When Family Disappoints – Part 2

**Guest(s):** Dr. Sharon May

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**Dr. James Dobson:** Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

**Roger Marsh:** Greetings and welcome to Family Talk, the radio home of Dr. James Dobson, America's most trusted Christian family and child psychologist. I'm Roger Marsh and today on the program, we present part two of our co-host Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with Dr. Sharon May. They're discussing the pain and frustration that can come when our families disappoint us. I think that we all can relate to this topic, can't we? Now, if you missed part one of their insightful conversation, you can find it at [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast).

Dr. Sharon May has been a guest on Family Talk many times in the past few years. She is the founder and president of The Safe Haven Relationship Counseling Center. She earned her Ph.D. in marriage and family therapy as well as a master's degree in theology from Fuller Graduate School of Theology. Sharon and her husband Mike make their home in Carlsbad, California. Here now is Dr. Clinton and Dr. Sharon May on today's edition of Family Talk.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** Sharon, welcome back to Family Talk. What a delightful conversation yesterday as we talked about a tough topic, how families can disappoint. And, Sharon, it happens a lot.

**Dr. Sharon May:** Yes, it does. Thank you so much for having me back again, Tim. It is always a pleasure to be here.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** Sharon, I know that 2021... Tough year for you last year. Your dad, who was a dear friend of Dr. Dobson, your mother, very close to the Dobson family... You lost both of them and it's been a journey. I know Dr. Dobson wanted me to make sure and communicate his love for you and he was so delighted to have you on the broadcast today.

**Dr. Sharon May:** Oh, thank you so much, Tim. I know my parents, Archibald and Kathleen Hart, both died last year within just over two weeks between. I think Dad's heart was broken when Mom passed away and he went home to be together and I appreciate that. Our family, as we talk about families, has shifted with Mom and

Dad being gone and we are growing and learning alongside all the listeners about how to get along well and to love well in our family, because life is so short and before we know it, it's over and we get this one chance to really love well.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, we've had a lot of meaningful conversations, especially around this statement, "Life's all about relationships. Get them right, you're blessed. Get them wrong and you're going to go on a tough journey." Sharon, family. The bedrock of culture. It's so important. Again, you talk about safe haven relationships. Can you explain how important safety is in a family system and what it does for us when we feel safe?

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. Our families are our support systems. They are... We're created to be in relationship and this family becomes our safe haven, our harbor to which we can go to, knowing we love, that we belong, that someone's there for us, that we're connected. And, that becomes the courage, the inner strength from which we can venture out into the world. And, we are born into our family. We may not choose our family, our parents or our siblings, but we're born into that. That becomes this central foundation that we stand on that builds us up, in which we grow, and it is important for that family, for us to bond and connect and love each other in ways that is safe, that we know we're seen and heard and understood and that our family will respond to us in ways that consider us and that are good and healthy. And, that becomes a template for relationships. That becomes our home base that we take with us into life.

And, we then marry and have children and we then become this image of the safe haven. I use the African acacia tree, the broad umbrella trees, under which our children live and we then launch our children into their safe havens. But, as the generations, we stay connected and even though... You know, I'm in my 60s, Tim, and the loss of Mom and Dad is a big loss. We feel the loss of that safe haven. That umbrella is gone even though I'm now the mama in my family with children and grandchildren. There is a sense of our families, our parents being there, and the loss is felt and as families, we are either there with our parents or launching our children and our grandchildren and how we get along in this generational family is really important. Family is really important, Tim.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Nothing more beautiful than to be in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you and they actually love you. Nothing more painful too, Sharon, than to be in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you and you're confused about it.

Dr. Sharon May: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And, Sharon, I think family can be a place where there's such beauty and warmth, love, affection. Can also be a place of real hurt. Some of our deepest life pain is associated with our families, isn't it?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, it really is. It is. And, as adults, when we go home to our family system, we can be deeply wounded. Mom and Dad are more critical. I can't have that conversation with them or I can't talk about certain things and I feel lost and alone and deeply not seen. And, we long for our mom and dads to just see us and validate us and we long for our siblings to be co-journeymen with us and when we fight or argue or don't see eye to eye and we're very different, it creates this conflict. And, more than that, it creates a sense of deep pain and disconnection and the very place where we want to just have peace and getting along now becomes our battle zone of disappointment.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Our reactions, Sharon, can also be that old fight, flight or freeze response. We can wind up just going at each other. And, boy, do we see people go at it. Sharon, it's just unbelievable. Or, the flight thing. You've seen people. They don't talk to each other ever again. I'm talking about siblings. I'm talking about parent-child. No. I'm not doing it. I'm not engaging. And, how empty that is, too, Sharon. Or, the freeze thing. We just numb out and it's like we're in a daze and we don't know how to respond, don't even know what to do, and so, we're just like lost. We're like lost children in a family system.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. Absolutely. And, going home knowing that my sisters-in-law are going to criticize me and my brother is going to be his chaotic self and then my other sister, who has arrived and seems perfect and I'm going to feel less than and you know... And, Mom and Dad are going to treat us sort of like kids again. How do we cope with that pain? How do we cope with that lost, that conflict, that disappointment? And, Tim, you outlined it so very well. Do I just fight for myself and then have enough and then pull back and say I'm not going to any family events again? And, cutting off never works, Tim. Cutting off leaves our hearts hurt. It leaves us empty and it nags at us. Cutting off is never the answer. We were created to be in relationship and our first and our lifelong relationships are with family and it is knowing how do I stay connected but staying healthy myself and loving well these parents, these siblings, these in-laws, grandchildren. How do I love well my family?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, yesterday we talked about, a lot about the reactions that we often have. But, we left one piece, one stone unturned and I wanted to talk about it. How do I know, Sharon, when I'm in trouble personally? Maybe I feel like I'm a disappointment or I'm just so overwhelmed or sad or grieved by all this that it's beginning to really affect or infect me, even my relationships. When...? When does the red light come on, Sharon? What should I be looking for? What are the red flags?

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. When you are ruminating about your family or you're working hard to avoid their phone calls, then you know you're avoiding something that you're eventually going to have to deal with. Or, when you feel that despair and that depression coming on. You know, as parents, when our children don't want to come around or they withhold the grandchildren. That grief, and especially when we hear our friends talk about, "Oh, I had such a lovely time with my grandchildren. I'm babysitting them again." And, you know my kids or my

grandkids have cut me off and that deep despair, maybe even depression, maybe even self-doubt... Is it all my fault? Or, even when we get to a place of blame. No, it's all their fault. You know, I've got the rotten kids or rotten parents or rotten siblings.

Then, that is a red flag. Our amygdala's hijacked, our dragon has raised their heads, and we are actually fighting and defending and protesting when actually we are wanting connection.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, there are a lot of parents listening right now who have been on the receiving end of some pain. Maybe the kids haven't turned out like they had prayed or thought they would. Sometimes, you know, we have a prodigal who cuts us off and we don't even know what to do. It's like we haven't talked to our son in forever. They don't even come home for the holidays. We don't even get a phone call or don't get to see the grandkids or anybody. You know?

And, maybe... And, I wasn't perfect as a dad or maybe I wasn't perfect as a mom. But, I love my kids and honestly, you're right. I am sad. And, when they do call, maybe I try to talk too much or whatever. I just don't know what to do. What do you say to that mom or dad?

Dr. Sharon May: You know, what I say, you know, first... Have this... Reignite your longing to stay connected. And then, secondly, be self-reflective. Your children have been trying to tell you something about yourself that you've maybe been too defensive or it's too hurtful to hear. And, truly take an assessment of yourself. How have I wounded my children? And, you know, it's okay. Don't feel like you're the only one or you're a bad parent or you're a bad human being if you have hurt your children. We're all human beings. To some extent, we've all disappointed our children and let them down or hurt them or not be there.

When I sit and do marriage intensives and family intensives, when couples say, "I took my pain to my parents and I knew they're not going to listen. They're going to be defensive. I am just talking in the wind. They're going to blame me for having a complaint." But, when they come back and say, "Oh, my gosh. I was blown away. My mom actually heard what I said and came back and said I'm so sorry. I did not know that you being a latchkey kid... I didn't know that me working all the time... Or, I did not know that me putting attention to your brother who was always the squeaky wheel left you feeling out."

When parents come back and apologize to their children and say, "I get what you say. Please forgive me," that heals a multitude of sins, Tim. That is so powerful and healing.

Dr. Tim Clinton: The apostle Paul said in First Corinthians 13, there's faith and there's hope and there's love, but the greatest of these is love. Sharon, it takes a lot to reach way down inside when you're on the receiving end of someone else's pain. Sometimes... And, let's stay... Let's stay with this conversation. Sometimes, our

kids aren't lovely and sometimes our kids hurt us deeply and sometimes they do things that aren't fair and it's like, "Tim, are you telling me...? Because, what I want to do is I want to just shake them. I want to... I want to say can't you see what you're doing to Dad? Can't you see what you're doing to your mother? Come on."

But, Sharon, there's somewhere in there, this element of love. And, help us. Help us here because this is where a lot of homes are. They're in the trenches, slosh... I mean, they're really raking and fighting and holding on and saying, "God, give us a different day."

Dr. Sharon May: Oh, absolutely. And, I think families get in the midst of conflict, one, when they... Their differences are highlighted. I don't believe what you believe anymore, Mom and Dad. I want a different rhythm of life. I'm not living the way you live or maybe the way you raised me.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Or, what you thought I should be like. You know that?

Dr. Sharon May: Or, what you thought I should be like.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And, I'm going to do my own thing. I'm going to raise my kids my own way.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And, I don't need your input. You know what? Or, whatever.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: But, there's a lot of hurt and anger down inside there and it may be their issue, too, Sharon. Not necessarily ours, even as parents.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. It's both of ours because as children, especially in this generation, Tim, parents who are now in their sixties and seventies, don't forget, were helicopter parents or tiger parents. We were so involved in our children's lives and now when our children become adults, they failure to launch. They expect us to be there all the time. They become entitled and we wonder why. I gave you everything. Why aren't you launching? Why aren't you allowing me to continue parenting you in a very helicopter way and parent your children in a very helicopter way when, whoa, this whole system... We are triggering each other, where maybe I can't put those expectations on my parents and I need to love my mom and dad for who they are.

They're not going to continue rescuing me when I'm 30 or 40. Or, wow. Maybe I have raised children who now are entitled and who have failure to launch. That's why we all need to take an account of ourselves and self-reflect and then we need to begin to love in a way that considers the other, not just considers

ourselves. You know? That maybe Mom and Dad want to continue parenting as helicopter parents and helicopter grandparents.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. And, Sharon, what you mean by that is overly involved. In other words, really trying to control, maybe... Maybe with the best intentions. But, that failure to launch piece is often related back to it.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And so, somewhere, we have to step back for a moment, kind of collect ourselves and say, "Hey. What are we doing here and how's this working for you? It's not working. Right?"

Dr. Sharon May: Right. Absolutely. And, as parents, being able to go back to our children and helping our children, coaching them to find the vision of their life. I know, son, you want to find a career and find a place where you can flourish. But, for me as a parent, if I keep rescuing you, money is not going to solve that. How can I help you win? Or, Mom and Dad, I know you really want to guide me and keep guiding me, but I am in my forties or thirties or fifties and I need to come to my own beliefs as to this is how I want to raise my children. Can you just maybe...? Even though you don't agree with what I'm doing, can you still be there for me?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Because, if you keep having that expectation and you don't step up to deal with it, you're going to be nothing but disappointed because the gap between expectation and reality, what's going on, is disappointment, and disappointment can... By the way, if it goes unchecked, can lead to a lot of deep discouragement, which can lead to depression, which ultimately can lead to despair and then we get lost and we become exactly what we hate in the world around us.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely, because that despair turns to resentment and resentment turns to I don't deserve this, I deserve more, and now it turns to anger. I'm not going to invite that daughter-in-law and I have an attitude when she comes over and then my poor son, who's trying to get along maybe with a very strong-willed woman, isn't feeling supported or loved. Now he's trepidacious about coming over and now we are part of our children's marriage difficulties.

Because, don't forget, Tim. One of the top topics that couples argue about... You know, money, sex, in-laws, family. And, if we're saying I want my kids' marriages to thrive, so I need to be the kind, loving, long-suffering, forgiving, consistent safe haven for my son and my daughter-in-law and for those grandchildren. That's the legacy that will last. It is not, now, all that I've given them, they need to respect me, call me and I deserve a better present and a better phone call. No. Pour out, then find your support system, your friends, your community, that can pour into you as a parent.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, I've got two more pieces I want to get in before we end today's broadcast and that is the issue of anger management. Sharon, you're one of the best in the world on teaching couples how to manage conflict. Those are the same principles we need in our family systems. Can you just highlight one or two key points, Sharon, that really...? It's like the light bulb went on for you when you saw this, especially in working with people and families.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. So, anger is a reaction often to a violation of a boundary but also when we feel unsafe, unheard, unseen in a relationship. And, how do I then manage my hurt myself in a way that does not tap into or flow over to resentment, how dare you, I deserve more, and that anger? Oftentimes, we expect our children to understand our hurt when we are mad and our children are not going to see through our anger to our hurt. We can't put that on our children. We have to manage that anger.

Now, we want our spouse to put their hand through our porcupine quills and to understand our anger, that actually behind that is woundedness, and to come and comfort our woundedness. But, we can't expect our children to comfort us. We have to manage that and bring our healthiness to our children. But, anger can destroy any hope of connection when it goes unchecked.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It really does. Anger is a corrosive, horrible thing.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That devours, is what it does.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, I'd like to end this way. Yesterday, you mentioned the subject of loving well. Let's talk about the payoff of loving your family well, even if it might be easier to write them off or to say *fait accompli*. I'm done with all this.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. And, that is a choice that we have. We choose how we're going to live this one life and the greatest commandment is to love well and we have to choose. I want to be someone who loves well. You know, I have a friend whose mother-in-law was always critical of her, as many mother-in-laws are of the wives that our sons choose, that no woman is good enough for our sons. And, when her mother-in-law was going through cancer and dying, she was the one that was there taking care of the mother-in-law as she was dying and I just thought, what courage. This is a woman now who has spent her whole life telling you you're not good enough, you fall short, you're a disappointment to the family.

And yet, this is the person in whom's arms that she's dying. And, I said, you know, my friend and all these woman who love their children and daughter-in-laws well even though it's a deep grief that we have to step beyond our hurt and pain... I deserve to hurt you and wound you. And, I forgive you and I love you

well despite. At the end of our lives, we can know I loved well, with kindness, and I stepped into your life understanding what you need.

But that takes character for us. That takes a choice. Who do I want to be in this life? How do I want to end? And, don't forget. Every time we're angry and resentful and... That shapes who we are. I don't want my resentment and my anger, my disappointment and my hurt, to shape me into a person that at the end of my life I'm bitter and got all these pokey porcupine quills. I want to know how to love and forgive and to love well.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That prodigal son story... I can only imagine that moment when Dad sees his son coming over the hill and he says, "My son, who was lost. He's coming home."

Dr. Sharon May: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: "Get the fatted calf. Somebody get everything we can. Let's have a dance. Let's have a party. My son who was lost is coming home." That's how God looks at us when we're lost and wayward. And, in our families, when we love well... Like Paul said, there's faith and there's hope and there's love, but the greatest of these is love. May we all love well.

Sharon, what a delight to have you on the broadcast. I know there are a lot of families out there who have been encouraged by the words you've had. They might be still in a fight, trying to figure out how to make it work. But, I think what you've shared with us gives them a little bit of hope and certainly some help. It's been a delight to have you. On behalf of Dr. Dobson and his wife Shirley, their family, our Family Talk family, we salute you and pray that God would continue to do great work in and through you for such a time as this. Thank you for joining us.

Roger Marsh: Well, you just heard the second half of Dr. Tim Clinton's important, compassionate conversation with his friend Dr. Sharon May here on Family Talk. These two colleagues discussed what to do and how to respond when our families disappoint us. It is such a needed topic to tackle, as all of us to some degree or another have unmet expectations when it comes to family. I hope that you've been encouraged by this program and remember, if you missed any of today's or yesterday's broadcast, you can listen to both of them in their entirety when you visit [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast).

While you're there, you can also request a CD copy of the two-part conversation to keep or to share. That's [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast). Or, give us a call at (877) 732-6825. Now, before we go, I want to tell you about a free marriage devotional series that we've created just for you and your honey this February. It's a 10 day series and if you and your spouse would like a closer relationship with each other and with God, you will definitely want to sign up for this. You can find all the information about this 10 day marriage series and how to sign up by visiting [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org).



Well, that's all the time we have for today here on Family Talk. But, why don't you join us again next time? We're here to help you build healthy strong families by using proven Biblical methods. Thanks again for listening. On behalf of the Dobson family, Drs. Clinton and May, and from all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, I'm Roger Marsh. May God bless you and your family richly today and every day.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.