



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Marriage Survival Skills – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Dr. Gary Smalley and Dr. Scott Stanley

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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:** Welcome everyone to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh with your host, child psychologist and popular author, Dr. James Dobson. Thank you for joining us every day as we continue to support the traditional family and its values. A crucial aspect to the happiness of every household is the relationship between a husband and wife. The institution of marriage is crumbling in this culture because of skyrocketing divorce rates. Research reveals that nearly 40 to 50% of all couples are eventually calling it quits. Husbands and wives must work hard and seek God daily to remain committed to each other.

This Family Talk broadcast is focused on those failing relationships and how couples can divorce-proof their marriages. In a moment, we'll revisit a timeless Dr. Dobson interview featuring Dr. Gary Smalley and Dr. Scott Stanley. Dr. Stanley is a research professor, author, and founder of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program. He's also the co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. The late Dr. Gary Smalley authored 60 books and hosted Smalley Live, his syndicated radio show. He passed away in 2016, but the Smalley Institute continues his legacy and work for God-honoring marriages.

Dr. Stanley shares his profound findings after studying the marriages of 130 couples for 12 full years. He and Dr. Smalley will identify the common misguided behaviors couples fall into when conflicts arise. There's a lot of content to get to, so let's get started. Here now is Dr. James Dobson to explain how this conversation came about on this edition of Family Talk.

**Dr. James Dobson:** Gary and I were fishing and we were just talking about the family and talking about the new ideas that he'd come across, kind of sharing information. We both have a passion for the family and for the home. And Gary, you said something to me that day that really stuck with me. When I came home, I began trying to research it because you said there are some new ideas that are the

most helpful in marital relationships of anything you had ever seen in your 30 years.

Dr. Gary Smalley: Exactly. In fact, I had never called you and said to you before, this was the first time I've ever said, "You've got to have this man on because some of the stuff I've just learned [inaudible 00:02:53]."

Dr. James Dobson: Referring to yourself, right?

Dr. Gary Smalley: No, this other man that I became aware of because it was so helpful to me first of all that I saw some truth there that can be applied in marriages and families today that really, really got me excited.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, the person you were talking to me about on both that telephone call and when we were fishing that day is Dr. Scott Stanley, who's a clinical psychologist. He specializes in marital therapy and research. He's the co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies in the psychology department at the University of Denver where he got his PhD. Now, what Gary is talking about is a book and video series called *Fighting for Your Marriage* that you co-authored with a number of people.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Correct. I've co-authored those with Howard Markman, who's been my colleague since 1977, and a real leader in this area of research and Susan Blumberg, who's been a friend and colleague since the mid '80s.

Dr. James Dobson: You didn't just sit down and say, "I think this would be a neat idea." You started with research. You began with 135 couples back in 1980.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly. In 1980, we recruited 135 couples that were planning marriage or formally engaged for our study at the University of Denver where we wanted to follow them over time and see what would happen in their relationship. There's also a small number of those couples, about 33 out of the 135 that got the version of the program that we've been developing that existed then that we call PREP in the more academic circles, which stands for the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program.

But what we've done with those couples is we've followed them now for the last 15 years, seeing who makes it, who does well, who gets married, has kids, is happy together, who broke up before marriage, who got married and broke up, and that allows us to look at things, that's a very fascinating thing to look at, before they even get married, while they're still happy, that are very predictive of divorce in the future. So for many couples, the seeds of their divorce are there long before they even know there's a problem.

Dr. James Dobson: What a sad commentary.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yes, it is.

Dr. James Dobson: That means you can look out over a college audience and say, "Perhaps 80% of you will be married, and I'm looking now at X percent of you who will eventually be divorced." And the seeds of that divorce are already there.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. Gary Smalley: And they don't know what those seeds are and they're discouraged. They'd love to know. So that's what's exciting about this program.

Dr. James Dobson: And we don't give them much training in identifying those problem areas, do we?

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. There's so much effort in this country is directed at fixing things after they're broken instead of trying to take things that are going the right direction and keep them going that direction. So we're very interested in prevention. I think the things that we talk about work very well for couples that are in trouble, but we'd rather keep them from getting there in the first place.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, suppose my fiance and I come to see you. We're 21, 22 years of age and we're thinking about getting married and you spend a little time with us. With what degree of can you predict whether we'll have a successful marriage or end in divorce?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Here's how I would say it to that couple. I would say, "I can't tell you exactly what your odds are, but I can tell you the kind of things that would work against you having a good shot." Because in the research we can be much more precise and we can measure a lot of things when I'm dealing with a couple just one on two like that, I'm going to speak globally, but here's what they're going to hear. I'm going to say this, "The factors that brought you together, the things you like about each other, your personality, differences and similarities, those things don't say nearly as much about how you're going to do in the future as how you handle your differences. How you handle conflict in particular is going to be the very best predictor of how you're going to do in the future."

Dr. Gary Smalley: Daily arguments.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's exactly right. All the little things that just come up every day, how the couple handles these kinds of conflicts as they arise is really going to tell the story of who does well and who does not.

Dr. James Dobson: And those conflicts are absolutely inevitable.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely. We could ask the audience here, "Raise your hand if you've been married for more than two weeks and haven't had a significant disagreement or difficulty." I mean that's two weeks generously. I mean, marriage is hard. Marriage takes work. And a lot of people think, and Christianity is fairly focused on things that matter, but you can't do much about them anyway, like

personality. I mean personality predicts something about how happy people will be in the marriage. It doesn't predict divorce very well at all, but how people handle their differences is very predictive. And the good news is these are dimensions where people can learn things to do it better as opposed to not doing it so well.

Dr. James Dobson: So conflict will come into every relationship. The key factor, one key factor is what you do with it when it happens.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: You can use it to tear each other apart or you can grow from it.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. Gary Smalley: In his conference, I heard him say that it doesn't matter how committed you are to each other, how much you love each other, devoted. It's how you handle those daily arguments that's going to determine the quality of your marriage.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, let's go to what Gary you were sharing with me on the banks of the stream up there. I was frankly more interested in the fish, but I did enjoy what you had to say. There are four factors that you all look at and that's part of this PREP program that you started with. This comes out of a research now, and the very first of the four, I guess it's one of four ways to deal with conflict, is that it?

Dr. Scott Stanley: You could think of these as typical ways people have of dealing with conflicts or patterns that you want to have not too many of these in your relationship or you're headed for trouble.

Dr. James Dobson: The first one is withdrawal. Explain that.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Withdrawal is something men do more than women and it's when an issue comes up, usually more often raised by the woman than the man, women bring up issues more often. Withdrawal is when you'll see that partner, it could be the male or the female, but it's more often the male, turn away, shut down, pull away, sort of click off, somehow trying to stop the conversation from happening or to get it over quickly. I mean, sometimes withdrawal takes the form of, "Okay, okay, okay, just tell me what you want me to do. I'll do whatever you want me to do." It's, "I want to get out of here." It's the, "Beam me up, Scotty" kind of thing, if you're a Star Trek fan.

Dr. Gary Smalley: And we're talking about 85% of the withdrawals are male.

Dr. James Dobson: Yes.

Dr. Gary Smalley: So that's way over the [inaudible 00:09:24].

Dr. Scott Stanley: And all by itself itself. And this is sort of the good news, bad news in our kind of research, this pattern is very common, many men do this, I do this to some degree. But it's also one of the very best predictors of divorce in the future. So it's common, but it's very destructive.

Dr. James Dobson: So in essence, this woman has all this stuff inside, she has all these intense feelings, things she needs to talk through, things she wants to negotiate, things that she wants to say, hurts that she wants to express, and he views that as unpleasant, as threatening, as unnecessary. And his way of dealing with it is to watch Monday Night Football, which drives her crazy.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly right. It's interesting if you watch what happens-

Dr. Gary Smalley: I didn't know Monday Night Football had anything to do with it.

Dr. James Dobson: It's one form of withdrawal. Fishing is another, I tell you.

Dr. Scott Stanley: We're really hitting close to home, right? Yeah, what happens and you see couples get into this dance then where the one is pursuing the other to talk about things, to deal with things and the other's avoiding and withdrawing-

Dr. James Dobson: He sees it as nagging.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yes, exactly. And you said something very insightful there. Men are not usually trying to avoid intimacy or being connected. What they're really trying to avoid is conflict. Men do not handle conflict as well in marriage as women do. They don't feel as prepared for it, they don't feel as skilled in dealing with it, and they have more intense physiological reactions during conflict with their wives. So it feels awful. They don't know what to do, so they try to exit it. They try to pull away and stop it, but that frustrates women immensely.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, I can't validate this with research, Scott, but it's my impression that men handle conflict in business better than women.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly right. And so a good question is what's different about business than marriage? And one of the things that's different about business or the military or about sports, all dimensions where we think about men handling conflict better are the rules are clearer. They may not be totally clear, in sports, they're pretty clear.

Dr. James Dobson: And they can keep it issue related and not entangle emotions. So that structure.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. Exactly. That's exactly. They have a sense of, "I know how to handle it here." But in marriage you talk to men, you pull them aside, "Why do you do that? Your wife hates it when you do that." They'll tell you, "I don't have a clue what to do. I can tell she's upset. I want to make it better. I feel tense inside, but I don't know what to do."

One the things that we try to get couples to do is how to figure out how to take a break like that to think it through that's not destructive, that doesn't have this sort of unilateral feel to it where the one just feels like the other's not paying attention to them. And frankly, when this goes on long enough, that one that's in the pursuer role begins to think, "Well, you don't love me, you don't care about me, or you would talk with me."

Dr. Gary Smalley: See Scott, what I really got out in this area in your conference that men don't feel like there's a clear enough structure in the conflict area in marriage, so therefore we feel unsafe and insecure. We're not as good arguers as she is because there isn't that structure. But in football we know that this is an out of bound that's 10 yards. In boxing we know there's so many minutes, you can't do this, you can't do that. So therefore I can function in that structure, but without it, I don't feel as confident, therefore I'm going to tend to withdraw.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. And you watch how little girls grow up, they grow up talking things through, they grow up working it out, talking it out. Little boys grow up, in fact, if you watch what little boys do when they get a conflict, they will go and ask somebody, "Who knows the rule? What are we supposed to do here? What's the rule?" And that guides them through and little girls kind of work it out and preserve the relationship.

Dr. James Dobson: Another aspect of this, I find this subject fascinating because the differences between the way men and women think has always been of great interest to me, but looking in my own past in terms of conflict, I remember being in high school and I was new at the school and there was a boy there that just started giving me a hard time. One day I was walking down the hall, I don't remember what he did, either tripped me or said something, I turned around and threw my books in his face. It was a very immature thing to do and it hit him all over the head. I mean, I just exploded on him. That's what a man sometimes does, and I believe wife abuse comes out of that, where he's trying to pull back, he's trying to hide, he's holding it in and she's frustrated by this and she's on him and on him and on him and finally blows up and then he does things that are illegal and horrible.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah, you touched on two things that are very important. One is that some men will say, "The reason why I'm trying to pull out of here and withdraw, and sometimes that means walking out of the room, walking out of the house, is I don't want it to get physical." And you bring up, obviously this is a hot political issue, but it's one that we've taken a stand on in what we say coming out of the research, that there's a lot of couples out there that are in what you'd really call battering relationships where it's not this sort of dynamic, it's more of a criminal dynamic in that that male is really trying to just subjugate and control and intimidate the woman.

But there's many other couples that have incidents of physical aggression that are exactly this pattern that you describe where they're at it, they're escalating, which is another one of the danger signs we talk about, and there's yelling and

screaming. And one or the other, and it's just as often the woman as the man, may push or shove or slap. This kind of thing happens fairly commonly in marriage. There's no doubt that women in anything that's getting physical in marriage are at greater danger. But that's a very different dynamic than this sort of battering model. And in that dynamic, there's a couple that doesn't know how to handle conflict.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Spouse abuse is very, very complicated, like every other form of human behavior, and you can think you get it all boiled down and it all represents the same general response, but it can result from different causes. There's no excuse for it whatever the reason. But the husband who gets frustrated and blows up and lashes out at his wife and maybe a man with a very different problem than the one who uses intimidation and violence to control his wife and make her do what he wants her to do. Either way it's intolerable and it simply must be stopped.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah. Our point on that is to try to get people to think about there's a couple of different ways this can happen here and the way you deal with it might be different in different groups. But let me make this point really clear, as we talk about these danger signs and go on and mention some more of them, one of the most fascinating things about the research is those premarital indicators that we see in that study are very subtle. I can describe very dramatic examples of these danger signs as we sit here, but when we're looking at these tapes of these couples in the research center, they're very subtle phenomena, but they're still going to wreak havoc in these relationships.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, how do you pick that up? You've got the couple sitting in front of you, they're very young, they're going to change, they're going to mature, they're going to grow hopefully. How do you identify the signs of a withdrawal versus nagging combination that's going to cause problems?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah. Our sense of it is this, that especially when couples have been together for a little while, and usually when they're planning marriage, they've known each other a little while, they know whether some of these dimensions are already coming up. If we describe that or, let me get another one of these danger signs on the table, escalation, which is the tendency of just going from talking calmly to something gets triggered and you're crabbing at each other and it's negative and negative, negative back and forth-

Dr. Gary Smalley: Name calling.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: I need to clarify, excuse me for interrupting. You're not just talking about a behavior, you're talking about a tendency toward that danger sign.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yes.

- Dr. James Dobson: You're talking about a temperament that tends to escalate conflict instead of settle it.
- Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly. We're talking about couples where they are more likely to get into this pattern, they're more likely to escalate, they escalate more easily, and the couples that are going to have more trouble not only escalate more easily, but once they're escalating, they don't get out of it as quickly as other people do. I mean a lot of times if we choose to in humility, any of us can end something that's escalating right away by just saying, "Oh, wait a minute, maybe I didn't say that quite right. Let's try this again. I'm sorry if I hurt you. Let's start that over again." I mean that can cut out a lot of escalation right there. But a lot of us, we're already angry and defensive and things are [inaudible 00:17:59].
- Dr. Gary Smalley: Ego's been hit, we're hurt.
- Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. So off it goes. We find at least with couples premaritally or maybe married 50 years, if we describe these patterns, they get it. They know whether they tend to do this too much and they know it's going to be really frustrating if they do it very often.
- Dr. Gary Smalley: So in fact, in his conference he said the greatest problem, biggest risk factor for even an unsatisfying marriage really is withdrawing. And then secondly, which is also a major thing, is escalation. Well, I mean I needed to hear things like that with the work that we're in with couples and families because when you nail it down to something concrete that I got hope that when couples hear this guy, and that's one of the reasons I got so excited about telling you about it, but he has a communication method that he's tweaked just a little, I've used the method before, but not the way he uses it, that actually eliminates all four of these risk factors, which I know we'll get to eventually.
- But that's what really got me excited about it because I knew there was one thing I could learn, even if I didn't understand all of the four causes, I knew that I could learn this method that would eliminate those four risk factors for a dissatisfying marriage. And we started using them immediately as a couple and I started using it in my home. So it was really kind of exciting.
- Dr. James Dobson: Well, that's exciting stuff. All right, now again, let me take you back to that counseling session and this young couple comes in and that says, "We're so in love, we can't wait to get married." And they're going to sail off into the sunset. It's going to be rosy and this primrose path and all that sort of thing. What are you picking up? What are you looking for? How did you identify that person who's explosive? They're not going to show you that there. In fact, their fiance may not know it.
- Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah, and see that's one of the problems that some of these things are so subtle early on that it may be hard for a couple to identify it. For most couples in the premarital time, the most they're going to have to work through are plans about



getting married. But I really want them to be alert to whether or not they have some of these danger signs. And even if they're not sure, to start to teach them skills and ways of dealing well with issues and conflict that will serve them well over the years if they will work at it.

Dr. James Dobson: I asked you a question earlier, your answer surprised me. I asked you how you could predict and with what accuracy those marriages that would be successful. I understand that on an individual basis it's very different than on a research basis where you're dealing with large numbers. But I also know that you have a very high accuracy rate. I think I read somewhere around 90%.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah, it depends on to what point we're tracking and what part of the sample. And there's different studies out there. There's other researchers that get something similar at this point using even somewhat different methods. And part of this is to say as a cautionary to couples, it's hard to say with a given couple, "Are you going to make it or not." But to say across a sample, "Here's the characteristics of the couples that aren't likely to make it and you need to look out for these characteristics."

Dr. James Dobson: That's like saying if your mother has breast cancer, you have a 40% higher chance of breast cancer, but a doctor can't say to the patient, "You're going to get breast cancer." In most cases.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly. And here's a real key, when we talk to couples, what they need to hear is this, the negative patterns in marriage are far more predictive, have a much greater effect than the positive.

Dr. James Dobson: That positive. Scott, do you find yourself actually saying to a young couple, "I don't think you ought to get married. I see too many negatives."

Dr. Scott Stanley: I haven't gone that far. And in fact some professional associations consider that unethical to go that far, but I don't mind at all saying to a couple, "You've got a lot of danger signs here. You have these risk factors, you have these risk factors and you better get really good at this stuff or you're deceiving yourself."

Dr. James Dobson: Last question, is this concept and are these ideas useful to those who have been married for 25 years as well?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Maybe Gary would like to answer.

Dr. James Dobson: You actually sat through a seminar.

Dr. Gary Smalley: I had four days with my two sons and I was able to use it instantly with my son, but also with my wife. And I'd love one of these programs be able to share with you well how it's impacted us as a couple.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, as a matter of fact, we're going to do another program on this next time and we'll start by asking you to do just that.

Dr. Gary Smalley: Great. I mean it really has made a significant impact and it's been exciting to see.

Dr. James Dobson: Scott, thanks for being with us. We're delighted to have you as our guest. Dr. Scott Stanley and Gary Smalley. And we'll talk some more, in fact, we've talked about two of the four risk factors, we'll talk about the other two tomorrow. Thank you all.

Dr. Gary Smalley: Hey, thank you.

Roger Marsh: Couples can beat the odds and build a lasting relationship. What great information so far here on Family Talk. And if you found today's program encouraging, you won't want to miss tomorrow's broadcast as well as Wednesday's program as well, as Dr. Gary Smalley and Dr. Scott Stanley will continue their conversation with our own Dr. James Dobson and dig a bit deeper into how couples can make their marriage last. You can learn more about the book *Fighting for Your Marriage* by visiting our website at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). There you'll also find information about Dr. Stanley's research and Dr. Smalley's continued ministry. Again, that's at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk).

And as always, the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute exists to strengthen marriages and families and to protect the sanctity of human life as well as spreading the good news of the gospel. If you've been blessed by Family Talk, won't you consider making a financial contribution to support our ministry? We are a completely listener supported broadcast outreach and every contribution is tax-deductible. Learn how you can give a gift online by visiting [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) or give us a call at 877-732-6825. And please know how much we appreciate your support and your prayers.

Now, if you're a parent, you know how difficult it can be to raise your son to be a godly man or to raise your daughter to be a godly woman in today's culture. The incredible weight of guiding them through this confused and turbulent time can really take a toll on parents and families. Well, to walk alongside you and to better equip you as a parent with timeless biblically based advice and tools, Dr. Dobson has bundled two of his classic books, *Bringing Up Boys* and *Bringing Up Girls*, and they're bundled together as one resource and we'll be happy to send it to you as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute today. So reserve your copy when you click the link on the broadcast page [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). Again, ask for the *Bringing Up Boys* and *Bringing Up Girls* Bundle when you make a donation of any amount in support of the ministry today at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). Well, I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of everyone here at the JDFI, thanks so much for making Family Talk a part of your day.

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