



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Difficult and Disconnected Marriages - Part 2

Guest(s): Dr. Sharon May

Air Date: February 23, 2021

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- Dr. Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute.
- Dr. Dobson: I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.
- Roger Marsh: Welcome to Family Talk. The listener supported broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh with a trivia question for you. Do you remember the signature line from the 1960s TV show, Lost In Space? Remember what it is? "Danger Will Robinson, danger." If you're old enough, that should have been a fun walk down memory lane. Well, our guest today here on Family Talk is Dr. Sharon May, president of the Safe Haven Relationship Counseling Center. And, she has a warning for us about the effects of emotional danger in a marriage. She points out that when a spouse is living in constant fear that their marital partner will lash out with hurtful and demeaning words, that marriage is in trouble. If you feel like you're stuck in a difficult or disconnected marriage, that your guard is always up, or that you can't be vulnerable with your spouse.
- Roger Marsh: Well, you've tuned to the right place. Dr. Sharon May received her PhD in marriage and family therapy and a master's degree in theology from Fuller Graduate School of Theology. She was raised in South Africa. And today, she's based in Carlsbad, California, where she specializes in work with couples who are experiencing emotional disconnection. Dr. May also host marriage intensives. Her two books are entitled, Safe Haven Marriage, and How To Argue So Your Spouse Will Listen. Let's listen in now as Dr. Tim Clinton continues with part two of his conversation with Dr. Sharon May on difficult and disconnected marriages right here on Family Talk.
- Tim Clinton: Sharon, I couldn't wait for us to get to this day two, in talking about difficult and disconnected marriages. Sharon, I'm going to go back to a comment I made yesterday, and we unpacked this. You're in intimacy relationship will never rise above the level of fear and, or anger between the two of you. Sharon, the patterns that sort of begin to unfold when we're getting sideways, when we feel emotionally distant, when we begin to, maybe in the name of love, try to get each other's attention, but all we're doing is wounding each other. And, the real

scary piece, Sharon, is those wounds can begin to go really deep and they create the shutdown between couples. That's a tough place to be.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. And Tim, I'm so glad to be back for the second day because I know so many couples, marriage is hard work, find themselves in seasons in a difficult marriage, where we're just not getting along, that everything you say or do triggers me, and then the way I react triggers you and you get irritated, and I get frustrated and I can't get you to see my view, and you seem so impossible that we then harden our hearts and we pull back defending, blaming and we emotion disconnect. And, we know living in a difficult emotionally disconnected marriage is painful. It is lonely. It is so sad, but we don't have to.

Tim Clinton: Sharon. I want to reference the work of Dr. John Gottman. And I know you know Gottman's work very well. He's a real imminent marital research expert out of the University of Washington in Seattle. In some of Dr. Gottman's work, he talked about patterns of arguing, or I'll use the word carefully fighting. It isn't that you're not going to argue or have differences or quote, "Let's use the word fight." He said, "It's not really that, it's how you fight, how you deal with these issues that's the difference." And, that's an important distinction for us, as we begin this journey on trying to navigate these kinds of treacherous waters.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. Not arguing is not healthy for her marriage. If you're not arguing, I don't get to know your view, you don't get to know my view, we aren't intertwining our lives. So, not arguing is not something you should aim for. All you're going to do is stuff, stuff, stuff, and then finally explode. It is how you argue. It is how you say ouch, that hurts me or how you complain. "Hey, I don't like that." Or how you clarify, "You said this, it made me feel insignificant or controlled or not worthy, can you help me understand what you meant by that?" And John Gottman says, "When we use contempt, something's wrong with you, when we are so defensive, no, I didn't say that, I'm not as bad as you claim me to be." And then, we finally come to contempt, and then just shut each other out. That argument pattern is what becomes detrimental to our marriage.

Tim Clinton: People can actually learn how to use anger against you to control you. That's a scary thing. That's got to be assessed. I mean, in this, quote, "Figuring out how to navigate and deal with constructively getting along on differences and more"

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. And, what we have to understand about ourselves and about our spouse, that when we feel the space between our spouse that, this bond that connects us, I call it off safe haven, when we feel that safe haven is threatened, or maybe you don't like me, or you controlling me, or you think less of me, or you're not there for me, you're not taking care of me, when this is threatened, and the alarm sound, danger, danger, you're not my safe haven, we have to realize that powerful emotions arise inside of us. This anger, this fear, this anxiety. The anxiety of, oh, you're going to leave me. The fear of what's going to happen. And, the anger of how dare you, don't you talk to me like that, don't you do this. And, these emotions rise up inside of us and they trigger this primal

response of, I'm going to fight you or I'm going to flee from you, or I'm going to freeze and wait until the danger is over.

Tim Clinton: Sure.

Dr. Sharon May: And, we have to be aware within ourselves. Do I go to anger first? Because anger is a M&M coating. It's a protective coating from me to feel the sadness and vulnerability and this loss. Fear is also a way of me to try and cope with restoring this bond. And, if we go to anger first, we need to be aware of how it impacts our spouse. Yes, anger wants to stop the conversation, wants to give ourselves the upper hand. If I talk louder and harsher and faster, and I remind you of all the wrongs you've done, maybe you'll hear me and understand me. We have to be aware. Even our fear that pulls us away, causes us to withdraw and shut down. That's also very painful for our spouse. I can't find you when you pull back and shut down, and the anxiety and this worry doesn't allow us to be fully present. We have to be aware of that in ourselves, and take responsibility for that and its impact.

Tim Clinton: Sharon, I'm thinking of a couple, let's say she grew up in a home where her dad was a yeller, a screamer. Her mom was also maybe very strong and was like that to her. And, anytime someone raises their voice or what have you, she almost cowers in fear. Her spouse learns that weakness in her. You hear what I'm saying? That she has lost her voice. It's been taken from her. And then, she winds up capitulating or being a peacemaker, doing everything she can to give in, in the moment, and that turns to anger inward. That can manifest itself in depression, or it can be, she just comes to a place where she's going to explode. And, the real issue is he's mean. You hear what I'm saying? But, the projection is onto her, that she's the problem, but there are challenges here. And, you've got to see these patterns too, as you begin to try to make your way toward each other.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. And Tim, this is actually one of the first steps that I'm inviting couples to. We are doing a 7-week Marriage Challenge of saying, "Put all your energies into doing something that can shift your marriage, turn it around, that can begin a healing process." And, one of those first challenges is recognize the argument cycle that you and your spouse gets stuck in. Recognize I get angry, because maybe that's the only way I got to be heard in my family. Anger shut down, my mom or my dad who were critical and harsh. So now, I use anger and then maybe the wife says, and then anger to me feels dangerous. And then when I feel anger, I then have to just go along with it and hide until I finally explode. Now, I'm the explosive woman. It is being able to understand those patterns and to take responsibility for it.

Dr. Sharon May: So, first is understanding your arguments cycle and then to be influenceable. Tim, if you are influenceable in your marriage, you're going to turn your marriage around. If you can just say to your spouse, "You know what?" "I do, I use anger to stop the conversation." And, you know most of us, that's all we want from our spouse. I am challenging couples to take big major steps, to be

able to turn your marriage around and start a healing process, regardless of whether or not your spouse chooses to. If both of you sit down and say, "Hey, let's really try to turn our marriage around, so that we can be a safe haven for each other. Let's start with this, first let's recognize the arguments cycle that we get stuck in. Secondly, let's be influenceable. Let's take responsibility for the ways we react and how it impacts each other.

Dr. Sharon May: And then a third one, Tim, let's be kind. When you don't know what to do in a moment, don't yell, don't get angry, don't shut down, be kind, use manners. It will soften the hardened of hearts. When my husband, when I'm upset or mad and I'm getting on my soap box to give him a mouthful, when he just softens and says, "I'm sorry, lovey, maybe I did that wrong." "I didn't maybe consider that, I'm sorry, lovey." His soft position using manners and kindness, him recognizing his part, being influenceable softens me. It just softens.

Dr. Sharon May: Because at the heart of what I'm really wanting, I'm really not wanting to get my view across, and punish him and scold him, although sometimes just five minutes of that, Lord. What I'm really wanting is his soft heart to understand how I've been hurt and to want to come and listen to me. And that's a fourth one, is listening. If you don't listen to your spouse, your spouse is not going to listen to you, and listen without defending. Don't try and correct the accuracy of what your spouse is saying in the moment. In that moment, we'd have an amygdala hijacking, our brain is saying "Danger, danger." Just listen to be able to let your spouse feel heard.

Tim Clinton: Listening to you, two words come to mind. The significance of my spouse being a safe place, we've mentioned the word safety before. It's hard for me to enter into your world, if I feel like you're dangerous to me. Or every time I do, all you do is hurt me. And so, I need to know that you're safe. And so, those skills that you're teaching are critical. And, the other word that entered my mind was the word, sorry. I think for a lot of men and women, but men in particular, think if I say, I'm sorry, then it should be all gone. "I said I'm sorry to you, what else do you want from me?" No, no, no. If you're not safe, sorry doesn't mean much. Sharon, does it?

Dr. Sharon May: Right. And, Tim going back to the illustration of you and Julie. If your roses came with a, "Julie, I recognize that when I..." And, I don't know what the issue was, I'll make it up Tim. "I recognize that if I don't call you to let you know I'm going to be late, makes you feel not a priority to me, it makes you feel not important to me, and that hurt I see and I get it." We don't just want, "Sorry, I didn't call you that I was going to be late, now isn't that good enough?" "Why can't you accept that?" We are looking for our spouse to say, please understand the wound, what it means to me.

Tim Clinton: One of the rules I often establish with couples, if they're having really a tough time, say over a extended family or something, listen, I don't want you talking about that outside here. It's so explosive and you guys escalate, meaning you go from zero to a hundred at each other's throat so fast that you're not equipped

yet emotionally and with skills to talk through this issue. So Sharon, that becomes an off the table subject that we'll deal with together. How do you handle when couples have some topics that are just like, okay, we can't even go there.

Dr. Sharon May: For a couple to be vulnerable enough, to be influenceable enough to recognize it, that I just can't talk about you criticizing my mom or it's just too painful for me to talk about what happened at the last event, it is-

Tim Clinton: Or money, or anything.

Dr. Sharon May: Or money, it just... That's when couples need to reach out for help. this situation, this woundedness is too deep for us. We need that third party. And to get counseling, to get help, I know at Safe Haven Relationship Center, we work with couples through Zoom during this time, as well as in person, really to help understand the meaning, the deep woundedness, the hurt around these topics and to find some resolve and problem solve around it. But until then, if you and your spouse can say, when it comes to money, it is such a hot topic.

Dr. Sharon May: We just can't talk about it. I'd say then, write down your views, what is your woundedness around it? What do you want your spouse to understand? And, what do you want to see change? Write it down on a three-by-five card. Because, if you're talking about it in the moment, oftentimes, if you're amygdala hijacked, that means the danger center in your brain gets triggered, you're not going to have just a calm, relaxed conversation. When your brain is saying, "Danger, danger. You can't have a calm, relaxed conversation when you're coming zooming down a rollercoaster ride thinking that you're going to fall off, you just can't. So, don't set yourself up for failure. Don't have meaningful conversations when your brain is hijacked and it's saying, "Danger, danger, my world around me is dangerous." You have to have those conversations when you're calmer. Write it out, if you can't talk about it. And if it's still too hot, reach out for help, you don't have to stay stuck. You can get unstuck, relatively easily with a bit of help.

Tim Clinton: Sharon, I want to go a little bit deeper here, because we'd be remiss, if we didn't acknowledge that there are some couples out there in relationships that are really broken. If she could call in, she might say something like this, "He doesn't want to change, he's not going to change. "Sharon, Tim, you know what he says to me, that's just who I am, it's just the way it is." "And, you're going to have to live with it or else." And, she's there and she's wrestling with God, and she's looking at the family and she's trying to figure out what to do. Sharon, we need to speak to her or to him in this moment, I received a phone call over the last week from a young man in a really tough spot in his marriage. And, he just wept and said Tim, "Every day, it keeps going the wrong way."

Dr. Sharon May: And, you know it is hard when our spouse says, "This is who I am, just live with it." "There's the door you can leave, you're the only one that feels like there's an issue, I'm fine." And, it is a very, very painful place that puts you at a fork on the

road. And, the men that I have worked with that have come to the intensives saying, "My wife has forced me here, my pastor said I had to..." Usually that cold, guarded, self-protective coding is just that it's self-protecting. There are a lot of men or a lot of women, to be vulnerable to say, "Wow, I have a part in this marriage to creating part of this difficulty, that vulnerability that I might be doing something wrong, or doing something hurtful, or not fostering a good marriage is too vulnerable." And so, being hardened and defensive, and I've got to blame you, keeps them protected.

Dr. Sharon May: And, to crack that egg shell where that husband or wife says, "It's okay for me to be vulnerable." I can self-reflect and say, "Yeah, my tone of voice is very demeaning to you, but I don't know how else to get my view across, that's how I learned to talk growing up." That vulnerability actually is character, takes courage, takes maturity.

Tim Clinton: Yeah. And, what are you guilty of? Loving someone, wanting to make a marriage or relationship work. Sharon, I've often said, "Listen, you can't change your spouse, but the one thing you can do is change you." If you go with a soft heart to Julie and say, "Hey, listen, honey, I know this isn't working." "And, I don't know what it is inside of me that you don't understand loves you, but I do." "And, I'm going to go and try to figure out what are my blind spots?" "What do I need to understand?" "Where do I need to grow?" "What can be done here, because I don't want you to not know that I love us, I love our family."

Tim Clinton: And, the truth is you need that kind of support. And when you step in that direction, what you learn to do is sculpt strength. Right, Sharon? And, you begin to move in a positive direction. And Sharon, I want to use the rest of the time here to focus in on what you're talking about, how to jumpstart marriages, because people want help and they want hope and they want it now. Everybody I talk to says, "Hey, rub it all over us, get everything we can going." Sharon, can you point us in that direction?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. And, Tim I'll start right there with what you said. If you are listening, you make a decision that you on your own are wanting to grow and jumpstart a safe Haven marriage, and when you make that decision, go to your spouse and say, "We're not getting along, we are arguing, we're easily triggered, we're defensive, we blame each other, we talk over each other and I don't want that anymore." "I want to enjoy you, because I want to get back to why I married you." "You're a good man, you're a good woman." And, if you make that decision and go to your spouse, you're right, even though your spouse is cold, is defensive, is protected. You're opening a little hedge of softness to be able to say, "I want to love you well." "I am going to understand our arguments cycle."

Dr. Sharon May: "I want to change my part." Come to your spouse and say, "Would you like to join me?" And your spouse might say, "Well, yeah fine, you start it, because you're the one with the problem." "Okay." "All right."

Tim Clinton: Oh, true.

Dr. Sharon May: But, I want a better. And if your spouse says, "I don't know how this can work, but all right, let's do this together," all the better. And be able to, the two of you write out, what is the cycle that gets us stuck?

Tim Clinton: Right.

Dr. Sharon May: What is the safe Haven we're trying to foster?

Tim Clinton: Yeah.

Dr. Sharon May: And, how can we be kind to each other? How can we be vulnerable, be more influenceable, and to be able to listen to each other. And also, Tim, and these are some of the steps that we'll go through if you choose the 7-week Married Jumpstart To Something New, the Marriage Challenge, it's also how to be loving.

Dr. Sharon May: It's really hard to be loving as a husband and wife, when you feel so wounded. I don't want to hold your hand. I don't want to give you a kiss. I don't want to go and rub your shoulders. I don't want to go help you with the dishes or do a kind act, when you've been so mean to me.

Tim Clinton: Exactly.

Dr. Sharon May: But it's breaking that cycle saying, "We will eventually understand why you react the way you do, well eventually, you will understand what I need and we'll be able to complain and share our needs, but until then, we're going to create a different atmosphere in our marriage." "One of kindness and loving and being influenceable, and creating, I want to listen." And, when we choose to do those very difficult things, Tim, it is hard to suddenly use manners when you feel your spouses suddenly being rude or a little sarcastic. It's tough. You have to rewire your routine. And, we have to do that with who we are in our marriage

Tim Clinton: Change starts with a decision. Somebody has got to take a step and what we're doing right now, isn't working. So, take a step. To learn more about the 7-week Challenge that Dr. Sharon May has been talking about, you can go up to drjamesdobson.org, and learn more about it. Get involved, my goodness, get everybody involved. Why not? Even if things are going well, get involved anyway, figure this stuff out. You know why? It'll save you a couple of sleepless nights. It may save your relationship, your marriage. How can people find out more information? And, if they want to sign up, where can they sign up?

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely Tim, they could go to my website, safehavenrelationshipcenter.com, and sign up for the 7-week Marriage Challenge. And, at the Safe Haven Relationship Center, Tim, we have both male and female counselors and consultants that both husbands and wives can safely reach out and talk with.

Tim Clinton: Sharon, I want to end with kind of where we began, nothing more beautiful in all the world than to be in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love

you, and they actually love you. Nothing more difficult, or very few things is difficult, or challenging or painful, than being in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you, and they don't love you. No wonder Solomon wrote these words, Ecclesiastes 9:9, "Enjoy life with the wife, one you love all the days of your life that he has given you under the sun." Boy, if we can get love, being loved and loving right, Sharon, it changes everything.

Dr. Sharon May: Oh, it really does. And when we can remember, we married our spouse to love our spouse and our spouse longs to be loved by us. And, we're just struggling human beings trying to be heard, seen and understood, both longing for a safe haven marriage. And, when we can both soften our hearts and come onto that lily pad, come to that place saying, "I want to love you well, and hopefully you will love me well, and we can then grow old together, loving well," that changes everything.

Tim Clinton: On behalf of Dr. James Dobson, his wife, Shirley, their family, the entire team at Family Talk. We want to thank you for being a part of today's broadcast and for listening. For more information about Dr. Sharon May and the 7-week Challenge, again, go to drjamesdobson.org. That's dr.jamesdobson.org. We'll see you again next time on Family Talk.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to Dr. Sharon May here on Family Talk. Sharon is the president of Safe Haven Counseling Center, discussing with our own Dr. Tim Clinton, about the keys to healing difficult and disconnected marriages. Now, to learn more about Dr. Sharon May and her book called Safe Haven Marriage, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. And, if you'd like to hear any portion of the broadcast today that you might have missed, or if you want to hear yesterday's broadcast in its entirety, you'll find that audio there as well. That's D-R, jamesdobson.org/broadcast. Thanks for much for joining us and be sure to tune in again, next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks for listening.

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