



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Life with a Messy Mate – Part 2

Guest(s): Sandra Felton

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Roger Marsh: Welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. Differences within a marriage can be a very good thing. In fact, the differences between spouses are often some of the main ingredients for a rewarding, fulfilling, exciting, fun, and God honoring marriage. However, when two people differ drastically on important values or lifestyle habits, it can cause a world of conflict, bitterness, and frustration in the context of marriage. And when one spouse is dramatically less tidy than the other spouse, well, the result is often a very difficult relationship. And I chuckled because I know there are a few groans coming from our audience right now. Well, to address this topic, we are bringing you part two of Dr. Dobson's classic conversation with Sandra Felton.

Sandra Felton is the founder and president of Messies Anonymous, a group dedicated to bringing harmony in the home through understanding and aiding the messie mindset. She's the author of 20 books, including *Winning the Clutter War*, *Organizing Magic*, *The Messies Manual*, and *Messie No More*. Sandra Felton holds a bachelor of arts degree from Columbia International University and a master's of education from the University of Miami. She and her husband have three grown children, several grandchildren, and they make their home in Florida.

No matter what stage of life you're in, whether you're married, single, parenting or an empty nester. I think you'll find today's conversation between Dr. Dobson and Sandra Felton to be encouraging and helpful. And if you missed the first part of their discussion, remember you can listen to it online when you go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And now let's join Dr. James Dobson and Sandra Felton right now, for today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra Felton is back with us now for the second day. And she has written a book called, *When You Live With a Messie*, and talking about the spouse of a person who does have that disorganized temperament, or for whatever reason is a messie. And we're glad to have her back with us again. Sandra Felton is a high school teacher. She has taught Math and English, and now Sandra, you teach special education, don't you?

Sandra Felton: Yes, I do. It's a wonderful area to be in, and I have great kids.

Dr. James Dobson: When you teach math students, if you're teaching advanced math, you have the brightest students, and now you're teaching those in some context with less ability. You've gone from one part of the continuum to another in this regard. Why?

Sandra Felton: Well, I guess I just always have liked special ed, to tell you the honest truth. I think when the Lord said, "and as much as you've done it unto the least of these my brethren, you've done it unto me." And I find it an opportunity to serve in that way. And I just, I find it a privilege to be able to carry out the Lord's instructions.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, we share that. I don't know if you're aware of it. I worked for a time in a hospital for the mentally retarded and they have different names for that now, developmentally disabled and so on. But out in California, one of the largest hospitals of that type. And then I was in the division of medical genetics at children's hospital in USC School of Medicine, where we dealt with people who were handicapped mentally. So I have also been drawn to those. My first book was on that subject, *The Mentally Retarded Child and His Family*, a multidisciplinary handbook. Nobody remembers that one.

Sandra Felton: One of your big sellers, I bet.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, that was a graduate textbook for medical schools. And that goes back a long, long ways. That was before *Dare to Discipline*. But you have written a book, as I just said called, *When You Live With a Messie*, we kind of gave the background to this last time. You were giving practical advice, when we ran out of time, for what a husband or wife can do to help the messie get more organized. And you said that the answer lies in kind of a similar arena to what I wrote about it in *Love Must Be Tough*, which is not to nag and plead and beg, but you begin to take steps to help the other person. Explain it.

Sandra Felton: That's right. Talking doesn't do very much. And remember that we are not really trying to change the messie. I figure that's a matter of their own personal choice. In the first place, you can't change the messie. In the second place out of, I suppose, a certain honoring of their individuality every person has to choose their own path. So, I just figure you should not bother about trying to change the messie since that's not going to be too successful anyway. So what you need to do is to change the house and to change your approach to the messie in such a way that if they choose to change, this will be their best opportunity. Now they may not choose to change, but you want to at least set it up so that if they do wish to make that choice, that's more possible than if you just let it go along with nagging and complaining.

Dr. James Dobson: Now you said yesterday that they should change the house. And you just said that again.

Sandra Felton: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Give an example of that.

Sandra Felton: All right. Here's the example. Let's suppose your husband, when he goes in and I'm not saying this is just a husband. Okay. Could be wives, but let's say it's the husband. Yeah. When he goes into take a shower, always leaves his clothes on the floor. Okay. So you have said everything you want to say, and it's not done any good. So, the next time he does it, I recommend that you not say anything just as you recommend that you stop talking so much in *Love Must Be Tough* and start acting. Don't say anything, simply take the clothes and put them under the bed or in the back of the closet or in the garage or wherever, it doesn't matter. All right. Now the house is cared for you. Haven't changed the messie, but the house is okay. Now the impact of his own disorganization is falling on him. He may choose next time to pick up his clothes if he wishes, or he may not. It's up to him.

Dr. James Dobson: And that probably will precipitate a form of crisis.

Sandra Felton: Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: Which is what I talked about in *Love Must Be Tough*.

Sandra Felton: That's right. It will precipitate a crisis.

Dr. James Dobson: Change occurs usually only in a crisis.

Sandra Felton: That's right. It is not easy to change. I don't know why it's so hard. Even when you want to change, it's painful. But certainly when someone else is changing you by their actions. And I, again, I want to emphasize, it's only changing the house that we're interested in, but if that precipitates a change in the person, that's painful. And that does precipitate a crisis.

Dr. James Dobson: Change is tough when you decide to do it, we resist every effort of somebody outside of us to change us.

Sandra Felton: That's right. And that's why I really do not recommend that we try and change them. We simply are trying to bring order and dignity and beauty to our lives. And that's reasonable. We're not asking these people to do something unreasonable, like never put a spoon in the sink. We're just asking that the house be kept in a generally organized fashion. And when they go around and fix their motorcycle in the living room, I mean, that's way out of line. We're talking about serious disorganization that makes nobody want to come home.

Dr. James Dobson: You said last time that you're a messie.

Sandra Felton: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And you've written all these books on the messie. And yet you're a messie who decided yourself to change it.

Sandra Felton: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And you worked hard at it.

Sandra Felton: It became so painful to continue living the way I was, that I was willing to endure the pain of changing. And it was painful. If it had not been so painful, the way I had been living before I would never have continued, but I could not bear to go back to that way of life. So through these last 14 years, I've been, I'm still changing, but my life is markedly different. I do not live as a messie anymore.

Dr. James Dobson: Someone said, it's not really the big conflicts that destroy a marriage often, it's the very little ones. And when a husband and wife get married, these kinds of irritants immediately begin to cause disagreements between them. Something as dumb as the way you squeeze a toothpaste tube from the bottom up, grab it in the middle and squeeze and it comes out both ends. Or rather personal things such as whether the toilet seat is left up or not. Newlyweds begin fussing and fighting over those things. There really ought to be a way to anticipate some of those conflicts early in marriage, or even before marriage and try to head them off. Because it's a shame to have them destroy each other over those things.

Sandra Felton: Well, you must realize that these people choose people to balance themselves off. And that's okay. As long as you have a lot of things in common, it's okay to have things that are different, where one person is good at it. And the other person is not. But if they're too extreme, then you begin having problems.

Dr. James Dobson: You mentioned yesterday that as difficult as it is for a cleanie to marry a messie, at the opposite ends of the continuum. It is even more unworkable or conflict producing for two messies to marry. That's really kind of a surprise to me, explain why you see it that way.

Sandra Felton: Well, if you have one organized person in the house, at least it keeps things from getting totally out of control. I can tell that you've never lived in a house that's totally out of control, or you wouldn't be asking that question.

Dr. James Dobson: You're right. That's true. I'm blessed.

Sandra Felton: When you live in a house and you can't find your keys, when you have to wash the dishes in order to cook dinner, the house becomes such an enemy, such a burden. That it's a blessing to have somebody who puts the skids on along the road, so that things don't get quite so bad off.

Dr. James Dobson: You get two messies living together like that, the light bill and the telephone bill and the doctor bill. All of those things. We've mentioned receipts for income

taxes, the servicing the car on time, all that stuff just begins to accumulate. Doesn't it?

Sandra Felton: That's right. And pretty soon you're living in a state of crisis. If it's not one crisis, it's another. You come home and the water's been turned off, or your checks have bounced or whatever. And these are fine upstanding people we are talking about, who simply are not able to organize their lives in a way that works.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, you said in my office earlier that this problem is growing, that it's growing by the sheer pace of life increasing and by the pressures that are on people. You've got two wage earners frequently, instead of one. And you've got everybody harried, then children having to go to soccer and going to little league and going to music lessons. And that puts an additional stress on people who already have a weakness at this point. And it just kind of collapses in many cases.

Sandra Felton: Yes. I think that in some ways, the fact that so many women have gone into the workforce puts a lot of pressure for everybody to do more and offers more opportunity for disorganization, for people that are disorganized. And for even some people that it wouldn't show up, if they had more time, it begins to show up. However, having said that, let me say that as a messie, if I had stayed home all day, my house would've just been messier because I was there. So I went to work.

Dr. James Dobson: To get away from it.

Sandra Felton: To get away from it and to play a game that I could win. When I stayed home, there was no excuse for the house being in that way. And I was terribly discouraged. So I said, I'm losing this game every day. I'm going to go find a game where I can win. And I went out and went to work. It is not practical or reasonable or workable to live using messie principles. And even as a messie, I have to do my very best to bring into my life those principles that do get the job done. It's hard for me. I wish it were not so, but it is. But a messie cannot simply say, Hey, this is who I am. Let me be. I suppose they could, if they were an artist and lived in a garrett somewhere by themselves. But for most people that would be letting themselves down and letting the people that they live with down as well. So, it's just forced upon us, whether we like it or not.

Roger Marsh: You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, jumping in to let you know we have reached the mid-point of today's program. We're titling this one, "Life with a Messy Mate, Part 2." In the next section of today's program will include Dr. Dobson and his guest, Sandra Felton, will take a few questions from the studio audience who joined them during this special recording.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's turn to our audience with the time that's left. We promised yesterday that we would allow people to come and ask questions of Sandra. And give us your name and where you're from, and your question about messies and cleanies.

Sheila: Hi, I'm Sheila Ellen Buzz from Billings, Montana. How do you handle leaving a house clean and then coming home from work and it's in total chaos and you're out of energy and you still need to cook supper?

Sandra Felton: Well, I'm surprised to hear what happened to your house while you were at work. I take it there with somebody there.

Sheila: Four children.

Sandra Felton: Four children. Well, why don't you leave the house in chaos and ask the children to clean it up while you're at work. Okay. That might turn the tables.

Dr. James Dobson: That's mean Sandra. That's mean advice.

Sandra Felton: Well, I'm sort of serious. And here's why I'm serious. Kid power is important power for a parent. And if you delegate, as Dr. Dobson mentioned earlier about his staff telling him to do. If you write it down, you might have to type it because handwriting, if it's just mother's handwriting, it doesn't look as official. Type it on some sort of schedule and have them sign off when they have actually done the activities. And if they have to clean it up, they're going to be a whole lot less quick to mess it up. So I would recommend that you actually get a schedule and expect them to keep the schedule, build in some system of rewards and punishments and see if that helps.

Dr. James Dobson: And you're also teaching them some of those principles that your mother taught you.

Sandra Felton: That's right. It's important for a mother to teach your children how to do these things.

Dr. James Dobson: Next question.

OJ: Hello. My name's OJ Awl, and I'm from Billings, Montana. My question is what would you say to an organized single who's not yet married, should messie characteristics be taken into consideration when choosing your perspective spouse?

Sandra Felton: I would think about it very, very carefully and say to myself, if I can see it while she's putting on her best face, she's putting her best foot forward. How bad might it be when we once get married? And then everybody settles into their regular routine. It is a serious consideration. Because the order of the home is an important thing. So, if you're considering marrying a messie, or if you're married to a messie, they're very lovable people, they need our concern and

they need our help. And if they're open to help, then there can be a lot of changes made on his or her part.

Dr. James Dobson: At least you should know what you're getting, right?

Sandra Felton: Yes. I think so.

Dr. James Dobson: You shouldn't get a surprise after marriage.

Sandra Felton: I think so. I think that for some people, it's a very important consideration.

Kristen: I'm Kristen Riddell from Greenville, New Hampshire, the messie spouse. And in an effort to redeem myself, I wanted to share some encouragement after reading your book. A messie friend, and I bonded together and we take turns Mount Vernonizing with each other. We tackle one of those rooms that you can't open the door. And then after I go home from doing her house, we're both energized and we have the energy to go through and do the regular stuff and be satisfied at the end of the day, when you can walk up the stairs without tripping over toys. And I also wanted to ask if maybe you'd be willing to autograph some books so I can bring one back for Diane?

Sandra Felton: I would love to, and I will order grab a lot of your books, because what you have just said is what Messies Anonymous is really all about.

Miles: Hello. My name is Miles Dalby from Great Falls, Montana. And I come from a military background. I live in the military now and I've talked to a lot of people who have grown up in the military, and their parents oftentimes on Saturday mornings would come and inspect their bedrooms, which is what they did-

Dr. James Dobson: See if a quarter bounces off the bed. Right?

Miles: Exactly. In fact, that's what they did when I went to college myself. I'm interested in what role does self-discipline and imposed discipline have on becoming a messie or even recovering from being a messie?

Sandra Felton: That's a very interesting question. And you're asking a question that deals with what the topic of the book is about, and that is changing someone from the way they are. If they're a messie, to being an orderly person. Now, my guess is that many people who go into the military go in as disorganized people and come out as organized people. So that obviously with very strong behavior modification principles, if you want to look at it that way, those changes can be made. But I'm not sure that in a marriage is the time to start doing that kind of behavior modification. So that doesn't exactly apply to the usual relationships between husband and wife.

But you're quite right. Changes can be made. And I made changes in myself by simply working at it, because it was so painful to live the other way. And

Messies Anonymous has self-help groups where people meet and they struggle to make those kind of changes. So changes are possible, whether they're imposed by the military or whether they're imposed by ourselves, but it requires some strong doing. And certainly the military has that strength.

Dr. James Dobson: It is really good to have the chance to talk to you. We still have people who would like to ask you questions. You know what I'd like to do? I'd like to just record some of these questions and answers. Will you hold still for some more questions, Sandra?

Sandra Felton: Sure. But before we finish, I would like to say one more thing to the person that lives with a messie Would this be a good time to do that?

Dr. James Dobson: Sure would.

Sandra Felton: The person who is a messy may change, and they may not change. We are simply trying to get the setup so that if they wish to change, they have the best opportunity. We're trying to bring that wish to them, but it may work and it may not. If it does not work, I want to encourage the person who lives with a messie to not give up and say, well, my life is just going to have to be a disaster. They need to think of another plan, how to take care of themselves. Even under the circumstances. It may be that they will decide to invite people into the house. Even like it is, that may precipitate a crisis, or it may just make...

Dr. James Dobson: I think that's safe to say.

Sandra Felton: Or may be that the person will, their messie spouse will welcome them in. And they'll have a good social life that way. Or it may be the person will decide, look, I'm not going to cut off my social life. I'm going to have to find ways to have a social life outside of my home. So we're going to have to join organizations or whatever. Or it may be the person will say, look, I can't stand living in this house like it is. So I will take up woodworking out in the garage.

Sandra Felton: What I'm saying is, don't just let it go. Take care of yourself. If the person who is a messy, if you can precipitate change on their part, fine. If you can simply make certain changes in the house, that will be, if you can make 20% changes, that will bring 80% change using the 20/80 principle, which is so well known. That may be enough for you. But don't give up. You've got to take care of yourself because living in somebody else's chaos and letting them dictate the kind of life you live, is not best for you or for them or for the family.

Dr. James Dobson: In short, you need to develop a plan. What are we going to do with the circumstances we now have? It doesn't help to get angry. It doesn't help to nag. Doesn't help to gnaw your tongue about it. Let's sit down as two mature grown individuals and talk this thing through and see if we can find some compromise. There are compromises necessary in the very best of marriages, because you've got two imperfect people and you take that material of imperfection and you

try to mold it into a workable hole. And it requires both parties to say, I'd rather, you wouldn't be that way, but I will accept you the way you are. So there is a point at which you have to decide whether or not you can live with it. And if you can't, you need to seek some outside counseling and work out a plan.

Sandra Felton: Exactly, exactly. That's exactly right.

Dr. James Dobson: I couldn't have said it better, myself, Sandra. Thank you Sandra, for being with us these two days and we're going to make you work some more. So just sit tight, will you?

Sandra Felton: I sure will.

Dr. James Dobson: Appreciate all that you do on behalf of messies and cleanies.

Sandra Felton: Well, thank you. And I appreciate your efforts on the part of messies and cleanies as well.

Roger Marsh: This is Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and you've been listening to part two of a classic conversation between Dr. Dobson and author Sandra Felton. They've been talking about living life with a messy mate, and the frustration, embarrassment, and conflict that an out of control household can often cause. And it's not just the proverbial "clean spouse" or house fellow that suffers. Often, being a messy yourself can be unbearably painful. You live in clutter and you feel like an utter failure most of the time because of it, but there is hope. And Sandra Felton has been sharing that hope over the past two days here on Family Talk.

Now, because this topic is so important and really struck a nerve with so many people, Sandra Felton will join Dr. Dobson again tomorrow for one final broadcast. The two will field more audience questions and offer additional encouragement, insight, and practical tips for living with a messy person. So make sure you tune in, you will not want to miss this broadcast.

Now, if you did miss any of today's or yesterday's programs, visit us online at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Well, that brings us to the end of our time for today's edition of Family Talk, thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for your prayers and your support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Be sure to join us again next time, right here for another addition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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

Dr. James Dobson: What's the primary reason for failure in high school? The answer may surprise you.

Roger Marsh: For Family Talk, here's Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: According to many teachers, the answer is not laziness or poor studies skills. No, the main reason for failure in high school is disorganization. Show me a student's notebook and I'll tell you whether that individual is a B student or a D student. An achieving student's notebook is organized with dividers and folders for handouts and assignments. A failing student's notebook is most often a mess of jumbled papers, if he even uses a notebook at all. Now, some children are just better organized than others, but it's a skill that can be learned. Educational expert Cheri Fuller says it's a skill that should be taught early, even before students reach junior high school. Starting in the middle school years, students may have as many as five teachers with different textbooks, workbooks, handouts and assignments from each classroom subject. It takes a good degree of organization to keep them all straight and to put assignments in priority. They need training and other organizational skills such as planning to complete long-term assignments a little at a time. This kind of exposure and training can help a flighty adolescent become a self-disciplined and self-propelled individual in time. Organization, it's one very important key to success in school.

Roger Marsh: To find out how you can partner with Family Talk, go to drjamesdobson.org.