



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: What Does Emotional and Mental Abuse Look Like?

Guest(s): Leslie Vernick

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Welcome friends to another edition of Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Well, we have reached the middle of the week and Easter is almost here. And as we draw closer to Resurrection Sunday, we might reflect on the suffering that Jesus went through before He was crucified. He suffered because He loved us. God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. Suffering is a part of the ministry of Jesus Christ, but in a marriage, however, when suffering arises, and if you're dealing with abuse at the hands of a spouse, it can be devastating. Enduring that marriage because of love is oftentimes not healthy at all. On today's edition of Family Talk, our guest is Leslie Vernick. Leslie will be discussing healthy boundaries in a marriage and the difficult subject of where to draw the line against abuse.

Leslie Vernick is an author, a speaker, a licensed clinical social worker, and a relationship coach. She has written several books including *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, and *Lord, I Just Want To Be Happy*. Leslie earned her master's degree in clinical social work from the University of Illinois, and she conducted her postgraduate training in biblical counseling and cognitive therapy as well. Leslie is married to her husband Howard, and together they have two grown children and three grandchildren. Let's join our own Dr. Tim Clinton right now with his special guest, Leslie Vernick on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Leslie, what a delight to have you. Thank you for joining us.

Leslie Vernick: Thanks for having me, Tim. I always love being here.

Dr. Tim Clinton: The last time we had you on the broadcast, it was one of the top-rated programs of the year, and I think it's because you're not afraid to speak out on that tough piece called relationships and the journey that a lot of us are on. Anyway, Leslie, let's jump straight in. I don't think I have witnessed, certainly not in my lifetime, what we're seeing right now in relationships, tension, frustration,

anger. I think a lot of is associated with the pace and the pressure and pain of modern day life. We've come through Covid and the insanity of everything around us. But Leslie, what are you seeing? I mean, you're out there on the front lines helping couples. What's in your mind, what's in your heart, as you kind of review that landscape?

Leslie Vernick: I've worked with couples for over 40 years, and at this point in time, I specialize in the worst of the worst, the destructive and abusive relationships. But if I can just backtrack, just in normal relationships, I think people are craving to be seen, to be heard and to be valued. And they're craving that from work relationships. They're craving that from neighbors. They're craving that from church relationships. They're craving that from siblings or spouses. I mean, we're so busy. We're so busy and we're distracted and we're chasing after success or accomplishment or getting things done that we don't take the time to see people and hear people and value people. We're just busy doing things ultimately that probably doesn't matter all that much, and we're leaving people by the side of the road.

And I think people are feeling that, depression is going up, anxiety is going up, addiction is going up, and I think it's because we're disconnected. We're not connecting and we're not present with one another as we should, and that's just for pretty much everybody. And then we've got some really toxic, toxic relationships, which is where I go into the weeds because I think the Christian Church has been inadequate in teaching about relationships altogether, but especially how to manage those kind of relationships.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I know the persistent heart cry, I think, behind every closed door is simply this, "Tim, all I have ever wanted is for someone to love me. I just want someone to love me." I don't think there's anything more beautiful in all the world than to be in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you and they love you, and nothing more painful probably than being in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you and they don't love you. Even worse, they hurt you. And Leslie, that's a horrible place to be.

Leslie Vernick: It is a horrible place to be, and I think there's two angles to that. They don't love you, there's a reality of they don't love you and they cannot love you by harming you intentionally or directly, physical abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse. And they can also harm you indirectly by just plain not caring. And this whole area of indifference in marriage, when you've made a promise and a covenant to love, cherish, honor, and protect, and someone's medical care doesn't matter to you because you want to go buy a new car and so they shouldn't buy their vitamins or they shouldn't go to the doctor.

Or they're hurting in the middle of the night and they say, "I need a ride to the emergency room," and they say, "Call an Uber, I'm tired." This indifference, I married you but you're here to serve me as a role, as a paycheck or as a sex object or as a maid or as a mother for my kids, or whatever the role is. We focus so much on the roles in marriage that we've missed the relationship that's

necessary and the base of trust and safety that's so necessary to create a healthy family life.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And when life's not the way it's supposed to be, when you're not loved or you certainly don't feel loved, Leslie, you tend to want to recover. And so you start pushing, maybe you start fighting. How many times have you heard this, "All we do is fight. Tim, all we do is fight. I don't want to be around him," or "I don't want to be around her anymore because that's all we do. We just get after each other and we tend to escalate quickly. In other words, we know how to push each other's buttons and it's just horrible." I remember a guy saying to me, "Tim, when I go home from work and I turn the corner and I see our house, I get a sick feeling coming over me. And it's like I don't want to go there anymore." And that's that flight piece, you fight or the flight, or some people, Leslie, they freeze. They just lock up and they feel numb and stuck.

Leslie Vernick: One of the things I talk to with women who are in that place, I don't work with men so much, but I would say the same thing to a man, is that I think we didn't mean to, but I think the church has made an idol out of marriage, and it's almost as if I must have this or I will die, especially for women. And they become men-centered women. They become marriage-centered women instead of God-centered women. And of course anybody wants their spouse to love them. That was the promise, that was the commitment. But ultimately, if you are secure in God's love and you are sure, if that's your first love, when someone rejects you it's painful but it's not destroying you. When Jesus got rejected, it wasn't pretty. He cried, "Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would've gathered you together, but you would not." So it's not that rejection is, oh, it doesn't matter because I have God's love, but we've made such a focus on I need, N-E-E-D, him to love me in order for me to be okay.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I think sometimes we become embarrassed to think, you know what, we were supposed to be happy, crazy in love, and here this is awful. And I think the tendency sometimes, like in parenting, when you feel distance with your kids you try to love more, love harder, and maybe you over indulge or you do all kinds of things like that. Leslie, there's a tendency to do the same thing in our marriages, in our relationships, that we try to take it to another place. And in some cases what it's doing is it's feeding the wrong thing.

Leslie Vernick: It's feeding the idol, and it's feeding this fury of I've got to get all of my needs met in this source. And that's not true and it's not possible. So even in a healthy marriage, I've been married 47 years, and even in a healthy marriage where there's not any abuse, there's a whole lot of disappointment on both sides because nobody can be your everything. And we have taken our love reports from Hollywood and Harlequin and not the Word of God. And to really understand that love is a mutual and reciprocal partnership in a relationship, and there is times of stress and struggle and times that you don't feel all romantic or you don't feel all love, if you understand that that's normal, and as long as you have a base of trust and safety that isn't broken.

So the Bible says she trusts him to do her good, not harm, all the days of her life. That base is what you need for all healthy relationships to flourish. And if that starts to crumble, because then when you're so disappointed you get ugly and vicious and biting and devouring each other or you cheat or you abuse or you do other things and you break that base of trust and safety, well then the marriage is like having termites in your house. If you don't deal with that, the house is going to collapse, the marriage isn't going to make it.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Leslie, I want to talk about those difficult relationships where things get out of sorts or things get bad, and what to do in those moments. You and I have a zero tolerance commitment, meaning we don't believe in a person being a recipient of anyone else's violence, hurt, pain, that we're talking about. What do I do? I remember a lady coming in my office and she was talking to me about what had happened that week with her husband, and let's say I'll never forget it. She's seated across from me and she grabs her throat with both hands and begins to squeeze and start screaming and yelling, "This is what he did." And she would not let herself go and she's turning red in the face and she's squeezing with everything she's got. I want to address that for a moment because we need to, it's horrific. Violence destroys the soul. That kind of heartache is horrific. Leslie, what do we do? What does she do? What happens when we're in a place where it is destructive?

Leslie Vernick:

So this is a really important question because when you say what do we do, what does she do as an individual and what do we do as the collective body of Christ in these situations? There's a book called *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, and it's used for school violence, school bullying. But the most important person in that triad is the bystander, because when the bully bullies the less powerful one and the bystanders says nothing, it empowers the bully. It's not neutral. Neutral is not neutral. And in marriage instances, in this case, I have seen so many pastors make the huge mistake of, "Hey, I don't want to be in the middle. Don't put me in the middle. I don't want to get involved in your mess. You figure it out. There's two sides to every story." When there is intentional harm done to someone else through abuse, addictions, deceit, this is intentional harm that is done in the marriage.

This is very destructive, whether it's verbal abuse, it says reckless words pierce like a sword, or it's choking and physical violence, this is toxic. It's dangerous. It's not good for the victim for sure, but it's not good for the abuser to allow him to go unchallenged. And this is where the church needs to come in and do a much better role at not prioritizing the sanctity of marriage, which we do prioritize, but not prioritizing it above the safety and the sanity of the individuals in that marriage. Because it does God no glory to say to a woman, well, just stay married and lie and pretend that everything is fine so you're safe. That's not a healthy advice and it doesn't glorify God by staying legally married when you're in a concentration camp kind of marriage. And so it's very important for a woman, if she had that support from her church and pastoral staff, as well as the husband had that kind of accountability that we don't put up with this. We don't treat our women this way.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Period.

Leslie Vernick: Period, ever.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That is not of God.

Leslie Vernick: Right, that is not of God, period. We don't do that. That's not what headship means. We don't do this. If the bystanders would start speaking up and out against this in the church, then the woman who feels ashamed, like you said at the beginning, I'm so ashamed of this happening, I feel like such a failure. What did I do to make him treat me this way? She wouldn't have that erroneous mindset because it would be wrong all the way across the board. And she would feel perfectly safe to go to her church and tell what happened and ask the church to intervene on her behalf, to hold her husband accountable. And if she needs to call the police as well as God has put the government in charge of evil doers. And so Romans 13 tells us that we should go to the government and get protection and police.

I had a woman who she went to her church, her husband was violent, he was a very prominent CEO and she was kind of an assertive, strong woman and I don't think the church likes that kind of woman. They sort of see her as, well, if you were just more submissive he wouldn't treat you this way. And finally she went to the church, she told him what was happening. She told her husband she wasn't going to put up with it anymore. Finally, in an episode of violence, she just picked up the phone and called the police and he ended up in jail. He repented. Her church disciplined her for calling the police. And it's a crazy mindset that says this should be contained in the church. We've seen the scandal in the Southern Baptist Church for trying to contain everything in the church and not call the police. She needed to call the police, and it actually woke him up and began his process of change.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I know we did a special edition of our publication around this very theme and talked about separation agreements and the intentionality of that and more. Leslie, when you get to a place where you need to have boundaries clearly defined and put in play, sometimes the mindset here is if the relationship's going to have any shot at coming together, that's the path you've got to go on. Because if you don't and this doesn't get fixed, it's going to blow up anyway. It's like dealing with explosives in your hands, right?

Leslie Vernick: Churches hate the idea of separation because they feel like if they're separated they're not going to stay married, and because they value the sanctity of marriage.

Dr. Tim Clinton: There's this mindset too that 60 to 80% of people who actually go into a separation wind up getting divorced. You know that? But what we're talking about is the tenderness under the leadership of the Holy Spirit following biblical principles and saying these are the boundaries. My daughter, you're not going

to come back and just waltz in here and think you're going to take her behind a closed door. You know that? No, no, no. We want fidelity here. This is not going to happen. Even more than that, you're going to demonstrate certain levels of health in your life.

Leslie Vernick: So one of the things that I found real interesting as a therapist, and I'm sure you did too, is when you saw a couple who was doing what you were describing at the beginning of our show, fighting and blowing up all the time, and you'd say let's call a timeout. Or, when you go home and this starts to happen let's do a timeout, and they aren't capable of doing it. They're not capable of doing it, or one of them is not capable of doing it. Let's say the wife says, "You're scaring me. Time out, time out. The counselor said time out," and he's chasing her in the room and he's still yelling at her, he's still hovering over her. So when someone's incapable of a timeout and the other person feels frightened or feels coerced or smothered, sometimes separation is the only thing you can do to create an atmosphere where there's the chance of some healing because it's sort of like your house.

If you clean your house and someone comes in and burns it down and then you build it back up and someone comes in and burns it down, it's not making any progress. And so separation is done for the purpose of safety and for the purposes of reconciliation, as Paul says, so that there can be safety in the marriage when you go back to talk about hard things to see if you can rebuild the marriage. But if you're not even safe to bring up the topic of how come you spent money without telling me? Or, how come I see these numbers on the computer and I don't know where they're from? And you can't talk about that without somebody blowing up, there is no healing of the marriage. There is no safety to heal the marriage,

Dr. Tim Clinton: Leslie, I know that in abuse situations there's one person who possesses more power than the other. I wanted to bring up men who are often dominated or controlled by women. That there are men who, for whatever reason, have lost their voice, they don't feel safe in their relationship, and they wind up in this cesspool of I hate the relationship I'm in. Have you dealt much with that?

Leslie Vernick: I did. I had a man who was very depressed. So depression is a result of some of this. And so oftentimes clinicians will see someone individually that's clinically depressed, and really when they dig deep the roots are a lot of this. So he was very depressed, and this is very key because so often we blame the other person for where we're at, and so I was talking to him and we began to realize that he was in an abusive marriage. His wife was very verbally controlling and abusive, and he was very passive and allowed it. And so what he did, as we talked about the depression, as a result of all this, is he wasn't very proud of himself as a man. I said, "Well, what do you need to do differently?" And he said, "I need to start taking responsibility for me."

And so he went and had a conversation with his wife, and he said this, "I need to apologize for something." And she's like, "What?" And he said, "I have been

such a passive man. When I've been working with Leslie on my depression, she's helped me to see how passive I've been and I've just allowed you to take over my life. You even buy my underwear. I feel horrible about that. I shouldn't be as childlike as that, and I think that's the root of my depression is I'm not really functioning as a man. So from now on, Leslie's helping me to speak up for myself and function more like a man. So thank you for all the things you've done for me but from now on I'm going to make my own decisions about what to order in a restaurant, what to wear to work. I'm even going to buy my own clothes."

Now, he began to take control back over his life but not in a way you are bad and I'm the victim of you, but I have allowed myself to be controlled and I'm not doing that anymore. Now, they're going to have some tugs of war here because she's used to controlling and dominating, and he's used to letting her and being passive. But if he's going to heal and be the man he's supposed to be, he's got to start with his work. So when you change the dance of a destructive relationship, it's often the victim who starts to change dance first because you can say, "Ouch, stop, don't step on my toes," and the oppressor, whether it's female or male, might say, "You know what? You're just too sensitive. Grow up, stop it, you're just whining." And they keep stepping on your toes. And so the only way the dance changes is when you change the dance.

And so when this man changed the dance between he and his wife, and he didn't blame her for the dance, he just said, "I'm not dancing this way anymore. It's caused me to be depressed," she had some choices to make. And so when she started bullying him again he said, "Oops, remember we had that conversation? I'm not doing this anymore. I don't want to stay depressed." And that began to wake her up into, "Oh, okay, I guess I have two choices. Either I have to get more ugly and control you or I have to respect your no."

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Leslie, we've heard subjects like gaslighting where people just blame you for their behavior and blow you up and light you up, or ghosting where people just bail on you and they just disappear. We may be married but I'm not engaging you one bit anymore. At the end of the day, let me say this, you've seen all this, you live in this world. It's easy to get jaded by it all. But Leslie, let's end on a word of hope. I mean, people have been listening to us in our conversation today, pretty tough kind of straight-up stuff about tough relationships, and some of them get real toxic, and we've got a lot of work to do. We need to come back and address this at a whole nother level. But Leslie, are you encouraged? Are you seeing good things happen?

Leslie Vernick:

I'm seeing some really good things happen with two different things. I'm seeing men begin to realize I have been a toxic man and I didn't even know it. There's a lot of good men who do bad things because they're not taught to be self-aware. They're not to look at their values and their virtues and they're just reacting out of their emotions. There are some also very bad people. The Bible calls them wolves in sheep's clothing. They look like sheep but they bite like wolves. And so we have to learn to discern the difference. The Bible tells us that we who are

spiritually mature should learn to discern the difference between good and evil, because evil masquerades as good. However, the good things that I'm seeing is that so many pastors, Tim, have come up to me today and yesterday and said, "Thank you. I'm learning so much. Thank you that I'm not doing the same mistakes I've always done."

And so that's very encouraging to me that the churches are finally, at least a lot of them, are coming on board and saying, "Wait a minute, we've got to be more serious about abuse. I don't want to read about one of my parishioners in the newspaper being killed and I've got to take this more seriously." And the second thing I'm seeing is that people are becoming more interested in what does it take to have a healthy relationship. It's not just about fulfilling roles. It's about really learning how to listen and connect and love and give and serve. And headship doesn't mean you get your way and submission doesn't mean you have no choice.

And really learning those things has helped create a younger generation who's a whole lot wiser and a whole lot smarter than we were in our generation. So if they're in a toxic relationship they're less likely to put up with it as long so they're not staying 30 years and losing their health over it, but they're also waking up earlier and beginning to have that opportunity to change before such bad habits are put in place. So I am encouraged.

Dr. Tim Clinton: 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.

Leslie Vernick: And that you trust them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And that you trust them, you feel safe with them.

Leslie Vernick: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That's why we come to you every day on this station here at Family Talk. We want that to be the gift in your life, that you know what it means to love and be loved by God, and with those closest to you. Hey, as we close, Leslie, I want everyone to know where they can find out more information about you, your resources, and the ministry that God's called you to. What's the best website they could go to?

Leslie Vernick: They can just go to my website, leslievernick.com. And this is really important because there's some tests right away to test whether you're in a difficult relationship, a destructive relationship, or just a disappointing one, and that can help clarify things right away.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Leslie, a meaningful, beautiful conversation. I know it's tough. These are tough conversations, but necessary, and as a result I think we all grow. On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, the entire team, we want to thank you for joining us

here on Family Talk and jumping in with both feet, and we can't wait to have you back. Thank you for joining us.

Leslie Vernick: Thanks.

Roger Marsh: Well, that is encouraging information from Leslie Vernick here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and if you're dealing with a challenging marriage, I hope you found today's program to be of tremendous benefit. Now, if you'd like to hear this broadcast material again, check out the James Dobson Family Institute app on your smartphone or visit us online at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Now, another difficult issue that is affecting many marriages and families today is pornography. Here at the JDFI, we have created an excellent resource to equip you to combat this sin and protect your family. It's called "A Parent's Guide to Pornography." To receive your downloadable anti-porn parenting guide, simply go to drjamesdobson.org/antipornparentguide. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org/antipornparentguide. You can receive this valuable resource immediately and confidentially.

You can even just call in to get it if you'd like at 877-732-6825. Our customer care team will be happy to email it to you or to send it through the U.S. Mail at no cost to you. Please prayerfully consider how you might use this clear cut PDF with practical biblical perspective to talk with your kids and grandkids and protect your family. We pray that it will be a blessing to you and your loved ones. Well, with that, that concludes today's edition of the broadcast. I'm Roger Marsh inviting you to join us again tomorrow for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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