



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Raising Worry-Free Girls – Part 1

Guest(s): Sissy Goff

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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.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Welcome in to Family talk the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host of Family Talk. I also serve as President of the American Association of Christian Counselors. As a licensed professional counselor and a licensed marriage and family therapist, it's fun, it's an honor to serve with the team here and to deal a lot with mental health and relationships. Thanks for joining us on today's broadcast. Everybody's talking about stress and anxiety these days, especially in today's generations, and more specifically, how it's impacting girls and young women.

If you know a girl who is a worrier, maybe it's your daughter, niece, perhaps a child in a class you teach or Sunday's school, today's Family Talk broadcast is just for you. Our guest has been working with pre-teen and teenage girls for about 30 years, three decades or so. Sissy Goff has devoted her career in professional counseling practice to helping young ladies and their parents address the growing problem of worry and anxiety. Sissy is a sought after speaker for parenting events and the author of 12 books, including the best-selling, *Raising Worry-Free Girls* and *Braver Stronger, Smarter*, and her new release for teenage girls called *Brave*. Sissy, so delighted to have you, welcome to Family Talk. Thank you for joining us.

Sissy Goff: Oh, I'm so honored that you would have me. I have long respected your work and the work of Dr. Dobson too. So it means a lot to me to get to spend some time with you.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sissy, you have been working as director of child and adolescent counseling at Daystar Counseling Ministries in Nashville, Tennessee. There you work alongside an assistant pet therapist named Lucy, tell us about Lucy just for a second.

Sissy Goff: Yes. So she is actually my second pet therapist in a row. My first one, we didn't have dogs as a part of our practice, and this was probably back in 1995, for some reason, I had to take my dog to work one day and I was meeting with an adolescent girl who was suicidal. And I had to, as we would imagine, go in and

meet with her mom to kind of prepare her mom to take her to the hospital. And my little dog jumped up in this girl's lap while I was away for a minute and just was licking her tears by the time I came back in. So, since then I have made it always a policy to have a dog with me at work. Now I have Lucy, the Havanese, who helps. She has this great trick where she waves. She waves her way into lots of girls' hearts of all ages. And we actually, at Daystar, we have 13 therapists and six dogs now as a part of our practice because it just does so much to soften kids who are nervous about coming in for counseling for the first time.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Well, we're going to have to post a picture of something for sure. Sissy, you're on the front lines every day, have a real heart for girls, for young women, I wanted to ask you up front, what are you seeing? Especially since COVID hit, when it comes to fear and worry and anxiety, especially with girls.

Sissy Goff: Well, before we got to COVID, we were looking at the statistics where one in four kids, with girls twice as likely to deal with anxiety as boys, and then once the pandemic hit, we're moving into now we're at one in three girls. And it's just so incredibly prevalent. And then as the pandemic kind of wore on, I think I got more concerned, because I felt like this anxiety was starting to bleed over into depression. So in and all these years of counseling girls, I've never been as worried about girls as I am today, with both anxiety and depression.

Dr. Tim Clinton: It certainly has my attention, I'm hearing it from everywhere. And family and friends close to us, everybody's talking about this issue. Up front too, I wanted to clarify some terms. I think it's always important. We have the word fear, people talk a lot about worry and then people talk about anxiety or being anxious. And for us as clinicians, it's important to clarify those terms. Can you just set us up as we move into this discussion? What is fear?

Sissy Goff: So fear is related to an object that we're afraid of or a situation we're afraid of, and so typically with fear, I think that emotion goes away when we're not in the presence of whatever we're afraid of, like when we-

Dr. Tim Clinton: Like a snake. I hate snakes.

Sissy Goff: Exactly.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I see a snake, I'm walking on water.

Sissy Goff: Right. Exactly. I'm that way with spiders. Yes. And then worry, I think is a more kind of a little bit more pervasive. We worry, all of us worry, especially in the last three years, I think worry has just been... Become a part of life for all of us. But with anxiety, I always... And obviously I'm working so much with kids, I try to come up with kind of a basic way to think about it, but I talk about it being like the one loop rollercoaster at the fair. As you know, we all have hundreds of intrusive thoughts per day. Typically, they're kind of the worst case scenario types of thoughts. If I don't have anxiety, those thoughts will come into my brain

and go right back out. If I have anxiety, it gets stuck in that loop and I cannot stop thinking about it, whatever it is. And that's really kind of the way I picture it in my work with kids and families.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I saw in your book, *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, you said, "Anxiety always involves an overestimation of the problem and an underestimation of self." That's what you mean. It gets stuck in there. It just keeps going over and over, right?

Sissy Goff: Yes, exactly. In preparing to write those books, I did a ton of research. One of the things that was really interesting is that in light of anxiety, parents, two most common strategies with kids are escape and avoidance. And of course, as a parent, you love your kids. You don't want them to be in distress. And so you come upon the thing and you pull them out. And really that very definition, when you rescue a child, you're validating that. "That's right. It's too big. You're too small. You can't do it." Which is never the message we would want the kids we love to get. But instead to be saying things like "you got this, you are so capable, I believe in you." That's going to help establish more independence, more confidence and more resilience in them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. I think we've all met the child that tends to be by nature, kind of shy, kind of anxious if you will, nervous, and when they get into pressured situation where they feel a sense of threat or potential embarrassment or something, they shut down. They just won't go there. Let me ask you, as a parent, what can we be thinking about or help us recognize what worry or anxiety looks like in our daughters?

Sissy Goff: Well, it looks so different, which is, I think very hard for parents sometimes to recognize because of that. And I conceptualize it a little bit like they're imploders and exploders. And the exploders are the ones who I sit with parents in what we call parent consults, and the parents will use words like controlling, demanding, manipulative, raging even, I will then say, tell me kind of the themes. When are you seeing that emerge? And it's often around times of transition, unpredictability, and so you pick your child up from school and they thought you were going to get to go straight home and you say, oh, actually we've got to run a couple errands and then we're going to run by your grandmother's house. And all of a sudden they just totally lose it and explode. And for that child, they don't yet have the words to say, it makes me anxious when you change my schedule at the last minute. They don't know how to say that. And so that's how it comes out for them often.

Dr. Tim Clinton: So that can be anxiety.

Sissy Goff: That is often anxiety.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That is anxiety.

Sissy Goff: Yes. And I think it particularly with girls, because like we talked about girls are leading the statistics, but girls also by nature want to please. And so if there's something driving emotion beyond that, that it gets bigger than that desire to please and connect, I always feel like there's more to the story with girls.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Any other behavioral signs that link up anxiety?

Sissy Goff: Yes. Endless questions is another way. I always look for it because we lean towards those perfectionists that are more of the imploders and they're not going to necessarily explode. They do sometimes with parents because girls reserve their most negative emotions for home and they feel safe with you. But I think for them it can be a lot of physical manifestations like you said, headaches, tummy aches, or we're going to hear endless questions.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Are they living in this kind of, what-if land or scenario they're always thinking about? And that's why they're asking a lot of questions in your mind.

Sissy Goff: Yes. Absolutely. I think you're exactly right. And it's kind of living out the worst case scenario. So what if when my mom and dad go out to dinner, what if something bad happens and they die because I'm just learning about death or what if somebody... This is such a common when we see in our practice, which is these poor kids who deal with this, but I went to a birthday party and someone threw up and now my stomach hurts a little, what if that means I'm going to throw up? And then they start to loop about it to the degree that these kids make themselves nauseated and then sometimes end up throwing up. So yes, it's kind of the worst case scenario per their development.

Dr. Tim Clinton: We often hear people talk about separation anxiety in younger children, and more so what we're doing is we're taking this upper level, age wise, right?

Sissy Goff: Exactly.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And we're trying to see what this behavior is, how it's being expressed. Whether it's through emotions or through their body or what have you, it's like the body is on hyper alert. Like they're amped up inside and you're sitting here thinking, what is going on here? And there can be a lot of reasons for it, but we're just talking about how do we recognize whether or not a child's anxious, right?

Sissy Goff: Right. Exactly. Which is so important to understand what's underneath because I think that creates more compassion in us rather than frustration.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Okay. So you focus primarily on teen girls. Let me back it up a little bit, like in pre-teen, what would anxiety look like in a pre-teen?

Sissy Goff: Well, there's this interesting thing that I think happens. And I do some work with all ages of girls and it's typically anger for kids earlier than pre-teen. And I think for them, especially the perfectionist, they will get explosive with that.

They will let that emotion out with their parents but I think there's an age where girls realize themselves, this isn't okay for me to act this way. I'm supposed to be... I think girls feel so much pressure to be kind and appropriate and all those things. So they'll internalize it. So I think with middle school kids, with pre-teen, a lot of times we see them more hang back and go underground and kind of shrink back from... I'm seeing more social anxiety than I ever have before.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I wonder why girls in particular seem to be moving into the zone of anxiety more frequently, well, certainly the statistics are showing us that they tend to suffer more from anxiety related issues than boys do, right?

Sissy Goff: Right. Exactly. And boys are taken in for treatment more.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah, probably because they act up a little.

Sissy Goff: Right. They get a little louder and more explosive.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That doesn't mean the girls aren't as amped up with anxiety, right?

Sissy Goff: Right. But often anxious girls are the ones you go to the parent teacher conference and the teacher says, "I wish every girl in my class was like your daughter," those anxious kids often are performing even more and trying harder. It's why I called the little girl's book that I wrote *Braver, Stronger, Smarter*, because every girl I've ever seen who's anxious is really bright, they're really conscientious. They try hard. They're the coolest kinds of kids. They just don't know how to turn that down, internally.

Dr. Tim Clinton: In some of your work, you make a statement that when something goes wrong in a girl's life, she typically blames herself for that. Take us into that for a moment, because that becomes a real kind of foundation that builds this life of anxiousness, that is really hard to tame. It's like a lion or something in their life and they can't get control of it, right?

Sissy Goff: Exactly. Yes. It is like a lion. And I read a research article at one point that talked about how, when something goes wrong in a boy's world, he blames someone else, most often his mom. And when something goes wrong in a girl's world, she tends to blame herself. I just think there's this exponential pressure that girls in our day and time feel that adds to that, I'm not measuring up because my expectation is perfection.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host here at Family Talk. Our special guest today is Sissy Goff. She's a licensed professional counselor, a therapist who has spent three decades working with teenage girls and young women, and really zoning in on this battle with anxiety that we're seeing in culture and especially how it's impacting young women. Sissy, fascinating piece as we try to unmask, if you will, what's happening to our girls. In it, you talk about the mind and worry for a moment. And the, basically,

inability to shut that off, or you're battling that negative thinking thought pattern in life. What's happening in her mind? Why is she struggling so much? Why is it that she doesn't feel like there's control or there's a potential threat all the time and that it shuts her down. It drives her in a sense toward doing everything she can to get control, but it also makes her crazy on the other side because it feels like there's never enough control.

Sissy Goff:

Exactly. So I mean, what's happening in our mind is really something that's happening in the chemistry of her brain in that moment, which I think again, is really helpful for us to understand all this, but when we are thinking rationally, we have blood flowing all throughout our brains, including going to the prefrontal cortex that helps us think rationally and manage our emotions. When we get really anxious, our blood vessels in our brain constrict and it shifts the blood flow away from the prefrontal cortex into the amygdala. And the amygdala, as we know, is fight, flight and sometimes freeze.

And so, when I sit with parents of younger girls in particular, they'll say things like, she's like a crazy person when she gets to this place, which is right. I mean, they are like a crazy person. And I know we're probably going to talk about some tools, but until we calm their bodies back down until we calm our own bodies back down, we can't even get to a rational place. And the concerning thing is that the more frequently the amygdala takes over, the more likely it is to take over it actually enlarges and becomes what psychologists consider hyper-responsive. And so, like you said, it's happening to our brain all the time, which is why we've really got to step in and help kids deal with this because anxiety left untreated only gets worse. And I think that's one of the biggest reasons.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Yeah. When you look at research, Sissy, you realize that a lot of mental health issues that adults battle with, the onset is in these early years. And I think it's what? By age 14 or so, you've got an overwhelming number of mental health issues have surfaced. And so early detection leads to better outcomes. That's why we want to have these conversations. We want to see these patterns and help them break their way through this. Let me go to two words you've used about anxiety. You said one anxiety is a liar and it's also an isolator. Can you help us understand what that looks like in her life?

Sissy Goff:

Yes. In the *Brave* book, I talked about how girls often feel like they're the only ones who've ever felt this way. And because kids often aren't talking about it, or we could have a conversation about how they're talking about it sometimes, that I don't think helps today, but they're not talking about it in a genuine way with someone who can help them, that they think I am the only one, no one else has ever experienced this to this degree and so I'm going to pull farther and farther in my shell. Plus I feel like I'm failing all the time. So that self-hatred cycle they get in, I think isolates them further. And anxiety also always makes any of us, not just kids, feel like we were talking about the situation's too big. We can't handle it. We're inadequate. We're incapable.

It makes us think... I mean, I've talked to so many girls over the years who feel like all their friends who are... One friend doesn't respond quite like I think she should while she's mad at me. She doesn't want to be my friend anymore. We just go to the furthest degree of worst case scenario. And so to help kids understand that voice in your head, that's telling you all these things, is just simply not true, it's a liar, I think can help kind of separate it out and take some of its power away.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sissy, the Bible says in Philippians 4, that we're to be anxious for nothing. I mean, God's Word speaks to that and we all know that because we all struggle with periods of fear and worry and feeling anxious. The hard part is when this starts going or running amok in our life, you're right it tends to get worse and worse and worse. In counseling and mental healthcare, we begin talking about anxiety disorders. And I want to just to highlight this just for a moment, because I want parents to see the flow here and what this potentially can go to. And they may identify with some of this. They may see it in their own personal life, or they could see it in their children, issues like social anxiety, where they struggle in public places or in relationships out there. What's a common feature that you see a lot to see, Sissy?

Sissy Goff: That is probably among girls right now, what I'm seeing more than any type, well, that and generalized anxiety disorder. But for kids, I think that becomes when they don't want to go to play dates or get together with friends anymore, when they don't want to spend the night out, I'm having more girls say things to me like, well, my friends, we're just kind of friends who hang around at school. We don't really get together outside of school, which I think really is their way of saying I can't do it. It feels like too much to go and do this or they can go to events sometimes and feel really overwhelmed in the process. And that's a hard balance between introversion and that, but it's important for us to be aware of.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sissy, some of the other signs maybe that you've seen that are pretty common with young girls that it's like, maybe she's not eating lunch or what have you, you know that, because of stress anxiety.

Sissy Goff: Yes, yes. I definitely am seeing more and more of that. And I think I hear girls talk about, I don't want to eat in front of other people. I think there's a self-consciousness of doing that, but also often girls are so tuned into what everyone is saying, doing around them, that their energy is spent trying to make and keep friendships that that's where their minds are. And so they don't even care about the food in that moment, they're just caring about the conversation or where even just, where do I sit? How do I get to the table that I want to sit?

Dr. Tim Clinton: It's interesting when girls feel safe, when they feel valued, when they feel like the world around them is okay, they're free. They're free to be themselves and it's fun. There's nothing more beautiful than to see her free, running, laughing, enjoying the moment. That's what we want to create in our homes.

Sissy Goff: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sissy, so as we move toward... We're fighting the clock today. This is...I love talking about this stuff because it's so important that we have these conversations.

Sissy Goff: Yes it is.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And that we identify this upfront and we get help to those who need help. Mental health issues are real and they're impacting our kids like crazy. Sissy, as we kind of put a bow tie on today, I think the step one was we're on a journey here and we're in a time where it's been a tough go especially over the last couple of years. Our kids are in trouble. They're probably one of the greatest, if not the greatest underserved population, when it comes to mental health issues. And we need to develop an awareness campaign and an intervention campaign here. But bow tie this whole thing for us, take us back, there's fear, there's worry, there's anxiety, what's the most important thing we can lay hold of today? What do you want parents to know? Get this. This is the most important piece, mom and dad. If it's rampant, we got to do something, right?

Sissy Goff: Yes. I just would say pay attention. I mean, that feels like the most important thing I would say. And I love Dan Siegel and Tina Bryson and they talk about all behaviors, communication and so if something is going on that you're noticing with your kids that feels out of the ordinary, pay attention and dig underneath the behavior because like we talked about understanding creates compassion and out of that understanding, we can get them the help they need.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. What's interesting too, in families, we tend to believe that if we don't talk about issues or address issues that kids won't unnecessarily wrestle with things, that'll minimize it, but nothing could be further from the truth. Typically, your kids are getting overwhelmed, bombarded with everything. You talked about devices and what they're getting hit with from their friends and in media and everything else and it's a hard, complicated world. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of investment to parent in these days.

Sissy Goff: It does.

Dr. Tim Clinton: But man, oh man, there's nothing more significant for our kids than mom and dads who are attuned to them and who want to dare courageously to step into these worlds and help them manage these things. And the benefit is exponential when we get this stuff done. Sissy, closing thoughts from you.

Sissy Goff: I love what you just said. I think it takes tremendous courage to be a parent today. And I think it takes tremendous courage to be a kid. And so I think as we're talking about anxiety, the message we want them to get is you can do this and you're not alone in the midst of it. I'm beside you and God's right beside us. And we're walking this road together and you're doing great.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Well, we've got some fascinating stuff to talk about tomorrow. Can't wait to get to it again. Our guest today has been Sissy Goff. She's a professional counselor, director of child and adolescent counseling at Daystar Counseling Ministries in Natural Tennessee, where she spent more than three decades invested in teen girls, young women, especially around stress and anxiety, the author of a number of books, 12 in total, but *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, *Braver, Stronger, Smarter*, and a new one just for teen girls called *Brave*. Her website again, and you need to go up and check out the resources that are up there, but it's raisingboysandgirls.com. Raisingboysandgirls.com. Sissy, such a delight to have you on behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, the team here, what a wonderful interview, can't wait to get you back tomorrow. Thank you for joining us.

Sissy Goff: Thanks. I'm excited too.

Roger Marsh: You have been listening to family talk and that was day one of Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with author and licensed professional counselor, Sissy Goff. I'm Roger Marsh, and these two mental health experts have been talking about Sissy's book called *Raising Worry-Free Girls*. Right now in our culture, girls are twice as likely to deal with anxiety as boys. Sissy's books and knowledge bring needed answers and encouragement to girls and parents of girls alike. I hope you'll listen again tomorrow to hear the second half of Dr. Clinton's conversation with Sissy Goff right here on Family Talk. Now, to learn more about Sissy Goff, her books and Daystar Counseling Center in Nashville, Tennessee, visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk or you can always give us a call at (877) 732-6825. And finally, if you haven't done so already, please go to drjamesdobson.org/kindnesschallenge to sign up for our 30 day kindness challenge.

It's 30 days of being intentionally kind to one person in your life and get this, 89% of relationships improve after doing the challenge. Just go to drjamesdobson.org/kindnesschallenge to learn more and to sign up. Actually, I've been doing the kindness challenge now for eight full days, I started it on July the first, and it's been stretching to say the least. I consider myself to be a pretty kind person, but this challenge has really opened my eyes to areas where I'm not as kind as I thought. I mean, quite frankly, Lisa and I have been married now for two and a half years. We've been together for over four and this has been a big challenge for me in terms of some of the things where I have thought that I was being very kind to my wife, actually, I need to do a better job.

So, I'm grateful for this kindness challenge because between you and me, it's really helping me and my marriage. Well, I'll keep you updated on how the challenge is going for me all throughout the month. In the meantime, to learn more, just visit drjamesdobson.org/kindnesschallenge. And thanks again for listening to Family Talk today. I'm Roger Marsh and hope you'll join us again tomorrow for the conclusion of the special two part program on the topic of *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, until then, may God continue to richly bless you and your family as you grow closer in your knowledge and relationship with him.

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