



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Defusing Anger in Marriage

Guest(s): Jean Lush

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Hello and welcome to Family Talk, the radio home of Dr. James Dobson, America's preeminent Christian child psychologist. I'm Roger Marsh, and Family Talk is the listener-supported broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Let me ask you a question. How much of a role does anger play in your life? How about in your marriage? Do you frequently find yourself angry with your spouse or do you tend to brush things off that should probably be addressed? Well, today on Family Talk, Dr. Dobson and his guest will be addressing the topic of anger in marriage and how to handle it in a God-honoring way. To introduce today's guest, here now is Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: I have the privileged today of letting our listeners hear from a friend who's already gone. She's in Heaven. Her name was Jean Lush, and she was a gifted counselor and family therapist and I had her on the program many times. What a great lady she was. She had such wisdom and such insight into family life. She authored many books, including *Mothers and Sons* and *Women and Stress*, and I had her on the program, as I said, many times. Today, we're going to roll back the clock to the 1980s when Jean and I talked about the subject, defusing anger in marriage. It's still good stuff after all those years, and I'm anxious for our friends to hear it.

Roger Marsh: Well, that's right Dr. Dobson. We pray that those struggling with anger will find some real hope from today's program. Here now is Dr. James Dobson's classic interview with Jean Lush on this edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me just start with this question. In the late '60s and early '70s, all the schools of psychology, certainly all the secular schools of psychology, and most of the counseling programs were telling people that stored anger becomes hate. Therefore, never store it, ventilate it. And if you feel angry, lash out at the other person. And counseling programs were designed where they taught people to hit each other with what they called encounter bats, which were foamy-like

things, slam the fist on the table and scream and curse and say mean things about your parents and so on. We came through a whole era of that. I never bought it. I know you never bought it, but that was the psychology of the '70s. Where are we now? How do you see anger and when should it find expression?

Jean Lush: I could never buy it because I very quickly found that it escalates itself into a vicious cycle that went on and on, because I think the more anger we are going to express in a way that attacks another, the more it'll generate.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah.

Jean Lush: Now, I feel that we have to find ways of expressing anger so it literally goes into the ground. You see what I mean? That doesn't become destructive to another person. I feel that many marriages are destroyed, you see, through these very theories. Too many people have come and gone through this, you see, in their marriages. And then we find that love goes out of the door. You know what I mean? There's a great deal of anger constantly expressed.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. If I could make an analogy, I think the psychologists of the early '60s thought of anger as a quantity. Let's say you have 10 ounces of anger. So, let's open the valve and let's release 10 ounces of anger and let it run into the ground. And then you will have zero anger. But instead, the process of releasing that anger produce 20 ounces of anger. In other words, the very process of ventilating and of expressing it to the other person and screaming and doing all that you do to let it go, builds additional hostility and conflict. So it's not really a ventilation at all.

Jean Lush: No, it isn't. And you see, marriage cannot afford that because I've always felt that the love in a marriage has got to be guarded very carefully. And so I just don't think that great love can stand too much anger. It can stand some, but the trouble with anger is it escalates, you see, until it becomes destructive. And in no time it does, because when one person expresses it, the other's only waiting their turn to hit back, you see, with more anger. And so it begins something that eventually people who once had great love for each other, wake up one morning and find it's simply gone because it's really, really been destroyed.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, I'll play devil's advocate with you. I'm a woman. I worked three hours fixing a meal for my husband and I had candles on the table and I fixed the favorite thing that he wanted. He knew I was doing this and he came walking in an hour and a half late. It was cold. The evening was ruined. I feel that he's disrespected me and he could have at least picked up the phone and called me. I am white hot with anger when he walks in. How can I keep from feeling that way? And if I feel that way, shouldn't I jolly well, tell him about it?

Jean Lush: I don't think you can keep from feeling that way, but when it comes to jolly well letting it out, then I'm going to say, "Hey, wait a minute. Let's see what we can do about this." Perhaps it would be better to wait and think it over a little bit.

And because if we do it right away, okay, we'll take that point that the brute has disregarded all our feelings and I don't feel loved. You see here.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah.

Jean Lush: All right. When he walks in at that time, our tension is high, isn't it?

Dr. James Dobson: Yes.

Jean Lush: And we are going to really let him have it, but the trouble is, at the height of the tension, we're going to bring something else in. So this is the kind of thing we will do.

Dr. James Dobson: What do you mean? You'll remind him of the last time you get something down.

Jean Lush: Right. And I might say to him, "Well, this isn't the first time that's happened." Then in no time I'm saying, "You always do this to me. In fact, I remember right back in our honeymoon, you don't care about the way I feel." You see, in no time, when you start in, while at the height of the tension, you're going to bring in a lot of other things.

Dr. James Dobson: You build a case.

Jean Lush: You build a case and in no time there are acquisitions held. All right. Now, supposing now I want to really guard my marriage. I am feeling mad, say. Now I might decide at that time not to say anything until I've had chance to think this over, because I don't want this to happen again, but I don't want to have a row right now. All right. Now the first thing that I might do now, perhaps, is to call up a very, very close... Supposing I have a very trusted, close friend... By the way, this is what I call debriefing.

Now, this is one thing. We could meet a friend. I remember such a friend calling me up once, many years ago, about a situation where she was feeling mad about the whole family, and really had walked out on. She had reason to be mad over this. But instead of having it out with the family, she called me first. And we sat down just for an hour and a half and she talked over the situation. Now, the time she talked it over, the tensions were being loosen. They were flowing out. When the tensions now in a sense were let go, she was able to think of a good solution. And the time she got around, that was a few days later, and the solution really worked. That was sitting the whole family down and explaining logically what had happened to have made her feel. Now, she might say something like this... Not, "You don't care how I feel." You know what I mean?

Dr. James Dobson: Mm-hmm.

Jean Lush: It's, "I had a problem with the way things went last weekend, I found that everybody went out and I was left to do the full brunt of the work. That isn't really the way a family can run." But when we have let some of the tensions out, then I think we can rationally handle the actual problem itself, you see, without all that buildup of tension. We're not likely to go back and call up all kinds of accusations. We're much more-

Dr. James Dobson: Now, you're not suggesting that a woman and keep to herself and to her friends, her anger over a situation like that-

Jean Lush: No. Certainly not.

Dr. James Dobson: ... that she ventilate first to a good friend and then confront the issue when she's under better control.

Jean Lush: Some other time. Now, I'm not saying always. This just happened and it worked beautifully because now this is a very dear special close friend, you see

Dr. James Dobson: Your advice is controversial. Isn't it?

Jean Lush: Very controversial here.

Dr. James Dobson: I'm not sure that I know anyone else who is saying when you're angry, don't blow it off.

Jean Lush: Wait a bit.

Dr. James Dobson: Wait a bit.

Jean Lush: Can I go back to when I first learned this lesson? And this was a crisis in my life. As I said, I came from a fantastically wonderful home. And now I'm going to tell you something kind of very special. I received a letter from my mother and it was a letter which upset me, because it was criticizing everything that I was doing. You know what I mean? Moaning about the kids' behavior. And two of my children were awfully lively when they were kids and they were hard going. Sometimes I used to feel very hopeless about it, and I was having a hard time, but I got a letter from mother and it just the most discouraging letter. Everything it seemed like I was doing was very wrong. Now I was dreadfully upset by the letter. And in no time, I got angry, really angry about what was said in that letter, because somebody wasn't even true to the facts.

All right. Now, do I get on the phone and call mother up and go for her as it were and tell her the way I'm feeling? Well, I'd begun to walk with the Lord in such a way that I knew the Lord didn't want me to do that. I went next door to my friend who was doing the washing. And I said, "Please, can you stop? I have to talk to you for a few minutes." You see, I talked it over. She didn't say anything back at all. She's a very wise girl. She didn't say anything. She just let

me talk to her for a few minutes. So I began to wait and I particularly read Psalm 37. That really is a good woman Psalm because it says, "Hey, wait a bit."

Dr. James Dobson: Fret not when other people do wrong.

Jean Lush: "Wait a bit," it says. And so I decided that I would not answer my mother at all. I would just wait until the Lord's time to do that. Mind you I was still feeling very hurt and very angry. I think I had every right probably to have called her up and told her how I feel. By the way, at the height of how I felt, I said, "This is it. I will never see my mother again." You get those feelings when you're first angry. Man, can you do damage when you're first angry? And so luckily it was the Lord that held me from doing that. All right, I waited a little bit. And suddenly a sister said to me, "Oh dear, mother is fretting. Mother says she wrote a letter to you and she's sure you'll be very angry." Well, I didn't do anymore... Soon mother called and she said, "I'd like to come down and talk to you."

Now, this is what happened. Mother had had some very great strains coming from other members of the family at that time. And mother didn't know how to handle it. And me being a little... Mother saw me as stronger than the others. So guess what? She took it out on me, but it had nothing to do with the facts. And when mother explained what the facts really were and how badly she was feeling to this day, I can only thank the Lord for keeping me from responding to my mother in anger. And I have never forgotten that. And so I can honestly say, I do try to wait on the Lord about this business of anger. And over and over in my life, I'm so glad that God has held me from responding to the anger that I feel.

Dr. James Dobson: You could have picked up the phone and said things that would be remembered till her dying day and yours.

Jean Lush: And do you know that mother was having a heart attack. Mother did have a bad heart and it wasn't after that she had to go back into the hospital for a rest. Can you imagine how I'd feel today if I had called up and told mother off for the pretty hard things that she had said? But the Lord stopped it. And slowly I debriefed that... And look, another thing. The longer you take overthinking about it, brings healing. Look, time does bring healing. When we're angry over something, over somebody, it's always wise to wait a bit because I don't think we are necessarily storing up anything that's going to hurt us, especially if we deal with it properly.

Dr. James Dobson: As a matter of fact, it's been discouraging to me to not be able to remember the details of what I was so angry over a few weeks ago. Have you ever gone back and said with your wife, "You remember that fight we had, what was that again? What had you done?" And your partner says, "Well, I don't remember, but boy, I was sure mad." All of that is gray except for the highlights or the low lights, the most significant moments. It's all of a blur.

Jean Lush: Yeah, very true.

Dr. James Dobson: It's the contradiction between the intensity of feelings at the moment, and these insignificance of things just a few weeks past.

Jean Lush: Now, there's another thing that I think... Now, again, is it okay for me to refer to another experience?

Dr. James Dobson: Absolutely.

Jean Lush: It seem to me I learned by this experience. Now, this experience happened I think about the same time as one with my mother. This was an occasion in which another Christian friend was involved and we had been very, very close. And all of a sudden that friend felt that she had to tell me something about another other member of my family that hurt me very much, you see? And I was terribly, terribly angry. I never remembered any time in my life feeling so angry with a friend that I had never had a cross word with up to this time. And because I think that our immediate response of anger builds up a tension and the tension is striving toward discharge. Now, at that point, the kind of discharge is often destructive because we sort of get discharged at that point of anger by hurting somebody.

Now, this happened on a Friday night and I think my husband was at the time away preaching. So I had no one to talk it over with. You see, I was alone with my children at the time. And I found next day I was so disturbed by the anger that I was feeling that I couldn't concentrate on anything. I was like a driven animal in a cage. You know what I mean? Trying this, trying that, and feeling vengeance and hate, and all the yucky negative feelings that you can imagine was going through my mind.

By Sunday, I sent all the kids off early to Sunday school, and I knew that I had to... I could not touch my Bible at that time. I felt so angry. But I decided now that I would explore the verses in the Bible, everything I could find about anger in the Bible, and I particularly found parts...Let's see. The 13th of Hebrews, 12th chapter of Romans, Psalm 37, many passages here that talked about if anger gets a hold, it becomes a root of bitterness and hurts other people. And I also learned that, "Vengeance was mine," saith the Lord. And there were many passages on how you wait on the Lord.

Now, at that time, I had no real teaching that taught me how to handle that anger. So I got down on my knees and I said, "All right, Lord, I will do everything in your word that you've said to do." And of course I found plenty of instructions: "Wait on the Lord." "Return good for evil." "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord. And it suddenly dawned on me now... By the way, now I can give a name to it but I didn't. I released my right to hand that anger to the Lord. On my knees I said, "All right, Lord, I give it to you. I can't help the way I feel, but I give you the resolution of this. You see, I won't do anything now. I'm not going to do a thing. I'm going to give it over to you."

Now, that was about on a Sunday. I was able to continue my work that day. It was so interesting because Monday I found it had quite a lot of work. I still felt pretty mad, but it was ebbing. It was ebbing. And I had a feeling the Lord was going to undertake. Now a very strange thing happened. When that girl got home, her husband said, "What'd you go all the way up to Jean's for?" And she said, "Oh, I thought she really ought to know about these things that are going on." They were kind of rumors. He said to her, "You little fool," was what he said. "Those things are not true." He told her then how they came, there was no truth in what the girl had believed. And he said, "Oh, I'm so upset with you for doing that." He said, "You better get on that phone. You better get ahold of her."

Now the strange part was, never had I been so angry with anybody in my life as I was at that time. By the Tuesday night when my friend called and she said, "Oh, how can I ever put this right? I find now what I said to you wasn't true." The funny thing was, I said, "Oh, forget it. Just don't bother with it." But you know the Lord had done that. See, by releasing my anger to the Lord, the Lord truly took it out. We went on with our work tremendously and it was gone. Now, this is for the Christian.

Dr. James Dobson: Jean, let's talk about other things for the Christian and the non-Christian. I suppose this would work in both contexts, but not only can you ventilate anger by talking to a friend and waiting. What about exercise as a debriefing or a reduction of tension?

Jean Lush: I call that defusing. Now, there comes a time when we are really mad here and now. We are feeling kind of vicious with all the tension that we can really translate that into action. This is the time to clean the basement out, clean the garage out, go prune those prickly roses, go dig the garden. And when I'm with groups and dealing with this, it's fun to hear the different ways. Women know how to defuse very often, and the things they say... A lot of them of course say, they just go shopping and they walk around and around until some of this is ebbed out. And so women have learned in many ways, I think already to deal with this, but debriefing, I call more talking it out or doing something creative. A woman may play the piano.

By the way, I don't despise listening to TV either at this time. I think often we vicariously identify with characters on the TV that may be doing something aggressive. It's almost like we transfer our anger harmlessly to somebody else who's acting it out for us. And so I sometimes think that TV has some uses, very great uses there. And I think men who're watching the sports and the Cops and Robbers. Have you ever watched a man watching sport? He leaves his seat. He sometimes jumped into the air. And you can see men defusing. You know what I mean? As they watch sport. They are clenching their fists, they're moving with it. You see, they are literally letting go tensions built up during the day vicariously sometimes as they watch well, healthy, competitive aggression in others,

Dr. James Dobson: We know men are more aggressive than women. Generally speaking. That's a generalization, but that tends to be true. Are women more or less angry than men?

Jean Lush: Huh. Now that's a difficult one for me to even guess it. I think that women have a longer time lag over a lot of things than men do. Like a man can make up his mind, and the funny part is his emotions tend to come quickly in behind the decision. But I think often the woman makes a decision, but the emotions don't come at a line that fast. I've often called it... There's an emotional time lag, you see, that operates I think with women.

Dr. James Dobson: I'll probably get chewed up for saying this, but it's happened before. So I'll cope with it. I don't know whether men or women have a greater anger. I don't know in which sex there's the greatest anger, but I do firmly believe that there is more anger at the mate on the part of women than there is on the part of men. I believe women are more angry at their husbands than their husbands are at their wives. Husband's anger may be directed at his boss or his competitor or someone outside the home. But when it comes into the domestic situation, it seems to me what a man most wants from his home is tranquility. He wants to come home to a tranquil home. He wants the kids under control. He wants them clean. He wants the house reasonably straight and he wants the washing machine working and he wants his wife happy. And often he comes home instead to a very angry wife.

Jean Lush: Yes. I think I'm going to go along with that too. I think that often women hold over perhaps anger a little longer. As I watch people getting over affairs, particularly I think I've seen sometimes men do a lot faster than women and put it behind them, where women take a long time perhaps to get over the same kind of hurt in their mates. And maybe I would really go along with that.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me try to summarize what you've been saying. And you tell me whether I've done it correctly. Your message in essence is that instead of doing what your impulse first tells you to do, which is to pull up every dirty, nasty, mean thing you can think of and hurl it in anger at your partner when he has offended you or she has offended you. You are suggesting that they take a few moments or maybe a day or two to work through that anger, and then come back to that person and deal with the issue. You are not saying they should ignore the issue and let it be accumulated.

Jean Lush: Oh no. No, I'm not at all. I am saying though, it needs time. Look, I think hurling anger, again, is a luxury you can't afford in a marriage. Oh yes, it brings immediate catharsis perhaps, but you're going to have something bitter there to deal with that goes on and on and on. And so it does not pay in the long run. And so I feel that people have got to regard love as a tender, fragile thing that has to be guarded all the time. And it can't handle anger or very little of it is the way I feel about it now. I don't think love is a tough, eternal thing at all, between a man and a woman. And this is why I say, hey husband and wife-

Dr. James Dobson: Be careful how you use your anger.

Jean Lush: ... be careful how you use your anger. And above all things, your marriage isn't the place to vent all that anger, even though your other spouse has upset you. And that's the way I feel about it. Very strongly.

Dr. James Dobson: Jean, thanks for being our guest again.

Roger Marsh: Such a needed discussion today here on Family Talk. Dr. Dobson was talking to his late friend and colleague, Jean Lush, about anger in marriage and how to handle it in a God-honoring way. Now, the interview you just heard was originally recorded back in 1983, but the principles that Jean shared are biblical and still as applicable today as they were nearly 40 years ago. Jean Lush passed away in 1996, so we feel very privileged to share her insight and wisdom to a new generation of couples via today's broadcast. Jean was a state licensed counselor, a therapist, and a frequent guest of Dr. Dobson's back in the Focus on the Family days.

Now, if you missed any of today's program or were encouraged by it and would like to share it with your friends and family, just visit drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. While you're there, you can listen to the entire episode or even request a CD copy. That web address once again is drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. Or you can always give us a call at (877) 732-6825. In fact, if you are in need of some prayer or encouragement right now, please don't hesitate to give us a call. Our team is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to pray with you, to recommend resources, or to lend a listening year.

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