



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Difficult and Disconnected Marriages - Part 1

**Guest(s):** Dr. Sharon May

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**Dr. Dobson:** Hello everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson and thank you for joining us for this program.

**Roger Marsh:** Well, welcome to Family Talk, the listener supported radio ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. And, there is no doubt about it, the COVID pandemic has impacted marriages both positively, as well as negatively all over the country. For example, for newlyweds, the pandemic and the ensuing national shutdown has been especially difficult. According to the national law review, a full 20% of couples who had been married for five months or less in 2020, sought a divorce. The year before, it was only 11% of those couples. Also in 2020, there was a 9% increase in outreach to the National Domestic Violence Hotline compared with the same period a year before. Now, the news isn't all bad though, according to the American Enterprise Institute, 58% of married men and women said that the pandemic has actually made them appreciate their spouses more. In addition, 51% of husbands and wives reported that the events of the last few challenging months have actually deepened their commitment to their marriages.

**Roger Marsh:** So, perhaps that's one of God's silver linings in all of this mess. Now, on the other side of that coin, the American Family Survey is finding that 34% of married men and women report that the pandemic has actually increased stress levels in their marriages. And, 29% of married couples have seen their financial situations worsen. And we know that with financial hardship, the whole family suffers. In many ways, difficult and disconnected marriages have been hit, especially hard by the pandemic. These are couples who are already on shaky ground, and then the conditions brought on by the virus actually just exacerbated relationship problems, that people were already having at home. You may be in one of those relationships right now, or perhaps you have a friend or a relative who is in one. Well, to help us navigate these unprecedented times, we are joined today here on Family Talk by relationship expert, Dr. Sharon May.

**Roger Marsh:** Sharon is a regular contributor to the Family Talk website where she has a popular blog. May I encourage you to check that out when you go to

drjamesdobson.org/blogs. Now, let's listen in as our co-host, Dr. Tim Clinton introduces his good friend and professional counseling colleague, Dr. Sharon May. Together for the next couple of days, they will be offering practical, biblically sound prescriptions for couples right here on Family Talk.

Dr. Clinton: Joining me today on Family Talk is our good friend Dr. Sharon May, raised in South Africa. She is the founder and president of Safe Haven Relationship Counseling Center in Carlsbad, California. She received a PhD in marriage and family therapy and a master's degree in theology from Fuller Graduate School of Theology. She not only specializes in work with married couples who are experiencing emotional connection as well as affairs, but she hosts marriage intensives. We've talked about that before on the broadcast, which lasts for several days, pouring into the lives of couples, helping them save or build strength into their relationship together. Her two books are entitled, Safe Haven Marriage, and How to Argue So Your Spouse Will Listen. Dr. May, welcome back to Family Talk.

Sharon May: Thank you for having me, Tim.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, as we get started, we're going to talk today about difficult and disconnected marriages. Couples who are caught up maybe in tense or tension filled relationships.

Dr. Clinton: That's a tough subject, but it's so important because all marriages are going to go through periods of disaffection, times when you don't feel close. And yes, when you escalate and maybe fight, all we do is fight, Tim, times in the relationship. Problems aren't going to be the problem, Sharon. It's what you do in the midst of that, that will determine the future of your relationship.

Sharon May: Absolutely.

Dr. Clinton: Before we get started, I want to just talk about your dad, a good friend of Dr. Dobson's, Dr. Archibald Hart. He was such a stalwart in the faith. He was a psychologist for pastors. He's been on the broadcast so many times, beloved to our audience. Can you give us an update on your dad?

Sharon May: Absolutely. My dad is almost 90, and has slowed down and it's doing well. He does not write or speak anymore, but he is finishing well as he has told so many pastors and leaders to finish well. And, he's just still got a sweet, tender, kind spirit. So, thank you for asking. I know he and my mom would want to say hello to the Family Talk audience.

Dr. Clinton: Well, send him our regards and your family know of our prayers. We love you all. And Sharon, again, looking so forward to today's broadcast.

Sharon May: Oh, Tim, I have been so looking forward to this program, to really bring hope to couples who are struggling, who are in difficult marriages and maybe disconnected. There is a pathway to joy and peace in a difficult marriage.

Dr. Clinton: Ecclesiastes 9:9, says, "Live joyfully with the one you love all the days of your life." Sharon, that's a pretty tough assignment when it seems like everything in this world, and by the way, enter the pandemic and everything else, the flood of stuff since then, comes against a relationship, your life and love together.

Sharon May: Yes, finding that joy and that connection and that safe haven with us, is hard work in the best of times. And, it has become more stressful now in the midst of the pressures and changes during the pandemic.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, the BBC reported that the number of couples seeking relationship counseling had actually surged during the lockdown. Have you found that to be true in the work that you're doing, and the couples you're seeing and what you're hearing from couples across the country?

Sharon May: Absolutely, Tim. At the Safe Haven Relationship Center, we have gotten so many calls and emails from couples saying, "Help." One, the pandemic has added stress to my own life, and I've brought the stress home to my marriage relationship, creating conflict. As well as now, that my spouse and I are living in these tight quarters, all our differences, all our heart issues, all the hurts and past pain are highlighted, and we don't know how to deal with it. And, we're trying to deal with it in isolation.

Dr. Clinton: You know what's interesting too, Sharon, I noticed that newlywed couples are the ones most likely to seek divorces during the pandemic, pretty consistent. Because, it's tough when you get married and you come together and you're very different, you have different personalities, different interests and likes, or what have you. And, it's like you're thrown into this new world order and you're supposed to get along. And, you think you've done a great job in the dating world, but Sharon, there's something about when you say I do, things change a little bit.

Sharon May: Absolutely. And during the pandemic, it is understandable that newlyweds, young couples are just opting for divorce. The highest divorce rate is with the newlyweds, and couples up to the first seven years of marriage. And then, the second highest divorce rate is those couples, once their children leave home and become empty-nesters and are emotionally disconnected. And, those couples in the early years now, more than ever, they're in isolation, maybe lost jobs, finances change. They realize they've married someone different, which is a good thing, but you have to learn how to navigate that. And, these young couples don't have the support system, and the network around them to help them navigate through the difficulties of the first years of marriage.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, I did notice there's some good news coming out of maybe the pandemic, and all the stress and anxiety. According to the American Enterprise Institute, six and 10 married couples say they actually appreciate their spouse more because of COVID. I guess maybe that's one of God's silver linings here.

Sharon May: Absolutely. And, I think couples have turned towards home, and now they have an external struggle, an external problem that they can team together. And, some couples are able to, or have been able to put aside their difficulties, their conflicts, their differences to come together as an us, to face this external issue. Kids have come home. And, other couples who were doing well or doing better, strong couples are even stronger. They've pulled together. They've had family rhythms, and getting bikes, and board games, and puzzles, and learning how to play the piano and learning how to skate board. I know in my neighborhood that families are coming together and getting stronger and more connected. Dad's a home to be able to spend time with the children. Moms are able to be home as well and pulling family together. And, this has strengthened marriages, even marriages that weren't doing well, and even made strong marriages, stronger.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, I noticed also, Bradford Wilcox, he's out of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. And actually said this, "The share of married men and women, ages 18 to 55 are saying their marriage is in trouble," "Actually declined, my marriage is in trouble." That number declined from 40% in 2019 to 29% in 2020. So, there it is again, reinforcing it. But, let me go to some other news. The American Family Survey, however, found this, that 34% of married men and women report that the pandemic has increased the stress in their marriage.

Dr. Clinton: 29% say that, "Their financial situation has worsened," maybe because of job loss or maybe a fewer hours at work, or what have you, draining that pocket book, that's making things tough. So, stress us up, financial pressures are up. And Sharon, I do think we're seeing tension at home, while there's a lot of good, there's also escalating tension because we're now in a new world. I'm looking at you every day, you're home every night. And you're right, we don't have things that we used to do, our routines are gone. And so, we're having to figure out new ones and that's good, but it also can make for some tough times at home.

Sharon May: Absolutely. I think couples have pressure on them from changes in social network, the way we do family, finances, job, work, the uncertainty of, what is going to happen to my job? What's happening to the workplace? What's happening to our finances? What's happening to our world, and even our neighborhood? Those external stresses that we don't have answers for. We don't know how things are going to work out, are placed on individuals that bring that into the marriage. And then in the marriage place, we're now home, we're in each other's space. You're telling me how to organize the kitchen.

Sharon May: I'm realizing I don't like your life rhythm or, boy, you're a strong person, or boy, you procrastinate a lot. All our differences are highlighted and the resources, the internal resources to deal with it, is a struggle for couples.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, set the tone for us on difficult and disconnected marriages in your mind, because there's a lot of people listening. Either they're in one or they certainly know someone they love that's in a really difficult marriage. And Sharon, it's horrible.

Sharon May: Yes. Tim, you're so right. I think today, what couples are facing is the stresses from the external world and the pressures from their own family and marriage. And, what happens is all our fears, I call them our dragons, raise their heads. The fear of, can I support my family? The fear of, what's going to happen? All our fears raise their heads. And, the way we cope with our fears is that, we battle and fight the world around us to try and find the safety. And after times, we are fighting and battling the very person who can be a source of comfort. Tim, what I have found that the majority of couples are longing to be loved by their spouse. They really want to be close. They really want to be vulnerable, and have their spouse be a source of comfort for them. They just get too scared, too defensive, too blaming, too guarded, too self-protective. And, they then pull away, seeing their spouse as the enemy.

Sharon May: And, soon as you've redefined your spouse is not safe, as the enemy, you then pull back, guard yourself. And, the two of you now are emotionally disconnected. And, that is what is dangerous, Tim.

Dr. Clinton: I'll tell a story on Julie and I, when we were young and the first few years of our marriage. Sharon, they were really tough. We had a hard time connecting. It wasn't that we didn't have moments where we were crazy in love and enjoyed each other. That's the good news, because we needed that to survive what we were going through. But Sharon, I remember one day coming home and I had actually gone out. We didn't have any money, but I went out and bought a dozen roses and I knock on the door. I'm knocking on my door. And, I'm knocking on the door and Julie comes to the door, and I had these flowers in my hand, and I'm handing them to her and I'm saying something, "I'm sorry, here's my peace offering, I love you." She takes the flowers, looks at them.

Dr. Clinton: And then, you know what she did, she shoved them right back at me and said this, "I don't want your stupid flowers." "Oh, oh, what?" "No, I'm not the problem, you're the problem." "There's nothing I can do to make you happy." "It doesn't matter what I do." And Sharon, we were just two kids who loved each other, who had complete disconnection. And, we were angry and frustrated inside, because I don't know what to do to get you to love me. I'm lost, Sharon. And, that's the sad place that a lot of people are in and they don't know what to do. They don't know how to navigate that kind of terrain.

Sharon May: Absolutely. In the old days, years back when I was at the airport, there was a man in front of me talking on the phone to his wife. Well really yelling, saying, "Well, how are the kids?" "Well, how are you?" "Well, I am calling you now." "Well, what am I supposed to do?" "Well, what do you want from me?" "I don't know why I called you." "Well, just forget it," and he hangs up. And, he turns around and goes, "Ah, home life, this is just tough you know." "She's a tough

cookie." And, big American family therapist, I thought I can't let this go. And I said to him, "What do you think she really is longing for you? And he said, "I don't know, she's just scolding me that I'm gone." "She's scolding me that she has to take care of the kids."

Sharon May: "She just wants to scold me." "Every time I call home, she's scolding me." And I said, "What's beyond that anger, what softer side do you think triggers that anger?" He says, "I have no idea, she's just a difficult woman." And I said, "She's probably longing for you."

Dr. Clinton: It's painful.

Sharon May: "And, when you're absent she has to take care of the kids alone, she doesn't know, are you my safe Haven?" "Do you really care about me? "Are you there for me?" And so, he paused and he kind of shuffles to the side, calls her back and says, "I know you have to take care of the kids on your own and I know you miss me, and I'm really sorry I'm gone, that I'm a traveling salesman." "And, I still love you and I care for you."

Sharon May: And then, he puts his head down and hangs up. He comes back and he says, "Thanks." And Tim, at the heart of every argument is someone longing to be heard and understood. Just see me, see my pain, see my hurt. Like, the other couple of that I was suiting an intensive for is, "He never text to see if the doors are locked." And, he's like, "Well, we live in an area where we don't need to." "And, I checked it yesterday," so last week when I didn't, becomes the issue. And she said, "It's not that you lock the door or not, it's the meaning behind it, that if you don't check to see if the door's locked, do you love me and care for me?" "Are you watching over me?" "Does it matter to you that it hurts me, if the doors are checked?"

Sharon May: "And, if you came to me and said, I am so sorry, you're right, I don't check to see if the doors are locked." "I really am trying to do that, and I know it hurts you, and I love you and I care for you, and I just want to hold your heart and care for you." "And, I don't want you to feel scared and afraid, like I don't care if I don't lock the doors." Her sharing that was everything. She says, "I don't need you to lock the doors every night, although I would like to." "But, I'd like to know that, that matters to you, that it matters to me." And, getting to the heart of our arguments, we might be arguing about who took the trash out, how you organizing the dishes in the cupboard, how you spend money or don't, or how you clean up, or how you play with the kids. Those are topics, but at the heart of all those topics, we're actually arguing about our fears, our vulnerabilities. Do you love me, care for me? Do you watch over me?

Sharon May: I drag and my fear, my vulnerabilities raised his head. And, does that matter to you?

Dr. Clinton: Yeah.

Sharon May: And that tenderness, being aware of that at the heart of our arguments is key to unraveling a difficult and disconnected marriage.

Dr. Clinton: It is. Sharon, there's a pattern here that I've seen. And, I think you understand this well. We began screaming, love me, love me, love me in whatever way we can. But because we're wounded, we tend to reject every attempt at being loved.

Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. Clinton: Or we disconnect on the love language piece. And then, we complain that nobody loves me. And, it's like this dialogue of those who can hear. Everybody's screaming, but nobody can hear.

Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. Clinton: And as a result, all it does is, it creates deeper wounds. And Sharon, when I would teach the Psychology of Relationship Course at Liberty to the undergrad students, we'd had thousands of kids go through this class every year. I would take in this kind of a lecture here and have two students stand up together, a young man and woman, and act like they're married and have her say to him, these words, "You want to know something, the real problem is we should have never gotten married, that's the real deal." I said, "Go ahead and say it again." Class is completely quiet. "We should have never gotten married, that's the real deal."

Dr. Clinton: And Sharon, when the pain continues to press in, and yes, we going to talk more about, how do you come out with tenderness to help change this pattern. But, when you're going there, Sharon, you begin to press into what you call, others have called, we've written about and talked a lot about attachment wounds. Can you take us there? What that is all about, and what it does to our hearts, to our souls, to our relationships?

Sharon May: Yes, absolutely. And to set that up, we long for our spouse to be our safe haven. We long for this bond that connects us to our spouse, to be safe, that I know you're going to be there for me no matter what. Yes, we argue. I married my drop dead gorgeous husband, Mike. And, we are opposites in so many ways, even though he's my sweetest companion and friend. And, these differences raise alarms saying, "Well, what do you mean you don't go with the flow?" "Or what do you mean, you don't want to put the knives and folks in a row perfectly?" What does that mean? Does that mean you don't love me and care for me? It raises our alarms, that say danger, danger. You didn't take the trash out, you didn't check to see if the doors are locked.

Sharon May: And, those events take on a meaning that you don't care about me, you're not watching over me. And that then, begins to redefine the safe haven between us. Can I trust you with my heart. At the end of the day, even though we argue, and

we're so different, and we see things differently and we do things differently, even my husband and I, we set the table differently, but we can come together as an us. And, research shows with John Gottman that, the end of the day, if you can come at the end of the day, and just know you love me and care for me. And, you are my sweetie. You're the love of my life, the source of all my trouble and strife, but you're mine and I want to grow old with you.

Sharon May: And, that coming together, that reassures the safe haven, is what gets us through a marriage. But, if events happen where we feel, you were not there for me, begins to redefine the safe haven. It becomes a bruise to this bond that connects us, this woundedness that says, "No, I'm not going to put my heart into your hand." "I am not going to trust you with me." And that woundedness then, although deep inside, I'm longing to repair it, I fear I won't be able to because you don't really care about me. And, that creates that attachment injury.

Dr. Clinton: That's difficult to work through, but it can be worked through.

Sharon May: Absolutely. For those couples really trying to thrive in the midst of this pandemic, that maybe, you do have wounds of the heart, that you don't see your spouse as a safe haven right now, and you're longing too, and you just don't know how, that it is possible to be able to repair the wounds of the heart. It is possible to unravel difficult marriages, to learn how to argue in ways that draw you together than pull you apart. And there is hope, even in the midst of this pandemic, where all these external pressures are coming at us, and even though there's might be this disconnection between us at home, that it is possible for us to be able to repair those wounds and to foster once again, a safe haven marriage.

Dr. Clinton: I can imagine people driving on the road, Sharon, maybe at home, turning up the volume, because this really connects with everyone. I hope you'll join us tomorrow for part two. Our special guest is Dr. Sharon May, marriage and family expert, par excellence. And, we're going to continue our discussion on difficult and disconnected marriages.

Roger Marsh: Today on Family Talk, our host, Dr. Tim Clinton has been speaking with Dr. Sharon May about how to best navigate difficult and disconnected marriages. I think Dr. May has really put her finger on something important today. She reminded us that at the heart of every argument, our spouse really wants to just be heard and understood. Ultimately, it's not about the symptomatic disagreements over things like the budget, or kids or the in-laws, your spouse really just wants you to see their pain. To learn more about Dr. Sharon May and her book, Safe Haven Marriage, visit our broadcast page at [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast). That's D-R Jamesdobson.org/broadcast.

Roger Marsh: Also remember, throughout the month of February, we're also offering you a copy of Dr. Dobson's timeless book called Night Light, a devotional for couples, whether you're a newlywed or celebrating a milestone anniversary this year,



regular quiet moments with your spouse to connect with each other and the Lord are essential. Night Light, written by Dr. Dobson, along with his wife, Shirley, will help you do just that. This daily devotional offers the personal, practical and biblical insight that have sustained the Dobson's marriage for over 60 years. To receive your copy of the book Night Light by Dr. James Dobson and his wife, Shirley, go to [drjamesdobson.org/couples](http://drjamesdobson.org/couples). We'll be happy to send you a copy as our way of thanking you for your gift of \$20 or more in support of the James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh:

Again, that's [D-R Jamesdobson.org/couples](http://D-R Jamesdobson.org/couples), or you can contact us by phone when you call (877) 732-6825. No matter the time of day, our customer service team is always standing by and ready to serve you. That's (877) 732-6825. And remember, to join us again tomorrow for part two of Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with Dr. Sharon May of the Safe Haven Counseling Center in Carlsbad, California. They'll be discussing her best prescription for difficult and disconnected marriages. That's coming your way next time on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk

Announcer:

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