



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Breaking the Argument Cycle in Marriage

Guest(s): Dr. Sharon May

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Dr. 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: Welcome everyone, to Family Talk, a production of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we are revisiting another program that made our 2020 Best of Broadcast list. Hope you enjoy it.

Dr. Dobson: Well, hello everyone, and welcome to another edition of Family Talk, which is a division of James Dobson Family Institute. I'm James Dobson, and we're going to talk today on our program about marital conflict and what to do about it.

Today, my colleague Dr. Tim Clinton is going to tackle that subject with Dr. Sharon May. Dr. May is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a popular author. She also founded and continues to lead the Safe Haven relationship counseling centers in Southern California. Dr. May is also the daughter of my very good friend, Dr. Archibald Hart. I have profound respect for Dr. Hart and his wife, Kathleen. They have been dear friends to Shirley and me over the years.

Now, as we get started, Dr. May and Dr. Clinton are going to talk about this subject of marital relationships and how to deal with them without hurting one another. We're going to talk about repairing broken relationships when that occurs. This is a very insightful broadcast that you're going to hear, and I hope that you will find it helpful in your own personal relationship. Here now is Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Sharon May.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, welcome back to Family Talk.

Dr. Sharon May: Thank you, Tim.

Dr. Clinton: It's always fun to have you.

Dr. Sharon May: It is such a joy to be here. I enjoy being with you and your listeners.

Dr. Clinton: We love talking about relationships, about our marriages. How do we keep our love strong? One of the greatest challenges that couples face is they don't know how to fight very well. They fight, but they don't know how to fight very well. Sharon, I want to talk... you put this topic together: "the argument cycle, when unresolved arguments disintegrate your marriage." Sharon, I hear this from couples all the time, "All we do is fight. I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to do this anymore." Sharon, you hearing a lot of that?

Dr. Sharon May: Oh, absolutely. Like "Everything I say or do, or even a look, sets you off. You take it personally. You're defending yourself. You're blaming back..."

Dr. Clinton: "I come through the door, you're going to bite my head off. I don't even want to come through the door."

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. I think for couples, you're right-

Dr. Clinton: There's a lot of stress.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. Couples have what they call weekend marriages, that during the week we've got work, we've got kids, we come home, we're tired, got to cook the food, take care of the responsibilities, and then it's time for bed, and we don't have time as couples to talk through issues, to repair and to resolve, so we-

Dr. Clinton: Maybe it's better that we don't even talk because that way, at least we don't fight.

Dr. Sharon May: That's what we end up doing, is just not talking, or I do a dance around you, try and not bring up this topic or that topic, because we don't know how to resolve it.

Dr. Clinton: But it's brewing inside. It's like, "Boy. Ugh."

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, and those little unresolved... We don't resolve the issue about your mother-in-law or the dishes or the kids or the money. We don't resolve that issue. We leave it alone. Then we've got the kids to take care of, or we got the dogs or the house, or we go back to work. Then we come home and we just feel like, "Okay, everything's normal," but it's not.

Dr. Clinton: Most couples get to a point when they do fight, they're so mad-

Dr. Sharon May: It all comes out.

Dr. Clinton: ... it's just like a bomb going off. It's like, "I'm going to just... I owe you about 30 days' worth, and I'm going to give it to you."

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly, or 30 years' worth. And they remember, "this is what you did on the honeymoon, on our wedding day, the first year, the second year, the fifth year."

They have accumulated these hurts, where the guy says, "What? How can you remember that? That was years ago. I thought you had long forgotten it or we had resolved it."

But, no, those unresolved arguments build resentment and cause us then to guard our hearts and not to fully trust each other with our hearts, which leads us to being a bit disconnected and leads us to having a bit of parallel lives, which the research of John Gottman, the marriage researcher, says the emotionally disconnected marriage, living parallel lives is detrimental to our marriage, because then we're not partners. You plus me isn't us. It's you doing you, me doing me. We stay away from the hot topics, and maybe one day we'll get to it. That disconnection is not what we're longing for, and is dangerous.

Dr. Clinton: Yeah, it is. Well, when I've been violated, whether it's real or perceived, I'm probably going to get a little frustrated, angry with it. The Word says in Ephesians 4:26, you know it well, "Be angry," or literally in the Greek, "In your anger, don't sin." In other words, I'm going to get angry. But what I do in my anger determines whether or not I sin or I hurt or I violate or maybe I commit an act of aggression towards you.

Dr. Clinton: Anger then probably is best understood as a state of preparation to respond to a real or a perceived wrongdoing or injustice in my life. When I feel violated, something's going to happen. When people get angry, you look at them, they clench their fists, maybe a vein pops out in the middle of their forehead. They say your nostrils flare when you get angry. Your nostrils flare.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. You've got to get more air in to fight. You're right.

Dr. Clinton: Think about it. Really, it's like my body is responding.

Dr. Sharon May: To a danger that I'm perceiving. I think we need to realize in marriage, as soon as we get angry, our brain senses danger. And when it senses danger, to face that danger, our brain causes us to feel three emotions: anger, fear, or anxiety. That anger in its pure sense, as you said, Tim, is that when I sense an injustice or a violation or a perceived danger, but that anger is also a protective emotion, that when I feel hurt by you, what you said or did, I felt you belittled me or you put me down. You asked me, "Show me the checkbook and how the finances are," and suddenly now I've taken that personally, like you don't respect me or you think I'm doing it all wrong, anger is a protective emotion preventing me from really feeling that vulnerability. That anger, then, I'm guarding myself and protesting, "I'm not as bad as you're saying I am." I then react out of anger. I say that "You're just as bad. Look what you do," in an aim to protect my heart, but it's damaging. It's damaging.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, you're very graphic. Give me some portraits of what anger looks like. I think some people, they are ragers; they start yelling. Some people yell. Men and women, they yell.

Dr. Sharon May: "Uh-oh, you're mad."

Dr. Clinton: Or maybe they could be sarcastic, cutting with their mouth.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. Or "You are just like your dad." "If anyone else could see you..." or "I bet your secretary doesn't see this."

Dr. Clinton: How about this? "You're not the spiritual leader in the home." Oh, dude, that just makes you feel like a million bucks. You know that?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. Or "You want me to respect you? I can't when you're reacting this way." But we must remember, in marriage, when I feel hurt and my alarms sound off, "Danger, danger, I don't think you love me or care for me," sometimes that first protective emotion is anger. When anger is there, anger causes us to react in ways to protect ourselves, and we do that through sarcasm, criticism, contempt, meanness, slight digs-

Dr. Clinton: Sometimes anger or meanness is "I'm just not going to talk to you anymore." I just shut down. I withhold love. "I'll just ignore you. Forget you. You won't touch me."

Dr. Sharon May: "I'm not going to hold your hand. I'm not going to open the car door. I don't want to kiss you, hug you, or make love to you."

Dr. Clinton: How about a little silent treatment?

Dr. Sharon May: A little bit of sulking, yes. When we find ourselves stuck in these ways of reacting in our marriage relationship, we need to catch ourselves. I need to stop myself and realize that is my anger that protects me from being vulnerable. What else am I feeling besides the anger? Well, I'm feeling maybe sad. I'm feeling very hurt. I'm feeling vulnerable. "You just-" and maybe it's perceived – "I felt like you just said to me I'm no good. I'm not of value, I'm not good enough, I could never do it right," and I need to get in touch with, what else am I feeling besides that anger? I'm feeling that vulnerability.

It's hard to do in the middle of an argument. When I feel attacked, we have to look past our anger, past the way we're reacting, to "What am I really feeling? What do I really want you to understand?" As I'm saying, "Oh, you're just like your dad," whoa, that's mean. Let me look past meanness. What do I want you to understand? It's usually around vulnerability. Even though we marry and even though we make love, which is the most vulnerable place to be with a husband and wife, it is hard to be emotionally vulnerable with each other, to be known, to be seen, and to trust you will love me and value me even when you truly see me and know me.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, I want to be very careful with this next piece here because I've seen people misinterpret this. When this kind of a pattern establishes itself in a

relationship, we don't realize that by doing what we're doing, it actually is fueling the very thing that we hate, the thing that's perpetuating pain in our life. You know that? That's what's happening. Sharon, is that true? It's almost like people are trying to be loving, they're trying frantically, they're on their knees, they're crying out, but they don't realize that the very cycle that's going on, they're caught up in it.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. The more I pursue you to get you to hear me, and I up the ante by maybe doing sarcasm and criticism, I don't realize that I'm actually trying to be seen and heard. But when I pursue in an angry way like that, then my spouse is defensive and blames and guards themselves, and they maybe shut down and withdraw, and the more they withdraw and don't deal with things, the more I pursue. We're doing the cycle together. We are both participants of this cycle, trying to be seen and heard and guard our hearts.

You're right, both of us need to stop and say, "I am participating in the cycle." A withdrawer might say, "Listen here, I don't say anything, so I'm the better one. It's my spouse that gets all ugly."

Dr. Clinton: Yeah. "You yell all the time. At least I don't yell."

Dr. Sharon May: "At least I don't yell." Yes. But my shutting down, saying, "I don't want to talk about this," is just as destructive as the yelling because neither of us are able to get to the vulnerable, softer side of what we really want to understand. And we can't do it alone always, Tim.

If you are listening and you've been stuck in this cycle for months as a newlywed, or years as a couple, and oftentimes after the kids start leaving home, we realize we've been stuck in this cycle. We've been married 20, 30 years. And you've tried all you can. You've yelled more, you've sulked more, you've shut down, and it doesn't work. You're going to need help.

Call your pastor. Get into that support group with couples. You might need to call a counselor. Come to an intensive. I know at the Safe Haven Relationship Center, we offer intensives for couples to come and really jumpstart, get unstuck from this rigid, negative cycle, but don't do it alone. Don't go silent and stay behind doors, not letting anyone know and suffering alone. You don't need to.

It is possible to break the argument cycle and to find a way to love each other. It is God's heart, Tim, for us to love well. God longs for us to be loved in our marriage, to change the way we argue, and God wants to make a path out of it.

Dr. Clinton: The persistent heart cry, "All I've ever wanted is for someone to love me."

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, and God is hearing it.

Dr. Clinton: You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton. Special in-studio guest, Dr. Sharon May. She's a marital research clinician expert par excellence. She's one of my favorite radio guests. We're talking today about the argument cycle, something that's a part of a lot of our marriages out there, and something we need to understand and, by the way, figure out how to push reset constantly in our love together.

Sharon, what do we do? How do we get to a truce? How do we get to a stop for a moment? They say that negative behavior is far more predictive in relationships than positive. In other words, it takes, what, five to 20 positives to overcome a negative. Gottman, Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and others, they talk about these things, that it takes five to 20 positives, in other words, "Honey, you look great tonight," "You know what, I really appreciated how you made dinner," "You know what, I appreciated you telling me that you loved me tonight," etc., it takes five to 20 positives to counteract one negative. "You know what, you're hateful. I mean, you're hateful. I wish you'd stop." How many positives? A bunch.

Dr. Sharon May: Oh, yes, hundreds. I tell you, one positive that can change and heal that like Neosporin on a wound is when we're able to repair in a deep soul level. If I go back to my spouse, I go back to Mike and I say, "I am so sorry. My tone of voice or the way I was trying to get you to understand me was hurtful to you. I am sorry." When we can slow down, recognize how we react when we feel hurt, take responsibility for-

Dr. Clinton: In other words, you've got to see these patterns, first of all.

Dr. Sharon May: I've got to see, yes.

Dr. Clinton: That's what we're trying to do here. We're trying to help people understand that there are patterns of anger in relationships. See it.

Dr. Sharon May: Take responsibility for it, and then-

Dr. Clinton: In other words, delay... By the way, Scripture says delay it. Don't go off the handle. Swallow it. Count to five. Do something. Don't go off. Don't react. Respond.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, and admit to it. That's so powerful when you can go to your spouse and say, "I yell too much and I can get critical, and then I throw in the stuff about you're just like your dad, and that is really mean of me. I am so sorry." Wow. First of all, make sure your spouse is sitting, because they're going to fall over backwards to realize, "You mean you are taking responsibility for how you react to me?"

Dr. Clinton: But if she says that or he says that, you look at them and you think, "Do you mean that?"

Dr. Sharon May: Yeah, because that way of being vulnerable-

Dr. Clinton: Yeah, it pushes me to become the same way back. "I apologize. I know what I do too. I don't want you to think that I don't love you, that I don't care about you, because I do. I'm embarrassed at times, and sometimes I don't know why I do that, but I would like for you to forgive me for doing that to you, because I don't want to hurt you. I really want to be happy with you."

Dr. Sharon May: Tim, what you just said, if couples could write that on a three-by-five card and repeat that in the middle of their arguments, it would be powerful. "You know what, I don't like shutting down. I don't like sulking, withdrawing, but in that moment I just don't know what else to do to either get you to stop yelling at me or to get you to understand me. I am sorry. I see that my shutting down makes you feel I don't love and care for you, but that's not what's going on. I truly do love you and care for you. I just don't know what to do in that moment." That kind of self-reflection and taking responsibility, and with vulnerability, coming to repair that way, is powerful. It is powerful.

Dr. Clinton: You know what else, Sharon, too, is that you see it and you delay it, and you begin to own responsibility for your behavior here for a moment, that literally, in my anger, I choose not to sin against you or hurt you. As I do that, you also then begin to establish moments where you catch each other doing good, in other words, when there's no reason other than "You know what, I just want to grab your hand," this ability to participate in non-sexual touch, this ability to say things to each other in a personhood way that says, "You know what, you really are beautiful" or "I really enjoy just going and getting an ice cream cone with you. It's fun," "I love to hear your laugh. You're funny. You've really gotten funny as we've aged together."

Dr. Sharon May: You're right, Tim. The more we're able to take responsibility, to be vulnerable, and to come back and repair, not blaming the others, but only naming our part, does soften our spouse. When we each are able to soften towards each other, then being able to enjoy each other, being able to see each other's intentions as positive, being able to appreciate and play, and that does give an air to a marriage of enjoyment and laughter and fun. That changes a lot.

Dr. Clinton: It does.

Dr. Sharon May: It changes the atmosphere at home.

Dr. Clinton: You grow together, and you can own things that you need to own individually and as a couple. Let's try to answer a couple of questions that we often hear. One is "My spouse just isn't going to do that. What do I do? He's mean, and he's not going to move. What should I do?"

Dr. Sharon May: All you can take responsibility for is yourself. If you change your part in the cycle, the other parts will shift. Sometimes if you change you, and your spouse is

so stuck, realize they're stuck because they are that hurt. Yes, maybe they have learned bad manners, and maybe you do then need help, and you've got to look past-

Dr. Clinton: By the way, there's nothing wrong with getting help.

Dr. Sharon May: No.

Dr. Clinton: Outcome research says that nearly 80% of couples or more actually get the help they're looking for when they reach out for it. Just making a phone call. Making a decision to go by yourself and do what you need to do. Don't worry about him going with you. Take that step. Get the support you need, because this is not easily done.

We don't want to give a false impression here that this is some easy program, and do these three quick steps and you're home. No. This is a pattern that's been established in your relationship that's not easily broken, but it needs to get done. It needs to change. I love discontent, Sharon. I love it. When couples come in and I work with them, I actually pray over them that God wouldn't give them peace, not until they really decide what they need to do

Dr. Sharon May: That, Tim, knowing that your heart is unsettled, use that unsettledness as God speaking to you, saying, "You've got to get help." We take our cars in to be repaired. We go visit the doctor when we've got a bellyache. When our relationship, our marriage hurts, which the heart of God is for us to love well, God longs for us to go get the help to be able to repair.

Dr. Clinton: Sharon, we can't leave without a word of encouragement. I want you to speak to her, I want you to just speak to him, and they just need a closing word that says, "Don't quit. Stay the course here. Fight your way through it."

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. I do, I want to speak to that wife and to that husband who longs to repair with your spouse. You do. That is your heart. God hears your heart cry, and don't give up. Go home and look at your spouse through a different lens, through a lens of "They're a broken human being. They're just a struggling human being just longing to be loved. They've grown a crusty shell guarding their heart. They long to be vulnerable with you, just as you do. They're hurting just as you are."

Go home. Put your hand through that crusty shell and say, "Love of my life," source of all of the trouble and strife, but "Love of my life, I want to grow old with you differently. Can we find a way of doing this differently? Let's pray together. Let's get help together. I want to learn to love you." Reach out. Stay the course. God longs to change your marriage, and it is possible.

Dr. Clinton: Yeah. A closing thought, we're going to pray that God brings into your life, and we mean this, every resource, every person, everything necessary to take you to

that place where you can actually love and be loved. That's what this is all about.

We appreciate you, Sharon. Thank you for being part of the broadcast today. I know Dr. Dobson loves you, your family, your daddy, and so much more. It's always a delight. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Sharon May: Thank you, Tim. It's a pleasure to be here.

Roger Marsh: This is Roger Marsh, and I hope you were encouraged by this discussion here on Family Talk. Discourse is a part of every marriage, but as you heard today, there are healthy ways to resolve conflict. Our desire is that couples will grow closer together by discovering how to “fight fair” if you will.

For additional information on any of our guests this month, be sure to visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. Thanks so much for listening, and be sure to join us again next time for another edition of Family Talk's 2020 Best of Broadcast.

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

Roger Marsh: Hello everyone, I'm Roger Marsh for the James Dobson Family Institute. Now, before we end today's broadcast, I have something important to share with you. As you may know, James Dobson Family Institute is completely supported by you, our faithful listeners. To help reinforce our ministry during the winter months, a gracious friend has blessed us with a matching grant. That means that every donation we receive between now and the end of 2020 will be doubled until we've reached our goal. Won't you consider partnering with us? We understand the holiday season can be a bit tight financially, especially now in these unprecedented times. But with this match, every tax-deductible donation will go twice as far, to help our efforts here at JDFI. So, if you're able to help us, we would greatly appreciate it.

Now, there are numerous ways you can pledge your support. First, you can make a donation online by going to drjamesdobson.org. That's D-R-jamesdobson.-O-R-G. You can also make a donation over the phone when you call 877-732-6825. Again, that number is 877-732-6825. And finally, you can mail a gift directly to our ministry headquarters. Send your donation to The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, CO 80949-9000. Again, that address is The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, CO 80949-9000. Thanks so much for giving, and for praying for Dr. Dobson and the ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.