



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: When Family Disappoints – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Sharon May

Air Date: February 9, 2022

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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: Thank you for joining us today on this edition of Family Talk. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, the president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, and your co-host here on Family Talk.

Dr. Dobson has said for years that the family is the foundation of the nation, and it's true. The nuclear family was designed by God, and marriage between one man and one woman is actually a picture of Christ's relationship with the Church. Families have always been a part of God's plan, but family relationships can also be the cause or the impetus behind some of our most painful emotions. Family members can disappoint us. They can make decisions that hurt us. They can make us feel small or insignificant. Or they can hurt loved ones, which, in turn, causes us great grief. How do you cope with family disappointments, when expectations aren't met?

Our guest today on Family Talk is the perfect person to tackle these hard questions and offer some hope to hurting people and families just like yours and mine. You've met her before on the program. Her name is Dr. Sharon May. Dr. May is the founder and president of the Safe Haven Relationship Center. She received her PhD in marriage and family therapy and a master's degree in theology from Fuller Graduate School of Theology. Dr. May is an adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University, and her practice specializes in emotional trauma. She's an author, and previously served on the boards of African Enterprise and The Hart Institute. Dr. May, thank you for joining us here on Family Talk.

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

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, we're coming out of the holidays, kicking off a new year, a lot going on in the world around us. But, Sharon, what's interesting is I think everybody keeps coming back to the significance and the importance of relationships and family. Sharon, you talk about family from a safe haven perspective. Set us up.

Help us to understand why relationships are so important, especially those relationships.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. We were created to be in relationship. In relationship, that's where we thrive and we flourish. We are not created to do life alone. Our first and most important relationships are our family that we're born into, and they're really important because in that family, we are loved and nurtured and cared for and shaped and molded. Those early interactions in that relationship are really internalized. They become the recipe that we take with us into our adult relationships about how lovable we are, how we can get the love that we need, and how to react when we don't get that love. So those early relationships where we can attach and bond and build that sense of self and community are vitally important, Tim.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. Family is the place where we're supposed to be loved no matter what, but often it's where we find some of our deepest heartaches too, isn't it?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, because we are struggling human beings. We really try and do the best we can with what we have, but if parents are broken, parents don't know how to manage their emotions, parents get overwhelmed, then their irritation, their frustration with children, or not having a good template for knowing how to discipline and to set boundaries, parents then become irritated, frustrated, don't know how to deal with their emotions, and then put that frustration on the children. And the children, who are longing for a safe haven, for Mom and Dad to be there and predictable, and emotionally attuned to them, and to respond in loving and caring ways, then these children discover, "Gosh, Mom, Dad, is it my fault that you lose it, or are you a bad person for not being there to love me?" All these inner things are going on for a child as they grow up.

I do remember one time walking into a pizza parlor in the Midwest, and a mother was walking out as I was walking in. She had four children following in front of her. As she got there, I said, "You've got four beautiful children." She said, "No, they're brats. Do you want them?" I just thought, oh my goodness, how do the children feel about themselves and this home that they're supposed to have as the child, "I'm loved, I'm cared for, I have someone to turn to, someone who can understand me and help me navigate this world"?

Yes, we long to have this perfect safe haven, where Mom and Dad are attuned, they get us, they respond to our needs, they're always there, they know how to regulate their own emotions so they can talk to us in the kindest of ways, and we have these wonderful conversations. We all long for the perfect home, but we're not perfect human beings, and so there is no perfect home. I have done over 900 intensives with couples from all over the world, really, and yet to have found a perfect family.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Disappointment then becomes a word, Sharon, that often describes how people feel in their relationships. "I'm disappointed in you" or "I'm disappointed in my family." "I'm disappointed in Dad." "I'm disappointed in my sister. I just can't

believe this" or "Mom, she's always hurtful with her words." Or maybe there's an adult child who constantly is disagreeing and arguing with Dad, or people are falling back into old habits or dysfunctions or sibling rivalries. Sharon, that kind of stuff starts making everybody crazy.

Dr. Sharon May: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. When we grow up and become adults, and we then have to go back home and relate to our family as adults, we have great disappointments. When we're growing up and we're in our family, we do the best we can as kids, as teens, to get along, to cope, to manage, and we develop ways of coping. Maybe we take the role of being humorous or being invisible, or we always buck the system. We learn as children how to deal with, manage, and get along in our families. But as adults, when we go back home, we have an expectation that our family will grow up and mature along with us, so that they will be different; they will be wonderful safe havens. When we go home for the holidays and we realize, "My family hasn't changed," and here we fall back into our old roles-

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sad.

Dr. Sharon May: ... and we are disappointed.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. Sharon, when you get disappointed... I'm thinking for a moment of a woman who said to me, "He hasn't touched me... I can't even remember. He doesn't love me. He never has," and she just lives in it. You know what happens when it goes deep in your heart. Sharon, can you explain a little bit of what that looks like and what it does to the human soul?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. When we come to an understanding or realize, "Wow, my family is a disappointment. I can't relate to my dad" or "My mom can't just empathize with me and listen. She always then has to correct and teach me" or "My brother is always in competition with me" or "My sister just doesn't get me," when we sit with that disappointment, when we have this idealized view that my family should be there for me, and perfect, and this ideal safe haven, we are then shattered.

We then feel, well, if family can't be there for me, then who will be? We feel lost. We feel alone. We feel like, "I don't belong. Where is my family?" That is a deep, deep grief and loss in us. We then maybe have moved away from home, or maybe we live in the same city 10 minutes from our sibling, and we don't see them very often. Then we feel like, "Where's my community? Who can I rely on? Who can I call in a pinch? Who will really get me?" That does bring a deep grief and sorrow and loss when our family disappoints, when we lose this safe haven of home.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, the reactions to that kind of discouragement or disappointment in life, it can be all over the map. I think for a lot of people, though, they look around at other families and they say, "God, how come? Why can't we just be a normal

family? Why can't we just figure out how to get along?" No matter how hard I try... I bet you if we had an open phone line, Sharon. and said, "Everybody call in, and let's start talking about this," we would be blown away, because the pain goes so deep here.

I think of Joseph in the Old Testament when his brothers sold him out. Even after all those years of being second only to the Pharaoh, God had established him, put his feet into a position of strength and influence and more. Finally, when the Bible says he revealed himself to his brothers, that he cried so loud that the house of the Egyptian and the Pharaoh heard him weep. Sharon, after all those years, that's the influence of families here for a moment. People don't see that.

Dr. Sharon May: Right. Our families impact us from the day we're born until the day we die. We will always have a longing to be somehow connected with our families, to be accepted by them, seen and valued and loved, and to know that they will just be there for us and safe. We have that deep longing. When we feel, "I can't turn to my sister" or "My brother's just going to compete with me" or "Mom will just criticize me, and Dad doesn't want to talk about it," that does shatter us. I think it overflows to all of our other relationships.

But when we realize families are complicated, families are messy, families are where we are wounded and hurt, but it is in the arms of family that we long to do life with and grow old with. We do all long and hope that our families will be there. Tim, there is a journey we need to go on where we have to, really, instead of just criticizing our family and keep punishing them for not being there or for being who they are, we need to really slow down and really be honest with what is going on in our family.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, I remember also a conversation I had with a very significant religious leader, pastoral leader. I remember I was seated alone with him. We were in a white-tablecloth restaurant, and we were talking about our dads. He said, "Tim, your dad, I wish I had a dad like that." He caught me off guard for a moment. Then he leaned forward and he looked at me, pointed his finger at me, and he said this. "My dad was out saving the whole world, but he never played one game of catch with me." He said, "It took me years to figure out how to forgive my dad." He was so disappointed, so discouraged in his heart.

Sharon, I want to talk about the reaction here, because we need to understand what this does to us personally. When we get disappointed, when we get discouraged, when we're on the receiving end of someone's anger, or whatever it is, it's not a good place to be. Sharon, there's a lot of grief here for a moment, isn't there?

Dr. Sharon May: Right. Absolutely. When we name the "dysfunction" in our family, or name how our parents were not able to be there for us, or we name our brother and our sister and who they are and how they're doing life that is very disappointing and very hurtful, it takes us out of just being angry, and it does, Tim, put us then into

the grief. Grief is grieving who our family is not, grieving who our family is, so we can then begin to accept them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, that's the hard stuff. That's really difficult to go there because the other part of me wants to say, "No, I'm not doing this anymore. You know what, I'm not going there and I'm not tolerating this." The whole boundaries piece comes in. We need to put boundaries in place. Sharon, talk to us about the importance of boundaries, but you can go too far here too. We do need some boundaries.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. Then what do I do about it? How do I guard my heart and not go back into the family dysfunction?

One of those things is, do I just cut them off? That's it. I'm never going over there. But cutting off never works, unless there is absolute abuse or the trauma keeps coming on up, that Mom and Dad know that my brother abused me, but every time I go, they still prize my brother, and it's too damaging to my soul, I can't go. Setting the boundary of "I just can't go anymore," that is on the extreme level. Yes, then you do need you to do that for the health of your soul.

Other times, it's when Mom just doesn't follow my rules or my guidelines for the kids. She's always feeding them junk food, letting them watch rated R movies, and they're seven. Then I need to put some boundaries, and those are healthy boundaries that allow us to still be connected to our families in a way that is healthy for us, our children, and them. Those boundaries become part of how can I still stay connected.

Tim, at the heart of families is we didn't choose them, we're born into them, and so how can we stay connected? How can I love well? Maybe for me to love well, I need to set a boundary that says, "Mom and Dad can't babysit my kids without me being there." That allows me to stay connected instead of cutting off or staying angry or blaming, or just going back into me being a kid again, that those boundaries then help me stay connected and love well.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, it's tough because sometimes... We know it's about communication. We've got to talk. Somehow, we've got to work our way through this thing. Too often what happens, though, is we have family rules, where you're not allowed to be angry or you're not allowed to... Only Dad gets away with that. You don't. No one else is allowed to.

All of a sudden, I'm done with it. I blow up. I become almost like them. I'm the epitome of what I say I hate, and so I start yelling, or whatever, and saying, "I can't stand you all. You are crazy. Everybody get out of here. I'm leaving. I'm packing up. We're leaving tonight."

Sharon, that kind of stuff then you get gaslighted on. Well, what happened to Tim? They come back and say your reaction to what they did to you, you're somehow to blame. You're gaslighted for it. You get what I'm saying?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, absolutely. And we are stuck. I think each of us is longing for our family to change.

Dr. Tim Clinton: There you go, because at our heart, that's what we really want.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. We want our family to change so we can be accepted and loved and get along. Our amygdala hijacks when we see our dad criticizing our mom the old way, then Mom minimizing it, and then you say something and now you're the bad person. There you see your brother asking your mom for money, and you know your brother is manipulating, you say something, you're the bad person. We want to call out the dysfunction in our family. We want to call out everyone's bad behavior, wrong way of behaving, unhealthy way of interacting. And how do we call them out on it so that they will then get it, see it, fall on their knees, confess, and change?

Tim, the next assessment we need to do is, can my family really change? Are each family member on a journey of growing and becoming? Can I really go to my mom and say, "Mom, you are overindulgent with my kids, which makes them kind of bratty. You don't make them say thank you or please. So, when I take the kids home, they're like, 'I want it. Give it to me.' Can you please use manners with the kids?" If Mom is not on a growing journey, Mom will just be offended and wounded and hurt, and attack back, "Oh, I can never do anything good enough. I watched your kids for two days, and all you can do is criticize me." When we realize, no, my family is not on a growing journey, then how do I relate to them?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sharon, yeah, that's what I want to do. I want to take the remaining time here to get us started, and then hopefully you'll join us again for tomorrow's broadcast, so we can talk more about how do we press our way through this, because at the end of the day, Sharon, everybody's raising their hand, "Okay, sounds like you guys are talking about my family. You guys were with us over the holidays. We get that."

How do we go about building relationships with our family again? Because that's what we want. God, help our family. Help us to come together. I want to have a good relationship with Mom and Dad. I want to have a better relationship with my brother, my sister. How do we get this going that allows us to stay connected and be healthy in a way that gets us going in a trajectory? I guess you could say it's like, how can we be kind and gentle and take meaningful steps in a good direction?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. You outlined that beautifully, Tim. We've got to want to, and we have to have a goal and a vision in our mind. I need to want to be connected to my family. This is my God-given family. And next, I want to love them well. How can I love well and stay connected?

One thing is setting the boundaries, having the rules, being able to say to your spouse or to yourself, "When the conversation turns to politics and then everyone is arguing and then everything goes sideways, I am not. I'm going to get up from the table and go help with the dishes, because that helps me still stay connected and love well, because that's my heart."

I don't just say to mom, "You just don't get me. You never have." I learn how to be kind, how to stay connected, stay centered, and to be able to share what I want understood in a kind, self-regulated way, being able to say things like, "Hey, I think this conversation is going sideways. I know we as a family want to just stay connected. Hey, why don't we move on to dessert?" How can you bring conversations back to the last place where we did get along? How can you remove yourself? Lowering your expectations sometimes helps you stay connected better. Saying less, maybe even being less involved emotionally, helps you stay connected.

Dr. Tim Clinton:

Sharon, I'm looking over the notes, and we've got some fascinating stuff to talk about tomorrow on the broadcast. But before we go, I'm reminded of the parable that Jesus told of the prodigal son. I know it's the prayer that somewhere Mom would come to herself, or Dad would, or maybe my brother would, or my sister, or somewhere maybe even in my own journey. Some of us, by the way, feel like we're a disappointment, or we've been made to feel that way. When he came to himself, he decided that he would go home. There's something in my dad that tells me that he still loves me, and I'm going to go back home to my dad.

Sharon, what a glorious moment when that happens in a family, and we see it a lot. Sometimes it's just about holding on and staying faithful and being kind and having some boundaries, and being clear, "Hey, I love you. We're family. Blood makes us related, but loyalty makes us family. I'm here. And God, would you do something so amazing that only you could get the glory for it?" That's the peace, Sharon, that we work so hard as counselors and marriage and family therapists and more, we try to restore that peace, but ultimately, it's about the work of God in and through our families.

Dr. Sharon May:

And living out the greatest commandment, which is to love well, and that knowing that Mom, Dad, our sister, our brother also long for a sense of family, for home. Sometimes we have to start with ourselves, that we have to self-reflect. We have to say, what is the old role that I fall back into that perpetuates our family cycle, and how can I step out of that to be who I want to be?

I want to love well. I want to be the answer to each of my siblings' prayer that day, of just empathy or understanding or listening, or just a word of encouragement, or just a word of, "Huh, is there another way to think through your problems, brother?" or "Sister, is there another perspective to have?" Just one little piece. Who I want to be, I want to love well, and that is God's greatest commandment. But to love well, I have to have character. I have to grow me, so that I can be there in a way that my family feels loved and cared for.

Dr. Tim Clinton: On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, the team at Family Talk, Sharon, been a delightful conversation, really championing the family that Dr. Dobson gave his entire life, and continues to, to say this is what it's all about, get this, because in the end, here's what Dr. Dobson said, all that really matters is who loved you and who you loved.

Dr. Sharon May: Amen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: If we get that right, Sharon, we're all blessed. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Sharon May: Thank you for having me, Tim. Blessings.

Roger Marsh: Well, my goodness. So much great information from Dr. Tim Clinton and his guest today on Family Talk, Dr. Sharon May. They've been talking about what to do and how to respond when our family members disappoint us. Sharon will be back on the broadcast again tomorrow to finish her conversation with Dr. Tim Clinton, so make sure you join us for that. Now, if you'd like to learn more about Dr. Sharon May, her books, or her counseling practice, visit drjamesdobson.org/broadcast.

Now, before we go, I want to tell you about a free marriage devotional series that we've created just for you and your honey this February. It's a 10-day series. If you and your spouse would like a closer relationship with each other and with God, you'll definitely want to sign up for this. You can find all the information for this 10-day marriage series by visiting drjamesdobson.org. Thanks again for listening to Family Talk today. May God richly bless you and your family today and every day. I'm Roger Marsh. Join us again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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