



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Marriage Survival Skills – Part 2

Guest(s): Dr. Gary Smalley and Dr. Scott Stanley

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- Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.
- Roger Marsh: Each and every person is intricately created by God with separate views, opinions, and characteristics, and because of these distinctions, there is bound to be conflict and disagreement. Given these realities, how is it possible then for two people to enjoy a long and happy marriage?
- Dr. Scott Stanley: The factors that brought you together, the things you like about each other, your personality, differences and similarities, those things don't say nearly as much about how you're going to do in the future as how you handle your differences. How you handle conflict in particular is going to be the very best predictor of how you're going to do in the future. How the couple handles these kinds of conflicts as they arise is really going to tell the story of who does well and who does not.
- Roger Marsh: That was the voice of today's guest here on Family Talk, Dr. Scott Stanley, a research professor at the University of Denver. The content discussed on these programs are based on his 12-year intensive study of married couples. Dr. Stanley also created the prevention and Relationship Enhancement program to help struggling marriages. Also, joining him on this classic Family Talk broadcast is the late Dr. Gary Smalley. He was a celebrated author, a popular radio host, and a highly sought after speaker. Dr. Smalley's effective and meaningful work for supporting godly marriages continues on through the Smalley Institute. Today we are continuing their discussion with Dr. James Dobson about resolving conflict in marriage. They'll begin by recapping yesterday's program and then they'll expand on the harmful ways that many couples try to deal with conflict. Doctors Stanley and Smalley also share some helpful techniques that husbands and wives can use to better handle disputes. Here again is Dr. Dobson to reintroduce our guests and this topic on today's edition of Family Talk.
- Dr. James Dobson: Gary, we explained yesterday that you brought this concept and Dr. Stanley's work to my attention when we were together during the summer, and in fact said that you went through a seminar. Now you've been doing this for 30 years. There's not a whole lot new these days when you've been doing something for

30 years, and yet you took the time to go through Dr. Stanley's seminar and said at the end of the program that you and Norma were greatly helped by it, in spite of the fact you got a great marriage. What did you hear that was so helpful to you?

Dr. Gary Smalley: Well, it not only helped Norma and I, but when Mike and I, my youngest son who he was with me and on our way home from this very conference, we were in the car driving from Springfield to Branson and we got into an argument over something about he's working with me in ministry. Okay? We started to escalate and I got angry, he got angry and we had come from his conference, and so Mike and I are enough alike, so that... And we said, "Let's stop," and we did what they suggested. "Let's get into this tomorrow, let's pick a time, and you and I can use their communication method that they teach." We got together the next day for 20 minutes to try to figure out when we were going to meet, but we use their method and solve the whole thing in 20 minutes, and that has never happened with Mike and I, because we're so much alike personality that oftentimes it'll take us longer, we'll get around to it eventually, but just like that, really-

Dr. James Dobson: The point is that it's not just good for newlyweds. You are laying the foundation to marriage, but these things last as long as you live, conflict continues to occur throughout a lifetime.

Dr. Scott Stanley: In all important relationships and how it's handled is important in any relationship.

Dr. Gary Smalley: And I still can't get Norma to agree with everything I want. She still as an individual-

Dr. James Dobson: There's no set of videotapes that's going to do that, man.

Dr. Gary Smalley: She reminds me to watch them now and then.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me see if I can bring our listening audience up to speed, Scott, for those that didn't hear yesterday, let's talk again about the basic concept that good relationships, loving relationships, Christian relationships, well-founded relationships have conflict. All of us have conflict, and I've seen a few marriages where it was kind of buried, but everybody's got conflict.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: And so the big question is what you do with it when it occurs?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: And what occurred to me as you were talking yesterday is that anger, which is really the end result of conflict, is not just emotional in nature, it's biochemical.

There are changes in your body when you get angry. There are of course the hormones that are released, adrenaline and others. Your heartbeat accelerates, your blood pressure goes up, your eyes dilate and you're ready for the fight or flight mechanism. You got to do something with that.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: You don't just say, "I don't feel that way." I mean those who do that have a new set of problems. So what are you going to do with it? Now, you talked about two bad ways of dealing with that yesterday that are predictive of marital difficulties and even divorce. The first is withdrawal, where usually the man about... Gary, you said 85% of the time, the man pulls into a shell and his wife is intensely frustrated because she didn't know what to do with all the anger she has. The second is to escalate it, to take what is just a normal conflict and turn it into a civil war or an atomic bomb. Those are two bad ways. Now, there are two other ways of dealing with this, two other temperaments or characteristics that we need to talk about very quickly and then hurry on to some solutions, some better ways. What's number three?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Invalidation, which can be either subtly or more directly putting down the thoughts, feelings, concerns of others. And by the way, you're right on about the physiology that goes along with this because when that gets really rolling, that's what makes it so hard for people to behave well. But invalidation, I'll give you just a quick story. A few months ago, my wife and I and two sons who are five and two and a half, were on our way to the post office and I'm going the way I always go and turning left the way I always turn left and someone had come along and painted these two yellow lines on the road there where I like to turn into the post office. I don't know who did this, but these two yellow lines are there and I'm turning over these yellow lines. Nancy just says kind of casually, "You really shouldn't turn left across two yellow lines like that right here." And I said, "That's ridiculous." Now I don't know how it works in your homes, but when I say, "That's ridiculous," for some reason-

Dr. James Dobson: That's not smart. That's not smart.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Nancy doesn't seem to feel warm and validated and close to me at that time. And we just exploded into this very quick hot, angry little argument and after about two minutes of this, our older son yells out from the back seat. Now he's five. He goes, "That's not healthy arguing, guys." Said, "Who made you a marital expert?" That brought-

Dr. James Dobson: Kids worry a lot about that. Don't they?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely, kids are very, very tuned into and reactive to the conflict between the parents.

Dr. James Dobson: Be more specific about invalidation.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Okay. On the subtle side, it could be something like, let's say my spouse said, "Boy, I was doing this project at work and I got this evaluation and it was good, but it wasn't great. I was really hoping for something else." And if I as that spouse would say, "Gee, that's okay. It'll be better next time. No big deal, you'll bounce back." That's a very subtle invalidation because I'm kind of ignoring the pain.

Dr. James Dobson: It gets a lot nastier than that though.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. The stronger forms are name-calling, character assassination-

Dr. James Dobson: You are so stupid.

Dr. Gary Smalley: Exactly.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right?

Dr. Gary Smalley: You are so stupid.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Which is the stuck-

Dr. James Dobson: How could you something that dumb?

Dr. Scott Stanley: If you look in the sermon on the mountain of things Christ said, he comes down very hard on those kinds of character assassination statements when we call other people a fool and it's very hard to recover from.

Dr. James Dobson: In fact, Scott, I read something in your material that really did surprise me, but it makes sense that one negative comment outweighs as many as 20 or 25 positive comments.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. There's been a couple of studies done that show, some by John Gottman, University of Washington, some by Howard Markman and his colleague Cliff Notarius. Howard's my colleague, where in these studies they look at the ratio of negative to positive as couples interact and you can't stay above one... It depends on who you talk to, whether it's one to five or one to 20. But the bottom line is those negative incidents, those negative behaviors put downs, invalidations carry far more weight than the positive. So you can work really hard to do more positive in your marriage, but that's spitting into the wind if you're not controlling the negative because the negative puts you in a big hole.

Dr. James Dobson: We've covered three of them now, these three danger points, these three characteristics that are really kind of signals to the marriage that is in trouble or will be in trouble. And the fourth one is negative interpretation.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah, there's a number of studies actually where the experts in this area in other labs than ours, but what these studies show over and over again are that when couples are really having trouble or on their way to it, they tend to read in much more negative meanings to what the other says, to what the other does than what are actually there.

Dr. James Dobson: You're referring to the recipient here. You're referring to the one who is hearing these things from another person.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly. For example, this argument we had going to the post office, we had all four danger signs in like five minutes, boom, boom, boom. Not necessarily in this order, but I'm sure if I stop and think about it a minute, when Nancy tells me, "Don't turn across that double yellow line or don't do this," which of course she's telling me that because she loves me. All right and loves the family.

Dr. James Dobson: And loves herself.

Dr. Gary Smalley: [inaudible 00:10:17].

Dr. Scott Stanley: Oh, yeah, she's on the right side of the car too, but there's a positive motivation there. But I might read that, you're trying to control me, you're telling me what to do or you don't think I'm a good driver. Any of those kinds of thoughts that can come so automatically over time when a couple's not doing well, those kinds of negative ways of viewing why the other does what they do become entrenched. And it gets to the point where even if the other does something positive, it will just get reinterpreted, what do you want now? You're trying to manipulate me.

Dr. Gary Smalley: So in other words, if they believe that somebody else's motives are negative or whatever that motive they believe is, as soon as they believe it, they'll start seeing it and hearing it no matter is-

Dr. James Dobson: Everything is run through that screen.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. And not only that, in the sociological or social psychology research, what you see is that not only are people incredibly prone to see what they expect to see in their relationships, we actually pull from other people behavior consistent with what we're expecting from them. And there's no way out of this unless we're willing to ask ourselves, are there ways I'm being unfair to my mate? Are there ways I'm being unfair to my coworker and how I'm viewing them and how I see what they do? And this is not to say we're not sinners, we're all sinners and we can have some bad motives, but when we get around to really thinking, this person's just trying to do us harm.

Dr. James Dobson: Scott, your reference to sinners there makes me want to ask you about the scriptural implications of all this. Do you see these psychological explanations being consistent with principles in scripture?

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely. It's been one of the great delights of mine being involved in this research to watch how things weave so nicely with what's said throughout scripture. And any of the listeners can go and check this later on today if they wish and look it over. Scripture says some very positive things very clearly about how to have great marriages or just how have great relationships. For example, 1 Corinthians 13 about love, very powerful passage and it's pretty descriptive, but when you really look at over, if you think about all the passages in Proverbs and in James chapter 3, Galatians 5, 1 Peter 3, look in these chapters and look for the very specific descriptions of the kind of patterns that destroy relationships. And they're the same things that we're talking about. Look for some of the hardest sayings or Jesus is really getting after people and what he's teaching about how others are treated. And it's the same stuff. It's so remarkable.

Dr. James Dobson: Ephesians 5 with regard to the fathers and their children comes out of the same-

Dr. Scott Stanley: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: Gary, you had indicated as we said that you went through this seminar. How are you all able to use this now? How are you able to change these? One thing to say, "Yes, that's me, I've made that mistake." How do you adjust?

Dr. Gary Smalley: In just a moment, I'm sure Scott's going to explain this communication method that he uses. He's tweaked one that we've all used, but it's really powerful. How I've used it and what he instructed was Norma and I agreed at their encouragement that when we do something that's fun together, we go out shopping or we go to something in Branson or we go wherever, okay, it's a fun time. We're going to be together maybe for several days, vacation or whatever. We've now agreed that we're not going to discuss an issue that has the potential of causing escalation or a hot button area until we get back and schedule it.

It has already solved many things because by the time we get back and actually get into it, then we use his method. It's so easily solved that it's kind of like a joy to do it. Now here's what's interesting about being married 31 years, we came all the way down to about three hot issues that we really didn't get into that often. We've got hundreds of issues that we've solved, but there was three of them we didn't like to touch. And so his method really allowed us to touch those areas and get to the heart of them. And you know what? We feel safe, both of us do. And that's what's really caused us both to relax and oh, now we can get into him.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Gary's really hitting on something crucial here and in some ways this is what it all comes together to mean. For too many couples, too much of the time, they go through their married life walking on eggshells and there is a sense that they're in a minefield together. They don't know exactly when they're going to step on a mine next, but they know it's not too far from now. They're going to

step on one and when they tend to step on them, they don't handle them very well. They get the escalation, they get the invalidation. And what that leads to is an inability just to relax in your marriage.

I mean, it's very clear what people want most from their marriage is a best friend and a safe haven, and that's the hope that we start out with. But when it gets to the point where you're feeling like, I can't relax around this person, I can't even talk with this person. If there's one comic strip that says it all where the couple is in this counselor's office and the husband is answering a question that the counselor obviously just asked and he says, "Oh, the reason why I don't talk to her, that's when I've noticed we've had most of our arguments." Now, when you begin to associate the presence of your partner with conflict and with things not going well and with tension, that's just going 180 from what people want.

Dr. Gary Smalley: And it kills intimacy because when you validate your partner's feelings and needs, you're going to get into conflict and it's really a door waiting intimacy, but lots of couples avoid it.

Dr. Scott Stanley: So one of the things that Gary's talking about, we emphasize ground rules to help couples manage their issues better. And one of the ground rules is to preserve times for fun and friendship and the sensual side of the relationship where those times are carved out. We often don't do that very well in America. Those times are carved out and they're protected from conflict and issues. We're not going to deal with issues and if they come up during that time, we'll put it in this other time.

Dr. James Dobson: I've got one eye on the clock here, Scott. There are four of those strong recommendations that you make. We've just talked about timeouts. Tell us the other three real quickly.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Okay, the timeouts ones, agreeing to protect time. One of the things, and Gary's been alluding to our communication technique, let me just get this out here at the end. We teach couples a very simple structured way to communicate when they're having difficulty or when it's a tough topic. It's not a way we want them communicating most of the time, but it's a great way to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry. And what we do is we'll teach the couple to take some object. We usually hand out pieces of card stock that have the rules for this technique on it, but any object can do a pen is fine, and whoever has that object has the floor, that person's the speaker. Okay, so I have this pen right now, I'm the speaker. Let's say I'm having a talk with Gary and we're upset about something, if he doesn't have the pen, he's the listener.

So the role is automatically defined. Just that simply. Now when I'm in the speaker role, I have a couple rules I'm going to follow. I'm going to try to speak for myself. I'm going to try to say what I'm saying in short enough segments that it's easy for the listener to do their part and I'm going to stop, so I'm going to say a bit. And then the listener has their job, which is to paraphrase back what they

hear the speaker's saying. So the listener might say, "Well, it sounds like you were really frustrated the other day when this happened." Just that simple act of feeding back. Here's what I hear you saying. They don't have to agree.

A good listener doesn't have to agree at all to be listening well, but the hardest thing for the listener, the paraphrasing can be hard for some people, but it's really not that hard of an act. The hardest thing for the listener is to edit out their desire to rebut, and that's not the way it was at all. It didn't start that way. We want the listener to sit back, paraphrase and wait until they get the floor. When they get that object, they have the floor, it's their turn, they can speak, the couple can have the floor, go back and forth as often as they want.

Dr. James Dobson: And if the person hangs onto the pen too long-

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. Gary Smalley: And you only give the pen or the object when you really feel understood. That's what's the key about this, and I use it with McDonald's, driving up to a fast food place. The person in the car has only one real purpose, and that's to be understood. The person inside needs to understand, and so you don't drive forward until you think you've been understood. And they usually repeat back, "Did I hear you say you want a hamburger?" They'll repeat it back. Same thing in marriage. We don't pass the object. See, that gives the safety, I feel understood now my feelings and needs. But this may sound simple on the surface right here, but it's not easy.

Dr. James Dobson: It sure beats screaming.

Dr. Gary Smalley: That's because it does.

Dr. Scott Stanley: And you bring up a great point, Gary. Simple does not mean easy, but a lot of the very best things we can do to really take care of our marriages and our family relationships are things that are simple that take some effort to do right.

Dr. James Dobson: You also recommend something I've been talking about for a number of years, and that is structured time together.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's don't fight tonight. We're both tired, we're exhausted. Whenever the subject of my mother-in-law comes up, we find ourselves in conflict. Let's don't go to bed on that. Saturday morning, 10 o'clock we go to breakfast, we get a babysitter for the kids and Saturday morning we're going to talk about this rationally.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Exactly right. And in fact, couples generally are not going to do very well putting an issue off that's just come up. Say it is that time to relax and you're out to

have a nice time and an issue's come up. Well, putting them off isn't going to work very long if that other time doesn't happen. Couples have to have times where they're sitting down together, talking constructively about issues and surprisingly, I don't think couples have to spend that much time doing that. It's just that so many couples spend no time doing that, that any amount of time doing it well is so productive.

Dr. Gary Smalley: When I was in graduate school, Norma and I used to have Friday night, and if we had a number of things to talk about, we held it. Because there was so much studying, so on. We held it for Friday night and we'd always say, "Friday night's coming, Friday night's coming," and we had a chance to discuss things and get it out. Because we knew every week it was coming.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah. It's just agreeing when we're going to deal with issues and how we're going to deal with them better and when we're not and how we're not.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. We've talked about structuring time to talk. We've talked about speaker, listener techniques, we've talked about timeouts. Now let's talk about the contract.

Dr. Scott Stanley: The contract really that Gary's talking about is getting couples to come to an agreement on these other ground rules. We call these things ground rules, that these are the basic rules for how things are going to go in our marriage as to how we deal with conflict, when we're dealing with it, when we're not. What's going to happen if one says, "I think we need a time-out right now, this is not going well." This is sort of the Geneva Convention for our marriage for what's okay and what's not okay, and what will work between us for dealing with issues-

Dr. James Dobson: Or our constitution.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: What is a constitution in the country? It is a statement of how you're going to function.

Dr. Scott Stanley: It's the basic rules.

Dr. James Dobson: Right.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And you need one in the marriage as well.

Dr. Scott Stanley: That's right. And it goes back to that thing that we talked about in the previous show, that where are the rules for marriage? I mean, there really are rules, but

so many couples aren't very clear between the two of them about how they're trying to observe them and what those are.

Dr. James Dobson: Scott and Gary, we have laid down the principles now. We've explained very quickly what you've tried to say in four videos and a book and who knows how many other places. What we need now are the practical questions that come out of these principles and we've got a gallery full of people. Unfortunately, we're out of time. Let's invite them to the microphone and hear those either tomorrow or as soon as we can schedule the time and see if we can apply some of this.

Dr. Scott Stanley: Great.

Dr. James Dobson: Scott, thank you for being our guest. I don't know why you and I have not met till this point. I'm delighted to know that you're there and we'll now follow your material with interest. Gary, once again, you've made a great contribution and let's go fishing again.

Dr. Gary Smalley: I'm looking for that.

Dr. James Dobson: All right.

Roger Marsh: Well, what a great refresher that couples should establish ground rules in order to settle disagreements in a healthy way. I'm Roger Marsh. Hope you can apply these helpful suggestions and advice to your marriage relationship as well. Now tomorrow here on Family Talk, Dr. James Dobson, along with Dr. Scott Stanley and Dr. Gary Smalley will be answering some questions from a studio audience. In the meantime, be sure to visit our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk and you'll find all of the resources Dr. Smalley and Dr. Stanley mentioned today. Now, if you and your spouse would like a closer relationship with the Lord and with each other, be sure to sign up for our free 10-day marriage series. Prayer is a very powerful tool. It can really change all sorts of situations, and when you sign up for our 10-day marriage series, you'll receive an encouraging email from Dr. James Dobson about how to strengthen your marriage, and that email will include some words of wisdom from Dr.

And also a prayer you can pray together at the end of your time of devotion. Now it's easy to sign up for this 10 day marriage challenge. All you have to do is go to drjamesdobson.org/10daymarriageseries. Once you're there, simply input your email address and click on the signup button. It is that easy. From the day you sign up and for the next 10 days, you'll receive that encouraging email from Dr. Dobson. So go online to drjamesdobson.org/10daymarriageseries. Parents who are working on maintaining their marriage also have a big responsibility of raising kids to be equipped to take on the world as well when they become adults. To walk alongside you and better provide you as a parent with timeless, biblically based advice and tools, Dr. Dobson has bundled his bestselling books, *Bringing Up Boys* and *Bringing Up Girls*, together, and we'll be happy to send

you that bundle as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

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Announcer:

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