



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Navigating Your Teen's Emotional Storms – Part 2

Guest(s): Sharon Hersh

Air Date: July 22, 2025

Dr. James Dobson: Hello, everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, the 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 broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, And if you're the parent of a teenage daughter, you've probably heard those heart-stopping words, "Mom, I hate my life!" Well, maybe you've even heard the even more painful version that ends with, "And I hate you, too!" These emotional outbursts can leave parents feeling helpless and confused, wondering where did they go wrong. Well, on today's edition of Family Talk, Dr. Dobson continues his conversation with counselor and author Sharon Hersh about navigating the turbulent waters of adolescence. Sharon has spent years helping families rebuild relationships that seem to be beyond repair. Her book, *Mom, I Hate My Life*, offers both hope and practical guidance for parents struggling to connect with their teenage daughters. On today's program, Sharon will tackle some of the most challenging issues facing families today—eating disorders, depression, self-harm, even thoughts of suicide. These are not easy topics to discuss, and if you have young children with you, you'll want to go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk and listen to the program at your own discretion. Now these aren't easy topics to discuss, but they're conversations that we simply can't afford to avoid. So here now is Dr. James Dobson to begin part two of his discussion with author Sharon Hersh on today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Sharon, let's get right into it. Your book, *Mom, I Hate My Life*, has such practical information in it, and it was written specifically to help strengthen the mother-daughter relationship. Now, I don't want to go back to all the things we said yesterday or we wouldn't get onto the new material, but you have counseled many teenage girls who are going through this difficult time of life. And that title for your book came from your own experience and observation, didn't it?

Sharon Hersh: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: There are those moments when teenage girls, especially, will say to their mom, "I do hate my life." And they imply that it's probably your fault, is that right?

Sharon Hersh: Yes. I suspect many mom's listening yesterday heard the title and thought, "My daughter has said that." And she hasn't known what to say in response. I mean, who ever dreamed that that little baby that we brought home from the hospital, or even for those adoptive moms out there who adopted, would think that that little sweet, precious baby girl would grow up to say, "I hate my life." And mom is thinking, "Well, I've tried so hard to give you a good life."

Dr. James Dobson: "And I hate you." That's even more hurtful.

Sharon Hersh: Yes. It is hurtful.

Dr. James Dobson: And it is very common for kids to say that to their parents.

Sharon Hersh: Especially to moms, who, as we said yesterday, often become the target for all of this emotional upheaval that goes on in a girl's world.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, I think of the typical experiences in a loving home, where mom has given a birthday party for the child every year, invited friends in, there's been a cake and there's been laughter and games and so much love and all of this kind of thing going on through the years and suddenly that individual, that child turns 13 and says, "I hate you." It makes no sense at all.

Sharon Hersh: It doesn't make sense.

Dr. James Dobson: And it sticks in the heart. Doesn't it?

Sharon Hersh: And there is so much about the adolescent girl's world that doesn't make sense. Unless moms will take a minute in the midst of the emotional chaos to remember it was like to be female. And sometimes that can be helpful for moms to go back and remember what they felt like when they wanted to belong. And they maybe were coming to a new school, or they had a boy that they were interested in and how they dealt with their own emotional life sometimes can be powerful in connecting them with their daughters.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay. At the end of the program last time, we promised to talk about specifics and get some advice from you on how parents can deal with these circumstances that unfortunately are very, very common today. The first one I want to talk about is the high incidence of eating disorders that are out there. It is a national epidemic.

Sharon Hersh: It is. And I would say further that if a girl is not struggling with a specific eating disorder, that to be growing up female in America today is to struggle with body image. And so, every teenage girl at times feels fat, does not like the way that she looks or was designed or that her body is structured. And that becomes the fertile ground, when you combine it with all this emotional angst that we're talking about, for eating disorders to develop.

And so moms, who are listening, take a deep breath. As we talk about some of the specific warning signs for these disorders, you don't have to close your eyes and look the other way in fear. In fact, that anxiety will immobilize you. And so, when our daughters say, "Mom, I hate my life. Mom, I feel fat. Mom, I hate myself." And we are tempted to roll our eyes and to think, "Oh brother, you have everything. You have nothing to complain about." We miss an opportunity to get at what is beneath the surface, which-

Dr. James Dobson: What's usually down there?

Sharon Hersh: And what's usually down there is two things. First of all, "I want to belong." Especially as females, I believe we were made, designed with a design to connect and we were born into relationship, created for relationship. And teenage girls, when they come to see me and they begin to read their poetry to me and talk about their angst, almost immediately I begin to hear these themes of, "I don't fit in. I don't belong. I'm not with the popular kids. I don't have a boyfriend." What they don't know is that every teenage girl-

Dr. James Dobson: Is feeling the same thing.

Sharon Hersh: ... feels the exact same thing. And so, letting our daughters express that though, without telling them, "Well, of course you belong, you have this friend and you have youth group, and you're a part of this soccer team." Letting them express how they feel, we can affirm their need to belong and let them talk about it and get those emotions out. You see, eating disorders develop when emotions go underground. And that's the second component, it is that girls somehow feel ashamed or shut down or unable to express themselves. And so food becomes a soother, a companion, a medicator-

Dr. James Dobson: A weapon.

Sharon Hersh: ... or a weapon-

Dr. James Dobson: Sometimes.

Sharon Hersh: ... sometimes. "I'm not going to eat. I'm going to be in control. I'm not going to feel things." All along the spectrum of the eating disorders. Eating disorders have to do with emotional expression.

Dr. James Dobson: Alright, help parents recognize the symptoms of it because it can happen right around you. It's always a shock. And it shouldn't be really because there are certain characteristics and there are certain physical changes and things that people should recognize. But talk about it.

Sharon Hersh: And depending on which eating disorder you're talking about. If you're talking about bulimia or anorexia, anorexia is where you starve yourself and bulimia is a disorder where you may binge and then purge. You're going to look-

Dr. James Dobson: Vomiting deliberately.

Sharon Hersh: Yes. You're going to look for a girl who maybe for a special event, goes on a diet. And she gets a sense, "Oh, this is where I can have some control, some power." And then if she does not have a healthy emotional life and is not communicating and expressing things, this is where it can all go haywire, where she can begin to think, "Maybe if I don't eat anything, then I'll really get skinny." And she discovers when she doesn't eat anything, or she begins to push aside food on her plate, or maybe she'll only eat certain foods or she won't eat but one meal a day, or you'll notice that she's drinking a lot of water or exercising a lot. You're dealing with more anorexic behaviors.

And the time to intervene in an eating disorder is when you first start to see something. I hear moms say, "Well, I didn't want to say, I was afraid to say something because I didn't want to plant the idea in her head." If your daughter is in the culture today, the idea is already in her head and she is talking about it. She's talking about with her peers. Teenage girls bond over talking about their diets and their bodies and their exercise.

How far better for them to be able to talk about it with their moms? And I encourage moms to say, "I have noticed something. I've noticed that you're not eating, or I've noticed that you're going to the bathroom after every meal. If I suspect there's an eating disorder going on here," because mom is saying, "I know about eating disorders. If I suspect something, then you need to know that I'm going to be finding us a counselor to talk about. And we're going to be talking about these things. I will not turn my head the other way while you get a full blown eating disorder."

Dr. James Dobson: "Leave me alone, mom. It's my life, it's none of your business. I'll eat what I want to, and I'm not going to listen to you. So get off my case."

Sharon Hersh: And let me talk back to you and say, "In some ways you can eat what you want, but I am not going to look the other way. I love you too much to ignore things that I know could be potentially dangerous." And this is where moms, once again, have a power because really to be female in America is to struggle with body image. And so we can say to our daughters, "Listen, I know what it's like-"

Dr. James Dobson: I resent that, by the way. You know, I really do.

Sharon Hersh: You do.

Dr. James Dobson: I resent a culture that takes these vulnerable kids, as you said, girls are born into relationship. That is extremely important to them. And at that time of great vulnerability-

Sharon Hersh: It is a great time.

Dr. James Dobson: ... to have the culture just throw that stuff at them and twist and warp them. I do resent that. I resent what Hollywood is doing.

Sharon Hersh: And it breaks my heart for teenage girls. Because as I see these wonderful, amazing girls come into my office, who should be excited about playing volleyball or writing poetry or playing music or sharing their faith. They're concentrating on their thighs or how big their stomach is or what size they wear. And it has saddened me and made me passionate for teenage girls that they were made for so much more than this. And even my own dear daughter. When she'll say to me, "Now, mom, remind me why God made me this way. Or remind me why I'm not just going to quit eating tomorrow because I feel so fat tonight." I will say to her, "Because, Kristin, you were made for so much more than just to obsess about a dress size or a number on the scales."

And as moms, we can most powerfully do this when we say to our daughters, "I understand. I've been on a diet. I've thought I was fat. I can see how you would get obsessed. And I can also see how it can take you down destructive paths. I'm not going to turn the other way while this happens."

Dr. James Dobson: If you have this continuing conflict over food, you see it coming, the child will not respond to you. You do seek out help. Where do you go to find it?

Sharon Hersh: Especially in this field of eating disorders. It's so important, Dr. Dobson, to talk to a counselor who involves, if not the family, at least the mother in the counseling. I have seen so many teenage girls in my practice who have gone through some eating disorder counseling, and they maybe leave the counseling without the eating disorder, but they hate their parents and their mom has become the blame for everything.

And what's unfortunate about that is the counselor is not there when it's her birthday or when she needs help with her homework or when her heart is broken over a boy, it's mom who's there. And that relationship needs to be healed and restored. So look for a counselor that works with mother-daughter.

Dr. James Dobson: You're one of them.

Sharon Hersh: I am. And I have seen powerful healing, especially in the realm of eating disorders, as that relationship is healed. And then you can also talk to other people in your church, in your school, whose daughters who've maybe gone through similar things. This means, moms, we have to be able to be courageous, tell the truth about some of our struggles.

Dr. James Dobson: That's a hard one there.

Sharon Hersh: It is.

Dr. James Dobson: They don't want to admit it. I mean, the people will hide this when they won't hide anything else. If their kids are going through this kind of adolescent rebellion, every impulse is to keep quiet about it.

Sharon Hersh: It is. And I think that's because we have maybe taken things too personally, or believe we're too responsible for the outcome of our children's lives. But we suffer and our children suffer as well. It is a wonderful model to our children that when we are struggling, we get help. And so I encourage moms whose daughters may yell, like you did in our little role play, and who may want nothing to do with counseling to say, "We need help." Make it about the two of you and say... Even some moms I've heard say to their daughters, "Okay, I'm going to go even if you don't go, I'm going to find out some things so that we can begin to make some changes in our family."

Dr. James Dobson: On some occasions you need to seek out a physician, don't you?

Sharon Hersh: Absolutely. Depending where you are on the continuum of eating disorders. And this can maybe lead us into the next subject of talking about depression. Studies have really confirmed that often, when girls are treated for depression, their eating disorders go away. And so, seeking a good physician who understands adolescents and understands eating disorders or a psychiatrist who specializes in adolescent girls, can sometimes help get to the root of some of these emotional issues that we've been talking about. And that can help with some of the acting out that our girls do with eating disorders or self-mutilation, cutting themselves.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. I want to make sure we cover some of those other topics. I mentioned last time that I've wanted to talk to you about conflict between mothers and daughters with regard to clothing. Kids tend to want to be very suggestive today, they want to show as much skin as possible. And that's what their friends are doing. And it drives the mother crazy, because she knows that's not only wrong, but that it leads to behavior that's harmful. And she just says, "Do you think you're going to tell me everything to do in my life? You can't. You're trying to tell me even what to wear? This is my life. This is not your life." You've heard all this before.

Sharon Hersh: I have. And I think of moms out there who are really well-meaning and trying to control the situation. And so they go into their daughter's room and they look through everything and they pull out everything they don't like, or they look through her backpack and discover that she's taking this one outfit to school to wear and she's wearing something else at home. And I understand that this is disturbing behavior. And that especially, sometimes, when we as parents are maybe too focused on the outward appearance as well, because we parents have peer pressure, too.

Dr. James Dobson: Sure do.

Sharon Hersh: We get so entangled in some of our daughter's fads of the moment that we create a power struggle in which most adolescent power struggles, the parents lose. And so I encourage moms with regard to the clothing. Obviously you're going to have standards in your home and you have to understand your child, because every girl is different. The reasons why she's attracted to a certain behavior, I encourage moms, "I know this is hard and this is where you need other moms to talk to. If you can develop a sense of humor about some of this as well, it does not come down as such swooping control."

Because when moms are calling and telling me they're so distressed because their daughter wants to wear a low cut shirt, I know their distress is real. But if they make this the battle that they want to bleed and die in, there are going to be battles down the road. And so to show your daughter that you can be an ally. I remember when the whole belly baring craze began, and my daughter was certainly interested in showing off her belly button. And I remember saying to, we went and looked through a magazine and I said, "Look, let's count all of the bellies that we see in this magazine."

And we probably counted 36 in one magazine. And I said, "What is the big deal with this? I don't understand it." And my daughter just said, "Well, I guess mom, if you look good, you want everybody to know it." So I said, "Well, let's go into my closet." And I said, "I think maybe I'm going to start dressing this way." She was about 13 and her eyes got really big.

Dr. James Dobson: Don't you are, mom.

Sharon Hersh: And we both decided that I would not look good in that style. But I think it lightened the moment and allowed her to know I am going to give you some guidance and direction here with regard to dress, but you know what, what you do when you get to school, I don't have control over. And I would rather us have a relationship in which we can talk about these things.

Dr. James Dobson: I'm watching that clock and I'm really concerned, because there are so many things that we need to talk about. You have discussed that in your book.

Sharon Hersh: Yes, and...

Dr. James Dobson: *Mom, I Hate My Life* is the name of it. It's published by Shaw. And we're talking to Sharon Hersh. Say what you're about to say.

Sharon Hersh: And for moms who are thinking, "Does my daughter have bulimia? Does she have anorexia? Is she depressed?" A lot of girls who struggle with emotional angst, there is a growing trend. They will cut themselves with pieces of a mirror or a pocket knife or pieces of glass. And of course this shocks and scares mothers to death. Get the book. It gives you all the indicators, things to look for.

Dr. James Dobson: This is one we really need to focus on, because it makes absolutely no sense to anybody. Why would a kid who wants to be accepted, why would a teenager want to do something to permanently disfigure herself in the way that's occurring? I mean, putting a tongue ring in the middle of the tongue, where every word you say is affected by it, that is absolutely irrational. Kids are doing this kind of stuff today.

Sharon Hersh: And the cutting, really, I will say to moms who call me desperate, it's the most desperate phone call I get just about, "I've discovered that my daughter is cutting. She has scars on her arms. She's carved a word or a design into her arm or her thigh." And of course, mothers are scared to death. Just as eating disorders are about emotional expression, cutting is totally about emotional expression. It's a girl saying sometimes what you just said, "I don't belong. I don't fit in. And because I cannot find a way to be accepted in this culture of appearance obsession, I'm going to go ahead and show my anger and frustration with this culture and with my peers, who are so harsh and cruel, by cutting myself."

Often times it's a girl who feels like she has no outlet for emotional expression. Some of these girls have told me they're in their bedroom by 8:00 at night, their parents are watching TV. They may be like most of the families of adolescents in America, where there are eight minutes of meaningful interaction a day. Well, girls need a lot more interaction than that. We have a lot of words inside of us.

Dr. James Dobson: Where do you start as a counselor to reach a kid like that?

Sharon Hersh: I get her to talk about what's going on in her inner world. And I will say to her, "Go home and write down everything that you're angry about. Everything that you feel like has been taken from you, that you're upset about." And moms sometimes will look at me and say, "You want her to focus on her negative feelings? We want her to get out of them." But what she needs is someone to hear them and to say, "Of course you feel that way. It is a hard, cold world out there."

Dr. James Dobson: Sharon, you call that the hieroglyphics of hurt.

Sharon Hersh: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: What a great phrase. I mean, that really does describe it. Talk about suicide and especially the warning signs.

Sharon Hersh: That is the scariest time for a mom. When a daughter begins to withdraw, to exhibit for more than certainly two to three weeks problems with sleeping, eating, she's dropped out of her activities. She seems joyless. Maybe she is saying things like, "I wish I could die." Moms, if your daughter is in angst and says that, you need to ask her, be brave, ask her, "Have you thought about how you would do something like that?" That gives you an indication as to whether

she's really formulating a plan in her brain. And if she is, you need to get her into help immediately. And you say to her, "I understand you are hurting. We need to go see someone. I understand you don't want to. I will take us. And I promise you that I will be there for you and support you, but this is going to be something we are going to walk through together."

Dr. James Dobson: Big, big problem. One in five teens considers suicide.

Sharon Hersh: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Fortunately, most don't do it. But the one in five does, that's 20%. That is scary.

Sharon Hersh: It is scary.

Dr. James Dobson: And four out of five individuals that succeed in killing themselves are boys. So it's an even bigger problem there. The girls are more likely to-

Sharon Hersh: Talk about it.

Dr. James Dobson: ... talk about it and even to try it, the boys are more likely to do it.

Sharon Hersh: And because girls are talking about it, once again, we have this great opening into their lives.

Dr. James Dobson: You've got to listen, you've got to be tuned in. During these teen years, you have got to listen. You've got to pay attention. Your daughter, Kristin. We said this last time, your daughter, Kristin, has just gone off to college. We've got 30 seconds left. Tell us what you learned from her.

Sharon Hersh: Well, I tell her often that she is my hero. Because what I learned from her is that it's possible to be in the midst of this culture, which assaults you and bombards you. There were days that I would pick her up and she would get in the car. And she would just sob. Kristin was very active in high school life. She was a cheerleader, an athlete. And yet, she held onto her values. And I think she would tell you if she were here, that part of that came through hours of conversations, where sometimes I thought, "I am too tired to talk about this again." And yet now, as she's on her way, I would take a thousand more hours for those conversations, if I had them.

Dr. James Dobson: And you couldn't get one more of them. You couldn't retrieve anything from childhood, your records in the books. And apparently you did the job very, very well. Our guest is Sharon A. Hersh. She is the author of the book *Mom, I Hate My Life: Becoming Your Daughter's Ally Through the Emotional Ups and Downs of Adolescence*. This is a good book for the parents of teens, and I do recommend it. And Sharon, thank you for two wonderful programs. You did a great job.

Sharon Hersh: Thank you for having me.

Dr. James Dobson: I appreciate you being here today. It's a pleasure to get acquainted with you. And I'm sure we'll talk to you again when you write your next book.

Sharon Hersh: Thanks, Dr. Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: God bless you, friend. You love the Lord, don't you?

Sharon Hersh: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. And that got you through, too.

Sharon Hersh: It did. Oh, nothing more than that.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, it's a pleasure to have you here.

Sharon Hersh: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: You know, sometimes the deepest wounds become the most meaningful scars, reminders of our battles fought and won, and the love that carried us through. You've been listening to Family Talk, and a candid conversation between Dr. James Dobson and counselor and author Sharon Hersh about the serious challenges facing today's teenagers. If you missed any portion of today's broadcast, or if you want to go back to listen to part one, you'll find both parts one and two at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And remember to check out Sharon Hersh's book, *Mom, I Hate My Life: Becoming Your Daughter's Ally Through the Emotional Ups and Downs of Adolescence*. You'll find information about the book and the broadcast when you go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

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Well, I'm Roger Marsh, so glad to have had you with us today. Be sure to join us again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

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