



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Building a Safe Haven in Marriage – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Arch Hart and Dr. Sharon May

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

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Today's program tackles something every married couple faces and that's conflict. Even in the healthiest marriages, disagreements are inevitable. But the key isn't to avoid conflict altogether, but rather how to learn how to handle it in ways that strengthen rather than damage a relationship.

Today on the program, we're digging into the archives for a conversation featuring Dr. Dobson, his dear friend, Dr. Arch Hart and Dr. Hart's daughter, Dr. Sharon May. They bring decades of experience in helping couples build what they called a safe haven marriage.

Now, before he went home to be with the Lord a few years ago, Dr. Hart served as senior professor of psychology and dean emeritus at Fuller Seminary.

Dr. Sharon May is a licensed marriage and family therapist specializing in emotionally focused therapy.

Together you're going to hear them share insights from the book they've written called *Safe Haven Marriage, Building a Relationship You Want To Come Home To*.

Whether you've been married for decades or you're just starting out, today's conversation offers practical wisdom for creating the kind of marriage that feels like a refuge rather than a battleground.

So let's get into today's conversation, right here and right now, on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: You at 35 years of age lost your husband in an accident. Do you mind sharing that with us?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, not at all. In 1995, as my husband was driving on his way to work was killed in a car accident not too far from our house. And so it came very suddenly when

the boys were only 10 and 12. And since then, the Lord has been really faithful to grow life around that.

Dr. James Dobson: How have you dealt with single motherhood, having two sons and trying to be both a mother and father to them?

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, several things. One, I think family support. I could not have done it without Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad at that time were going to retire and they sat me down and said, "We're choosing not to retire. We're going to help you raise these boys," and committed to that. And I had friends and family that just came around and alongside me, some wonderful, wonderful people, and really were there for me through that time. My heart just is filled with thankfulness for them.

And secondly, prayer. I think knowing that the Lord knew that this was going to happen, the Lord knew I'd be a single mom and therefore, he also had the resource and the strength to help me do that.

And knowing that it was for a season, that I wouldn't be a single mom forever, that one day they would leave home and to do the best I could with all the energy I had until that day.

Dr. James Dobson: And you've just about got that done, haven't you?

Dr. Sharon May: That day. Yes, they left for college. So I am now enjoying empty nest, grieving it, but I've earned it.

Dr. James Dobson: Someone said that, "The Lord is not a bridge over trouble. He provides a tunnel through it." So you do go through it then.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: And was He there for you, Sharon?

Dr. Sharon May: In very real ways. When I took the time and slowed myself down to really look up and look around, I could see evidence of God there in very, very real ways.

Just when I needed that next meal because I was too exhausted, when I needed my boys to learn a principle that Mom cannot necessarily teach them. And the Lord daily, would bring me a verse, bring me a book. When I had eyes to acknowledge that God was a living God who wanted to make a difference in my life, and I had eyes to see it, He was right there in very real ways.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, that's encouraging to a lot of people who are going through hard times.

Now, the name of the book again is *Safe Haven for Marriage*. What in the world is a safe haven for marriage? Dr. Hart, how would you define it?

Dr. Arch Hart: Well, let me begin by saying that marriage is hard work and marriage makes more enemies than any other relationship. So the illusion that marriage just easily works out and it's hunky-dory for the rest of your life is just not true.

Dr. James Dobson: And that conflict often hurts too, doesn't it?

Dr. Arch Hart: It does.

Dr. James Dobson: It's intense.

Dr. Arch Hart: It is intense. And so this book has come out of Sharon's research, her doctoral research where she looked at a phenomenon, a particular approach, and she'll say more about that in a moment.

But it is about building a safe haven. It's about the bond, the attachment that occurs between two people. And unless that is safe, emotionally safe, nothing else works, everything else falls apart.

A place that is safe enough for you to say what you feel, talk about your feeling. A place that is safe enough to express what your wants are, a place that is safe enough so you can give it your whole heart. And how to create that sort of bond is really what this book is about.

Dr. James Dobson: Sharon, what percentage of the married folks achieve this goal of building a relationship you want to come home to?

Dr. Sharon May: Very few. I think nowadays there's a lot of pressure on marriage, but I think that's the reason why people do divorce. They divorce to find that safe haven, that secure attachment bond where they feel, "You know me, you understand me, value me."

Couples will come into my office and will say, "I want to leave because I don't feel seen and understood." And that today I think is a hard desire and a demand on marriage that maybe wasn't such a demand years back.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you just explained why people get divorced. What about why people marry?

Dr. Sharon May: You know, Jim, we're created by God to be in relationship first with Him and then with others. So we're not meant to go through life alone. So the Lord has put in us something that draws us to other people and to draw us to a mate of the opposite sex.

And so we get to the brink of marriage, all hopeful that we'll be seen and understood and loved and valued. And someone will just laugh at our jokes and will not mind our quirks. And even though we're different, they will just look

over that and say, "Sweetheart, just let me put my arm around your waist and draw you close because I just love you and care for you."

And I know some of us women, our hearts melt and say, "Yes, of course that's what my husband's going to do. Why wouldn't he?" And the husband say, "The woman's going to respect me and come alongside me and support me in life and value me."

And maybe we didn't get that growing up and we long for that, that this one person will give us what maybe we never had or will continue giving us what we long for.

Dr. James Dobson: So that's the expectation?

Dr. Sharon May: That's the expectation.

Dr. James Dobson: And expectations are made to be dashed. But I'm strongly pro-marriage and pro-family, and this is God's plan.

Dr. Sharon May: It is God's plan and it is God's will for us not to only be in a close relationship with Him, where we're talking and having a flow and a wonderful relationship with Him. He longs for us to have a close and wonderful interchanging relationship with our spouses. So it is God's design really to have some of these expectations met.

But we start getting in life and few years past, and our differences and how we do things different, all begin to mean you don't love me and care for me. "My greatest fear has happened. I've married the man who doesn't see me or value me. He's aloof, he's cold and he's distant and disconnected. Although when I first married him, he was an anchor and strong and stable, but now he's just cold aloof and doesn't have the brain cells for a deep emotional thoughts or feelings."

Dr. James Dobson: You're getting personal now.

Dr. Sharon May: And now suddenly my dream, my longing for that close attachment is ... And what we call an attachment theory is the attachment system clicks in and the attachment system says, "They're not there for you. Danger, danger, danger."

And what happens when our body and our insides of our brain sense danger, they're not there for you. You're not going to be loved. We want to do one of several things. We want to fight or we want to get the heck out of there.

And what women usually do is fight. "If I don't argue with this man, he'll never get to see me, love me or understand me. I have to follow him around the house and say, 'Get back here. Listen to me, understand me.'" And what men

say is, "The soon as I hear her voice go up, soon as I hear the criticism, I withdraw, shut down, back away, I flee."

Dr. James Dobson: Now I'm on the golf course.

Dr. Sharon May: I am on the golf course. I work late.

Dr. James Dobson: Arch, can you give us any idea of how many people come into marriage with tremendous baggage from childhood, especially in this day where families are falling apart, there are multiple marriages and all kinds of difficulties. There's child abuse, there's all kinds of things that people have in their personalities when they get married. How common is that?

Dr. Arch Hart: 99%. I'm saying it's very high. There's the rare person I think who comes into marriage with a rich heritage of ... But even with good parents, it's not necessarily a criticism of parents here because unfortunately, no longer are parents the exclusive influence in a child's life. A lot of this baggage comes from the environment in which one is embedded.

But my feeling is that we should all make the assumption when we go into marriage that we're bringing a lot of baggage with us. And now the work begins.

The analogy I like to use is that of a new car. The marriage is not getting a brand new car, that it's spanking clean and runs nice and starts nice and runs smooth, and then slowly deteriorate. It's the other way around. Marriage starts broken. You get a box of parts, no instruction manual. So the tendency is for young people today to idealize marriage and they, "Well, we've got this fantastic romantic love thing going now, so it's all going to be okay."

Dr. James Dobson: And it feels pretty good.

Dr. Arch Hart: It feels good. And that may be a reason why you will want to begin your attachment, but now the hard work begins. Sharon, you have a ...

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. Well, I think what we talk about in the book and Safe Haven Marriage is specifically what we bring to marriage, our experience of being loved. How we felt we could or couldn't be loved, the ways we try to get our parents to love us or view us or see us.

Dr. James Dobson: That's the attachment bond that you talk about.

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly. Right.

And that is an important point, and especially when I work with my pre-engagement couples or pre-marriage, is what's that piece you're bringing into marriage? Do you feel that no matter how much I try, you're just not going to see me and emotions are not worth bringing up because I will be scolded? So

it's best not to feel. Or do I feel the only way I can get my needs met is by flailing and getting angry and upping the ante and understanding how you express your desire for love and your hurts. It's of vital importance.

Dr. James Dobson: Fights are inevitable.

Dr. Sharon May: And fights are inevitable. And it's how you fight and what you do with the fight, and what happens after the fight. If a couple is able to have "a fight," "You didn't offer me cup of coffee just right at that time and now I feel hurt."

And he's saying, "Well, here we go again, just like at home. And this confirms that relationships are overwhelming."

And she says, "This confirms that relationships won't meet your needs."

And the way they fight, and if they cannot come back afterwards and say, "You know, honey, it's just a cup of coffee. I really love you and care for you. And of course I want to get you your cup of coffee. I was just busy and distracted. And you're right, I need to learn more manners in this marriage."

And the way they can come back and emotionally reconnect, and that will predict if you can stay married or not. And if you're not able to do that, you don't talk for a few days, you sulk, you slam the door, you let tasks or household chores bring you back together. Or, "All right. Well yes. I'll say I'm sorry right now, but underneath, I'm putting that in my back pocket for later on."

Dr. Arch Hart: A scorekeeper.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. "And I'll let you know in the next fight as to ... Well, remember the cup of coffee you never offered me two years ago." And I have some people who say, "I remember on our honeymoon, you never did that."

Dr. James Dobson: And the fights often begin right there, don't they?

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly. And it's how you can emotionally reconnect and how you perceive your spouse to be that safe haven. We can predict that.

Dr. James Dobson: And how, Arch, do you predict that?

Dr. Arch Hart: Well, you bring to your relationship a style of attaching and it's not that difficult.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, what are those styles? You talked about it in the book. What are they?

Dr. Arch Hart: Let Sharon say so.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. Well, secure attachment style is when, "I know you're there for me and I know I can reach you if I need you. And I know you will love me and care for me in return."

The avoidant attachment style says, "You won't be there for me. And actually, you might even scold me for having these needs. And so it's best to just shut down and be neutral and not really feel and not really have those deep longings and needs. And I think everyone should feel that way."

And more the anxious attachment style says, "I'm not sure if you're going to be there and so long for you to be there. And I need to be scanning the horizon. Will you be there or not?" It's sort of, "Do you love me or not love me?"

And then there's more of the fearful attachment style, which in those couples and individuals have come from more abusive families. Where the person that you thought would love you and be there for you, was actually abusive. Maybe a depressed mom who could not be there for you, an alcoholic father. And so now you're fearful. "I long to come close, but I fear you will hurt me."

Dr. James Dobson: Compare the desire for attachment in men with women, is it the same in both?

Dr. Sharon May: We all, God has placed within us, all of us, a desire to be loved, valued, respected, seen, understood. And when I sit with my couples, I do a couple's individual work as well as couple's intensives, both the husbands and wives. I will turn to both the men and the woman and the man will say, "I long to be seen by her, just like her." But now, maybe the way he expresses it is different, but the longing is the same.

Dr. Arch Hart: What this means is that men mask their feelings, but deep down they long for the same intimacy. They really do. But they mask it. They've been hurt so often, they feel so vulnerable, so threatened and have no idea-

Dr. James Dobson: How to deal with this angry woman.

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: She's on his case all the time and he knows she wants something, but he's not prepared to meet it. And so he just gets quieter.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. And he feels, "No matter what I give her, it's not enough. She's always moaning, a complaining. It's like putting a penny to the Grand Canyon. No matter what I do, it's not good enough. I don't hug her the right way. I don't say it the right way. So it's best just to shut down." And then men start saying, "I don't have it in me."

Dr. James Dobson: And what we just described is the rather typical pattern. It can be different, but the woman is pursuing, the man is withdrawing.

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly. The man gets overwhelmed by the woman's emotions. He doesn't know what to do with it. A man will try fix it or problem solve. And a man has not really been taught how to sit with those emotions and how to just understand and listen.

And when he learns how to, he discovers how powerful it is. And he thought, "Well, this emotion, if I just sit and listen, it soothes her. It brings us intimacy and deeper. I wish I could have learned how to do this early and sooner."

But men tend to withdraw and pull away to get away from that intensity. And of course, the minute a woman sees the back of her husband's head, that's just a trigger that says, "Pursue, go after him. He just needs one more lecture. He just needs to be told in a different way."

Dr. Arch Hart: One more mouth to be tightened.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, yes. He will understand me with just one more.

Dr. James Dobson: And that makes him want to get away.

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: You build a cage around him and it's the worst thing you can do.

Dr. Sharon May: And it's that cycle, that couples get stuck in, that we help couples identify in this book that causes them to be emotionally disconnected. Because now they have hurts and resentment and wounds, and they don't know how to come back together again and emotionally reconnect.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, Sharon, in your graduate work towards your Ph.D. in marriage and family counseling, you have examined various approaches to therapy for people who are in that kind of situation.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And you have discovered, and others have confirmed, that there are only two that work very well.

Dr. Sharon May: I would say yes. 75% of couples who say, "Our marriage is terrible. This is not a safe haven. Divorce is a lovely option. We're in distress, will come into emotion-focused therapy counseling. And at the end of counseling, sometimes as short as six months, their relationship is significantly improved. They say, "Yes."

Dr. James Dobson: But emotionally-focused therapy means you're talking about those feelings and how to deal with them.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. We are identifying this fight cycle. We're identifying the emotions that fuel this fight cycle and we're helping a couple talk at the heart of their relationship rather than the behaviors. Now a lot of the-

Dr. Arch Hart: You bring it out into the open in a way that it's safe, that doesn't humiliate one or other of the partners. And then begin to work constructively with those emotions. Right?

Dr. Sharon May: ... Right, right.

And most of marriage and family therapy, we haven't done so well, look at the divorce rate. We're not really impacting it very much. And we have tended to focus more on behaviors or our past early childhood experiences, and not really touching the heart of relationship.

And the next most researched model has come from Neil Jacobson's Integrative Behavioral Therapy. And where he says, "We're no longer going to try and teach people to change, we're going to help people accept."

And when we can help a couple emotionally connect, that is powerful enough that helps marriages last. And we're doing it with quite a high success rate and it's starting to sweep our field.

Dr. James Dobson: Arch, is it not possible to head these things off before people get into a bad marriage? Obviously, these are things that could be talked through, but they're usually not. And premarital counseling is usually focused on the mechanics of sex and money and those kinds of things.

Dr. Arch Hart: It's not that that isn't important, but we have totally neglected the bonding process, that we've not thought about it. We've not helped them examine their attachment styles. What baggage am I bringing here? Where was I hurt in my childhood so that it's now beginning to get in the way?

And there are really three ingredients that help us build a safe place. And Sharon, why don't you just mention those three because I think it's important we emphasize them.

Dr. Sharon May: The three things is, one is trust. I trust that you will be there for me no matter what. No matter how much we fight, no matter how much our differences are that you really are going to see this to the bitter end. We're going to be married no matter what and if I trust that.

And then second, if I feel that you are emotionally available and accessible. That no matter what I'm going through or you're going through that we can pause to give not just our physical attention but our emotional attention. To say, "Honey, come sit next to me. I'm not quite sure what you're going through right now and

I'm not sure what you need from me, but come sit. I want to listen. I want to be emotionally available."

And then thirdly, to be caringly responsive. That I'm going to consider who you are, I'm going to weigh who you are. I'm going to try and take your perspective and weigh that.

And those three ingredients are powerfully important.

Dr. James Dobson: We're going 40 miles an hour and we're laying down good stuff that people need to hear, and yet I just looked up at the clock and the time is gone.

And I want to pick up again with this next time if you all will be our guests and we will just continue talking about this book. It is *Safe Haven Marriage: Building a Relationship You Want To Come Home To*, and everybody does, I think, and many people don't. And you're going to help us a little more next time to figure out how to pull that off.

Thank you all for being our guest. Sorry to have to end the program so quickly.

Dr. Sharon May: Thank you. Dr. Dobson.

Dr. Arch Hart: Thank you very much, as usual.

Roger Marsh: Even in the most challenging seasons of marriage, there's always hope for renewal and restoration.

You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk at a conversation Dr. Dobson recorded a few years ago with his good friend, Dr. Arch Hart and Arch's daughter Dr. Sharon May about building a safe haven marriage. That's the name of the book that Arch and Sharon had written together.

By the way, if you'd like to hear today's program again or share it with someone walking through a difficult season in their marriage right now, you can always find the complete broadcast online at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

And by the way, once you're there, you'll also find a wealth of resources to help strengthen your relationship, including the brand new five day email series based on Dr. Dobson's groundbreaking book called *Love Must Be Tough*.

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Thanks so much in advance for the receipt of your gift. Your generosity helps us reach countless numbers of couples with the tools and encouragement they need to build stronger, more resilient marriages.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh thanking you for spending some time with us today. Be sure to join us again next time right here for part two of Dr. Dobson's conversation with Dr. Arch Hart and Dr. Sharon May. It's coming up next time right here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

- Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.
- Dr. James Dobson: This is James Dobson again. As we close today's program, I just want to thank so many of you out there who make this broadcast possible with your contributions. And I want to tell you how much your generosity is appreciated.
- Roger Marsh: With another Dr. Dobson minute, here's Dr. James Dobson.
- Dr. James Dobson: According to research by Dr. John Cuber, only one in 10 marriages ever attains true intimacy in the relationship. By intimacy, we're referring to that mystical bond of friendship, commitment and understanding that just almost defies explanation.

If you're one who longs to attain intimacy with your spouse, set out deliberately to build it. Talk about your concerns and needs. What is it that's kept you from growing closer as a couple? Commit to open communication and honesty. Look for ways to show your love daily. Start touching each other in a way that communicates love and concern and approval. And above all, treat each other with respect and dignity. With a little effort, you can beat the odds and enjoy a lifelong love.

Roger Marsh:

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