



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Building a Safe Haven in Marriage – Part 2

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

**Air Date:** February 14, 2025

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: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. And today, as many celebrate Valentine's Day with cards, chocolates, flowers, romantic dinners, and more, we're taking an honest look at the reality of marriage. Because while those gestures are wonderful, real love isn't just about roses and romance. It's about learning to navigate the everyday challenges that every married couple faces.

One of the most common challenges is falling into repetitive patterns when conflicts arise, and that will be our topic today here on Family Talk with our special guests, Dr. Arch Hart and his daughter, Dr. Sharon May. Together, they wrote a book called *Safe Haven Marriage: Building a Relationship You Want to Come Home To*. Through their work with countless couples, they have discovered how to transform those frustrating patterns into opportunities for deeper connection, the kind of connection that lasts long after the Valentine's Day chocolates are gone.

Now, in our last program, Dr. Hart and Dr. May explored the challenging cycle where wives pursue and husbands withdraw in marriage. Today, they'll be discussing how to break free from those patterns to create the kind of emotional safety that both spouses desperately need. So whether you're a newlywed or if you've been married for decades, this practical wisdom will help you build the kind of marriage that truly feels like a safe haven. Let's get into part two of this conversation now on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: I want to key off of something that we talked about last time, and that has to do with this vicious cycle that spouses tend to get caught up in. If a couple has fallen into a pattern of the wife being frustrated up to her eyes with her husband, he doesn't say the right things, he doesn't do the right things, there are many people that are experiencing that now. And it goes two ways. So you've got that pattern, and the guy is just into his own world. He's angry about what's going on. He's bewildered. Instead of defending himself, wouldn't it be just pretty straightforward for him to sit down and say, "Let me just be honest with you. I don't understand how I'm failing you. I really do love you. I really do

want to get along with you. And if you'll help me, if you'll teach me what it is you need from me, I'll give it to you. But at this moment, I don't have a clue"?

Shirley did that for me when we first got married. It was that way. I didn't understand what it was she needed. She was reaching for something. We had a wonderful relationship right from the beginning, but, as with all other marriages, there were times when I failed her. And she would react to that, and I honestly didn't know what she needed, and she taught me. And I was listening. That's the difference, I guess, I was listening, and I learned it.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, and you just described pretty much the heart of emotion-focused therapy and what I sit and do for hours and hours.

Dr. James Dobson: So why do I need your book?

Dr. Sharon May: And you're right, because you guys weren't stuck in such a rigid cycle and you weren't stuck and overloaded with resentfulnesses and hurts and attachment injuries and wounds, that you were able to slow down and say, "Even though I see your anger, even though I see the back of your head all the time, I think you really do care for me, and I really care for you." And when a couple can start there, you're right, it is powerful, very, very powerful.

Dr. James Dobson: And it's so simple.

Dr. Sharon May: So simple, isn't it? And it's so biblical.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. And a woman melts when you do that.

Dr. Sharon May: Oh, you do. Yes, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: I mean, he hasn't done any...

Dr. Arch Hart: And men melt also.

Dr. Sharon May: And men melt, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: He hasn't changed anything. All he has said was, "I'm trying to understand, and I want what you want. I just don't know how to get there."

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly. Exactly. And you're right, men melt at the same time, because that could bring tears to a man's eyes to hear his wife say that at the same time. And when you see your spouse's anger... Had one couple that she would throw shoes at their big anniversary clock every time she got in a fight. And I said, "Well, when you're throwing those shoes and you've got that anger and you're crying, what do you long for him to do at that moment?" And he's folded his arms and says, "I know what she wants me to do, pick up the keys and drive off," which he did all the time. She said, "No, I want you to reach for me. Put

your arm around my waist and pull me close and say, 'I love you, my princess, and we'll work through this. It'll be okay.'"

She just wept and melted, and his jaw dropped and said, "I can do that. I just can't handle the shoes flying." And then he was able to say, "I long for the same thing, that you'll come alongside me and say, 'You are my hero. I respect you and love you, and I'm going to be by your side no matter what.'" It is powerful.

Dr. James Dobson: If you could say, "Let's take the fight we had last Wednesday night. I came home from work. I'd worked 12 hours, or 10 or 11. I came home really exhausted. And when I got home, you wanted me to do all this stuff around the house. You wanted me to help carry your load. I kind of felt like I'd done it. I kind of felt like I'd paid the dues for that day, but you wanted more from me. Now, what would you have wanted me to do there? You really want me, when I'm absolutely worn out and I've worked about as hard as you have, to start working again? You want me to be a wimp? Tell me what you want of me and I'll try to hear you."

Dr. Sharon May: Right, absolutely. I need to just get a little respect, a little thankfulness. Yes, you have worked all day, and I don't want to dump on you, but how can we partner in this? Maybe the two of them sit at the kitchen table and say, "Forget the dishes. Let's have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee and a cookie," and they sit and talk about the day and both laugh about, "Well, let's get the paper plates out for tomorrow night," and team in that together.

Dr. James Dobson: The trouble is resentment that isn't resolved begins to be stored and it gets rancid down there in...

Dr. Sharon May: Exactly.

Dr. Arch Hart: There's that deep down level of trust is there. That's why I think these three key ingredients are so important. Because when they are in place, then you find it easier to make these other connections.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, give some advice about how to get off on the right foot and how not to wind up fussing and clawing. Life is so short. I mean, when you're at the stage where, Arch, you and I are, you realize that it passes very quickly. Why blow it on fighting and scratching and clawing each other, and hurting one another, and being angry all the time? There's got to be a better way to live than that.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. If at Heaven's gate God does not care whether or not you folded your towels, don't make that the biggest battle at home.

Dr. Arch Hart: Or put that top on the toothpaste.

Dr. James Dobson: That's not a biggie.

Dr. Sharon May: That's right. No, that's...

Dr. Arch Hart: Yeah, the toilet paper over the top, right?

Dr. Sharon May: That's right, that's right. Pick your battles, pick your battles.

Dr. Arch Hart: I suppose my first comment, then I'll leave Sharon to say something, I would say to young people today, stop thinking about finding the right person. Marriage is all about becoming the right person. And there's a vast difference between those two. It's all about becoming the right person, not finding the right person.

Dr. James Dobson: I had a young man tell me not too long ago that he really was excited about this girl that he thought he was falling in love with. And he said, "Oh man, she's just wonderful." And I said, "You really would like to marry her?"

"Yes."

"Tell me why."

And he said, "Well, she makes me feel good when I'm with her. She seems to understand the passion for my life, what I want to be doing." He ticked off about six things. I said, "Do you realize that all those things you mentioned focus on you? I didn't hear you say anything about this is a woman that I want to pour my life into. She's got character. She is noble. She'll make a great mother."

Dr. Arch Hart: Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: Everything was focused on him. And in marriage, we tend to do that, don't we? We marry somebody who's going to be a credit to us instead of, what can I do for this person? When you turn that thing around, you're in good shape.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes, yes. And I'd say, learn how to be a safe person for your spouse, that person that you are marrying. And to do that, learn what you do when you feel someone's not there for you, when you feel that the man that you are getting engaged to or marrying, when he doesn't pay that attention to you, when he forgets a date, comes late, and you just feel rubbed the wrong way, how do you react? Do you explode? Do you sort of sulk for a while, and then he has to guess, "Honey, what's the matter? What's the matter? What's the matter?" And then you sort of, "Nothing, nothing."

Dr. James Dobson: And you say, "Nothing."

Dr. Arch Hart: I don't want to talk about it.

Dr. Sharon May: Understand how you deal with those attachment needs and longings and how your attachment system works. Understand that about yourself, and then try and understand that about your spouse, about that other person in your life.

What do they do when they shut down, pull away? Are they really saying, "I am thinking twice about being with you," or are they really saying, "Oh my goodness, I just failed her. She doesn't value me"? And start seeing each other through different lenses, through a lens of we all are struggling human beings who long to be loved and seen, to be close and connected, and we all do it in strange ways that sometimes pushes us away from each other instead of drawing us close.

And when we understand that about each other, then we can say, "You know, honey, you have just disconnected. You're off in that other room, flipping through the TV buttons. Did I say something that hurts your feelings? Do you need a little bit of space? Because, you know, I love you and care for you," and just go to the heart of the matter rather than fighting with those little dragons, I call. Don't fight with her saying, "You didn't put your socks back!" Just say, "Honey, what's under that? Do you feel disrespected?"

Dr. James Dobson: This illustration again will be the last time I refer to myself, because I don't want to focus this on me, but in our early married life, I was a student, just like you were, in graduate school, both of you.

Dr. Sharon May: No, it's wonderful.

Dr. James Dobson: And I was working pretty hard. I was working full-time and going to graduate school, and on a fast track to get the Ph.D., and began to hear Shirley talking about feeling distant from me, and the attachment I felt was weaker. And if she were sitting here today, she would bring this up and she would tell you about the night that we went for a walk and she expressed some of those things. And I took the better part of a semester off to reconnect with her, because that mattered to me even more than my professional goals.

Dr. Sharon May: Wow. Wow. Yes. Wow. And that is so powerful. And, Dr. Dobson, if I could say right now, that couples usually wait five to six years before getting help. And those are couples who are five to six years of feeling emotionally disconnected, walking on eggshells, feeling like, "I'm worthless. You don't care for me. I'm afraid you're going to leave me. I'm afraid you don't love me," and stuck in this fighting cycle. That's a long time.

And I urge those couples that if they're right now feeling, "I feel disconnected. I don't feel like coming home. I would not risk putting my heart into my spouse's hands," I urge them to get help. Read a book. Talk to their pastor. Pray together. Ask the Lord to guide them to counseling. And I'd also want to say that sometimes that one-hour-a-week counseling isn't always effective. That intensive, the intensives I've been doing with couples have been profoundly effective, that they come for two or three days and can get on track.

Dr. James Dobson: That's encouraging that there is success there.

Dr. Sharon May: And there is success. There is a way to emotionally reconnect. And there's wonderful resources out there.

Dr. James Dobson: And you've documented that with research. This is not just anecdotal. You have seen that you can help people overcome this detachment.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely. Yes. Yes, there is hope. And as you said, it's simple. It is simple. It's not this big, as some men say, going into the past. No, it's just learning how to come heart-to-heart, human being-to-human being, and share on a deeper level that keeps them emotionally connected.

Dr. Arch Hart: Well, I can speak from experience. My brother and I both experienced divorce at a young age, but neither of us have a divorce. It was so painful for us as children going through this that, when we married, we resolved we would make this marriage work. And my brother is not a Christian. So the cycle can be broken, but one of the things you have to be alert to is what baggage you bring over from your parents. Because often, the issues we deal with and fight about in marriage are the same issues our parents were fighting about, and we never learned from that.

Dr. James Dobson: Isn't that amazing that we just pick up the worst they have to offer sometime?

Dr. Arch Hart: We continue the battle.

Dr. Sharon May: I'd say, learn how you protect your heart when you're hurt. That is just really powerful. Do you pull away? Do you shut down? Do you feel no one could really be there for you? Do you feel anxious and that you always have to be hyper-vigilant in your relationships? And as you understand how you relate to other people and how you're repeating patterns or reacting to how you were raised and in previous relationships, in multiple marriages, it's a very powerful healing. You have what we call an emotionally corrective experience. You have a new experience of being loved and cared for in a safe and secure relationship.

And I think that's why those children and adults who have not had good attachment experiences growing up find good mentors and good people in their lives, that they can have that emotionally corrective experience, a new experience that corrects and changes. And it actually changes the makeup in your brain and how your brain and how your body reacts. It's quite fascinating, but that's a whole other discussion. And so those healing relationships are very, very important.

Dr. James Dobson: Sharon, we've talked today about the angry woman who is so frustrated. The anger comes out of frustration, and she's just seething with it because she can't make this man be what she needs him to be or even understand what the goal is, and he's not listening frequently.

Dr. Sharon May: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: What would you say to the women who are listening to us who are angry? I mean, anger is an involuntary response sometimes. The Scripture says, "Be angry and sin not," because sometimes you can't help being angry, or at least it's very, very difficult.

Dr. Sharon May: Yes. I'd say to that woman, understand that your anger is your protective emotion... Sort of like the coating on the M&M or Smarty candy, it's protecting something deeper.

... And that you are very afraid of taking your heart and placing it into the hand of your spouse, and you're afraid that it will melt, that your heart will be hurt, so it's easier to be angry. It's easier just to say, "I'm going to protect myself," and, "How dare you?" and, "You just weren't there last night. You got home late and I had to go off to the PTA meeting by myself, and I thought you were going to be there."

And soon as you hear that anger, "Uh-oh. Gosh, I'm really angry. But you know what? Underneath, I guess I'm really hurt. I'm really afraid that I'm going to be alone, because growing up I was alone. No one was really there for me." And when I understand that softer emotion that I protect with that anger, I can then slow down and say, "Now from that softer, gentle place, maybe from that place I should approach my husband." And she then realizes that softening and coming from that softer place actually penetrates her husband's heart more so than her anger. Because when he gets the anger, well, you're a man, you know what you do when you come up with a...

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, he's gone. If you ask her to think back when they were dating, I'll bet you she didn't attract him with anger. Somewhere, that anger came along.

Dr. Sharon May: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: If she had been that mad, he'd have been gone.

Dr. Sharon May: Now, I will also say that her anger was probably there when they were dating, and probably because that's a way of relating, an attachment style, a way of being in a relationship that she brought with her into the relationship, that the-

Dr. James Dobson: But she hid it frequently. She didn't-

Dr. Sharon May: She hid it or he said, "Oh, that's fine. I can understand why she's so angry. It's all right. Isn't she cute when she gets... Her just fluffing her feathers?" And as the years go by, it's not so fun and cute, and it's more hurtful. And now he's saying, "She's angry because she's disappointed in me. I am wrong. I have let her down. I'm not the man she wanted. I'm a big disappointment," and now it begins to mean something very deep and hurtful and wounding. But we all have that fight cycle, even my engaged couples. I can identify it. But you're right, it is masked. It's not as heightened.

Dr. Arch Hart: There are times when a spouse, for a variety of reasons, is not in a position to be a safe haven. I'm thinking when a psychotic condition of something emerges, Jim. You really have-

Dr. James Dobson: Alcoholism.

Dr. Arch Hart: Yeah, right, but I'm thinking more of those over which you have no control, those conditions. And then that takes a slightly different tack for you, because they're not functioning healthily enough to be a safe haven. And I happen to believe that then one enlarges the circle that provides a haven of safety. I believe in extended family. I think one of the saddest things of our day and age is that we've no longer fostered extended family phenomena. We know what it's like to be an extended family in times of Christ. Now, you're supposed to marry and go off and never see your parents again. We fear this thing of enmeshment, of being too attached to your parents.

For some people, I think the only safe haven is God Himself in Christ. And that's why we foster a spiritual relationship, a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And I think that, often, that can be the only safe haven given unfortunate other circumstances.

Dr. James Dobson: Sharon, would you agree that, in most cases, a woman has more needs than a man can meet and she's got to find a way to meet them in other ways, that no man is equipped to handle the full range of female emotional needs, and that she needs girlfriends and she needs activities, and she needs things that also meet those needs? Otherwise, you dump this load of anger on the relationship, and it can't survive that. And it's possible to already have met some of those needs by the time you come together. Do you agree with that?

Dr. Sharon May: Well, I think we are whole people. And maybe we could take the illustration of the pieces of a pie. I think a man is able to fully be a safe haven for his wife and to nurture her, but we were created to have multiple relationships. And when we look to our spouse to be the answer or to fulfill every single piece of the pie, then he will fall short. We're created to be in relationship with our Heavenly Father first and foremost.

And I feel, though, that a man is capable of meeting the husband need in a woman and all that she needs when we are whole people in community, not in isolation. And when we live in isolation, then all the demands become my spouse. My spouse is not giving me my self-esteem, not the friendship, no this. Then, it becomes the pressure and the stress on the marriage. But when we live in a full community, then our husbands are, men are able to be there in a very rich and deep way for women that is satisfying, when we're whole people in whole communities.

Dr. James Dobson: And you can't be that if you're isolated from the rest of the world and everything comes from one person.



Dr. Sharon May: Exactly. Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: It just doesn't work.

Dr. Sharon May: Right.

Roger Marsh: Healthy conflict in marriage comes down to learning new patterns, breaking free from those cycles that keep us stuck, and discovering what our spouse truly needs. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, featuring an insightful conversation with Dr. Arch Hart and his daughter, Dr. Sharon May, about building stronger marriages through better communication. The practical wisdom shared today can help any couple move from patterns of conflict to deeper connection and understanding.

Now, if you missed any portion of today's broadcast or if you'd like to share these valuable insights with a friend who may need to hear them, visit [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). And by the way, there you will also find information about the book that Dr. Hart and Dr. May wrote together called *Safe Haven Marriage: Building a Relationship You Want to Come Home To*.

And while you're online with us, hope you'll also take advantage of a special free resource that we're highlighting each day this week. Today's your final opportunity to take advantage of the new Love Must Be Tough email series. Over five days, you'll receive encouraging messages drawn from Dr. Dobson's groundbreaking work called *Love Must Be Tough*, an outstanding book. The website also features practical tools to help strengthen your marriage, especially during challenging seasons. Now, to sign up, simply go to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) and then enter your email address where you're told to follow the prompts. That's [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org), and then click in your email address to receive the Love Must Be Tough email series.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh. On behalf of Dr. Dobson and all of us here at the JDFI, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time, right here, for another edition of Dr. Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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

Dr. James Dobson: Well, thank you, everyone, for tuning in to our program today. You may know that Family Talk is a listener-supported program, and we remain on the air by your generosity, literally. If you can help us financially, we would certainly appreciate it. God's blessings to you all.

Roger Marsh: That's right, Dr. Dobson. And, Friend, thanks to generous listeners like you, Family Talk can reach more and more listeners with practical help and encouragement. To support Family Talk with your best gift, go online to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) or call 877-732-6825.

Hey, everyone, Roger Marsh here. When you think about your family and where they will be when you're no longer living, are you worried? Are you confident? Are you hopeful? What kind of legacy are you leaving for your children and their children? Here at Family Talk, we're committed to helping you understand the legacy that you're leaving for your family. Join us today at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) for helpful insights, tips, and advice from Dr. James Dobson himself. And remember, your legacy matters.

With today's Dr. Dobson Minute, here's Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: Commitment. Why is this simple concept missing from so many marriages today. Romantic love along with other emotions may ebb and flow through the course of time. Commitment is the source of all stability in the marital relationship but commitment isn't a feeling, it's a choice. That's why the traditional wedding vows read "in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or for worse, forsaking all others till death do us part." That's the real meaning of commitment. Emotion is the caboose on the train. The engine is a commitment of the will which can steadily pull a relationship through all of the ups and downs of everyday living.

Roger Marsh: For more information, visit [drdobsonminute.org](http://drdobsonminute.org).