



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Life with a Messy Mate – Part 2

Guest(s): Sandra Felton

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Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Marriages thrive on differences, amen? The unique qualities each spouse brings can create a rewarding, fulfilling partnership that honors God. But when those differences clash over everyday habits, especially when it comes to household organization, the result can be ongoing frustration and even conflict. On today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we are continuing a classic conversation featuring Dr. Dobson and his guest Sandra Felton. Now Sandra is the founder and president of Messies Anonymous and she is dedicated her life to helping people find harmony at home through understanding and practical solutions. She's the author of more than 20 books on this subject, including *The Messies Manual*, *Organizing Magic*, and *When You Live With a Messie*. Sandra holds degrees from Columbia International University and the University of Miami, and she brings both personal experience as well as professional insight to this topic. You see, Sandra Felton is a self-described messie who learned to change her own patterns and now helps others do the same. On the last edition of Family Talk, Sandra began sharing practical advice for both messies and their spouses. On today's broadcast, she'll answer questions from a studio audience about some real life messie situations. So here now is Dr. James Dobson to continue the conversation.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra Felton is back with us now for the second day and she has written a book called *When You Live With a Messie* and talking about the spouse of a person who does have that disorganized temperament or for whatever reason is a messie, and we're glad to have her back with us again. Sandra Felton is a high school teacher. She has taught math and English. And now Sandra, you teach special education, don't you?

Sandra Felton: Yes, I do. It's a wonderful area to be in and I have great kids.

Dr. James Dobson: When you teach math students, if you're teaching advanced math, you have the brightest students and now you are teaching those in some contexts with less ability. You've gone from one part of the continuum to another in this regard. Why?

Sandra Felton: Well, I guess I just always have liked special ed. To tell you the honest truth. I think when the Lord said, "In as much as you've done it unto the least, the least my brethren, you've done it unto me," and I find it an opportunity to serve in that way and I find it a privilege to be able to carry out the Lord's instructions.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, we share that. I don't know if you're aware of it. I worked for a time in a hospital for the developmentally disabled and so on, but out in California, one of the largest hospitals of that type. And then I was in the division of medical genetics at Children's Hospital in USC School of Medicine where we dealt with people who were handicapped mentally so I have also been drawn to those. My first book was on that subject, a multidisciplinary handbook. Nobody remembers that.

Sandra Felton: One of your big sellers, I bet.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. That was a graduate textbook for medical schools and that goes back a long, long ways. That was before *Dare to Discipline*, but you have written a book, as I just said called *When You Live With a Messie*, we kind of gave the background to this last time you were giving practical advice when we ran out of time for what a husband or wife can do to help the messie get more organized. And you said that the answer lies in kind of a similar arena to what I wrote about in *Love Must be Tough*, which is not to nag and plead and beg, but you begin to take steps to help the other person. Explain it.

Sandra Felton: That's right. Talking doesn't do very much and remember that we are not really trying to change the messie. I figure that that's a matter of their own personal choice. In the first place, you can't change the messie. In the second place, out of I suppose a certain honoring of their individuality, every person has to choose their own path. So I just figure you should not bother about trying to change the messie since that's not going to be too successful anyway. So what you need to do is to change the house and to change your approach to the messie in such a way that if they choose to change, this will be their best opportunity. Now, they may not choose to change, but you want to at least set it up so that if they do wish to make that choice, that's more possible than if you just let it go along with nagging and complaining.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, you said yesterday that they should change the house and you just said that again.

Sandra Felton: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Give an example of that.

Sandra Felton: Alright, here's the example. Let's suppose your husband, when he goes in, and I'm not saying this is just the husband, okay, could be wives, but let's say it's the husband. When he goes in to take a shower, always leaves his clothes on the floor. Okay? So you have said everything you want to say and it's not done any

good. So the next time he does it, I recommend that you not say anything just as you recommend that you stop talking so much in *Love Must Be Tough* and start acting. Don't say anything. Simply take the clothes and put them under the bed or in the back of the closet or in the garage or wherever. It doesn't matter. Now the house is cared for. You haven't changed the messie, but the house is okay. Now, the impact of his own disorganization is falling on him. He may choose next time to pick up his clothes if he wishes or he may not. It's up to him.

Dr. James Dobson: And that probably will precipitate a form of crisis, which is what I talked about in *Love Must Be Tough*.

Sandra Felton: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Change occurs usually only in a crisis.

Sandra Felton: That's right. It is not easy to change. I don't know why it's so hard. Even when you want to change, it's painful, but certainly when someone else is changing you by their actions, and again, I want to emphasize it's only changing the house that we're interested in, but if that precipitates a change in the person, that's painful and that does precipitate a crisis.

Dr. James Dobson: Change is tough when you decide to do it. We resist every effort of somebody outside of us to change.

Sandra Felton: That's right. And that's why I really do not recommend that we try and change them. We simply are trying to bring order and dignity and beauty to our lives and that's reasonable. We're not asking these people to do something unreasonable, like never put a spoon in the sink. We are just asking that the house be kept in a generally organized fashion and when they go around and fix their motorcycle in the living room, I mean that's way out of line. We're talking about serious disorganization that makes nobody want to come home.

Dr. James Dobson: You said last time that you're a messie and you've written all these books on the messie and yet you're a messie who decided yourself to change it.

Sandra Felton: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And you worked hard at it.

Sandra Felton: It became so painful to continue living the way I was, that I was willing to endure the pain of changing and it was painful. If it had not been so painful the way I had been living before, I would never have continued, but I could not bear to go back to that way of life. So through these last 14 years I've been, I'm still changing, but my life is markedly different. I do not live as a messie anymore.

Dr. James Dobson: Someone said, it's not really the big conflicts that destroy a marriage. Often it's the very little ones. And when a husband and wife get married, these kinds of

irritants immediately begin to cause disagreements between them. Something as dumb as the way you squeeze a toothpaste tube from the bottom up, grab it in the middle and squeeze and it comes out both ends or rather personal things such as whether the toilet seat is left up or not. Newlyweds begin fussing in fighting over those things. There really ought to be a way to anticipate some of those conflicts early in marriage or even before marriage and try to hit 'em off because it's a shame to have 'em destroy each other over those things.

Sandra Felton: Well, you must realize that these people choose people to balance themselves off, and that's okay as long as you have a lot of things in common. It's okay to have things that are different where one person is good at it and the other person is not. But if they're too extreme, then you begin having problems.

Dr. James Dobson: You mentioned yesterday that as difficult as it is for a cleanie to marry a messie at the opposite ends of the continuum, it is even more unworkable or conflict producing for two messies to marry. That's really kind of a surprise to me. Explain why you see it that way.

Sandra Felton: Well, if you have one organized person in the house, at least it keeps things from getting totally out of control. I can tell that you've never lived in a house that's totally out of control or you wouldn't be asking that question.

Dr. James Dobson: You're right. That's true. I'm blessed in that regard.

Sandra Felton: When you live in a house and you can't find your keys, when you have to wash the dishes in order to cook dinner, the house becomes such an enemy, such a burden that it's a blessing to have somebody who puts the skids on along the road so that things don't get quite so bad often.

Dr. James Dobson: You get two messies living together like that, the light bill and the telephone bill and the doctor bill and all of those things we've mentioned, receipts for income, taxes, servicing the car on time, all that stuff just begins to accumulate, doesn't it?

Sandra Felton: That's right. And pretty soon you're living in a state of crisis. If it's not one crisis, it's another. You come home and the water's been turned off, or your checks have bounced or whatever. And these are fine, upstanding people we're talking about who simply are not able to organize their lives in a way that works.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, you said in my office earlier that this problem is growing. That it's growing by the sheer pace of life increasing and by the pressures that are on people. You've got two wage earners frequently instead of one, and you've got everybody harried and children having to go to soccer and going to little league and going to music lessons. And that puts an additional stress on people who already have a weakness at this point and it just kind of collapses in many cases.

Sandra Felton: Yes, I think that in some ways the fact that so many women have gone into the workforce puts a lot of pressure for everybody to do more and offers more opportunity for disorganization, for people that are disorganized and for even some people that it wouldn't show up if they had more time, it begins to show up. However, having said that let me say that as a messie, if I'd stayed home all day, my house would've just been messier because I was there. So I went to work.

Dr. James Dobson: To get away from it.

Sandra Felton: To get away from it and to play a game that I could win. When I stayed home, there was no excuse for the house being in that way, and I was terribly discouraged. So I said, I'm losing this game every day. I'm going to go find a game where I can win and I went out and went to work. It is not practical or reasonable or workable to live using messie principles. And even as a messie, I have to do my very best to bring into my life those principles that do get the job done. It's hard for me. I wish it were not so, but it is. But a messie cannot simply say, hey, this is who I am. Let me be. I suppose they could if they were an artist and lived in a Garrett somewhere by themselves, but for most people that would be letting themselves down and letting the people that they live with down as well. So it's just forced upon us whether we like it or not.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's turn to our audience with the time that's left. We promised yesterday that we would allow people to come and ask questions of Sandra and give us your name and where you're from and your question about messies and cleanies.

Speaker 4: Hi, I am Sheila Ellingbas from Billings, Montana, and how do you handle leaving a house clean and then coming home from work and it's in total chaos and you're out of energy and you still need to cook supper?

Sandra Felton: Well, I'm surprised to hear what happened to your house while you were at work. I take it there was somebody there.

Speaker 4: Four children.

Sandra Felton: Four children. Well, why don't you leave the house in chaos and ask the children to clean it up while you're at work? That might turn the tables.

Dr. James Dobson: That's mean, Sandra. That's mean advice.

Sandra Felton: Well, I'm sort of serious and here's why I'm serious. Kid power is important power for a parent. And if you delegate, as Dr. Dobson mentioned earlier about his staff telling him to do. If you write it down, you might have to type it because handwriting, if it's just mother's handwriting, it doesn't look as official. Type it on some sort of schedule and have them sign off when they have actually done the activities. And if they have to clean it up, they're going to be a whole lot less quick to mess it up. So I would recommend that you actually get a

schedule and expect them to keep the schedule build in some system of rewards and punishments and see if that helps.

Dr. James Dobson: And you're also teaching them some of those principles that your mother taught you.

Sandra Felton: That's right. It's important for a mother to teach your children how to do these things.

Dr. James Dobson: Next question.

Speaker 5: Hello. Hello. My name's OJ All and I'm from Billings, Montana. My question is, what would you say to an organized single who's not yet married? Should messie characteristics be taken into consideration when choosing your prospective spouse?

Sandra Felton: I would think about it very, very carefully and say to myself, if I can see it while she's putting on her best face, she's putting her best foot forward, how bad might it be when we once get married and then everybody settles into their regular routine? It is a serious consideration because the order of the home is an important thing. So if you're considering marrying a messie or if you're married to a messie, they're very lovable people. They need our concern and they need our help. And if they're open to help, then there can be a lot of changes made on his or her part.

Dr. James Dobson: At least you should know what you're getting, right?

Sandra Felton: Yes, I think so.

Dr. James Dobson: You shouldn't get a surprise after marriage.

Sandra Felton: I think so. I think that for some people it's a very important consideration.

Speaker 6: I'm Kristen Riddel from Greenville, New Hampshire, the messie spouse. And in an effort to redeem myself, I wanted to share some encouragement. After reading your book, a friend and a messie friend and I bonded together and we take turns Mount Vernonizing with each other. We tackle one of those rooms that you can't open the door. And then after I go home from doing her house, we're both energized and we have the energy to go through and do the regular stuff and be satisfied at the end of the day when you can walk up the stairs without tripping over toys. And I also want to ask if maybe you'd be willing to autograph some books so I could bring one back for Diane?

Sandra Felton: I would love to and I will autograph a lot of your books because what you have just said is what Messie Anonymous is really all about.

Speaker 7: Hello, my name is Miles Dalby from Great Falls, Montana, and I come from a military background. I live in the military now and I've talked to a lot of people who have grown up in the military and their parents oftentimes on Saturday mornings would come and inspect their bedrooms, which is what they did.

Dr. James Dobson: See if a quarter bounces off the bed, right?

Speaker 7: Exactly. In fact, that's what they did when I went to college myself. I'm interested in what role does self-discipline and imposed or imposed discipline have on becoming a messie or even recovering from being a messie?

Sandra Felton: That's a very interesting question. And you're asking a question that deals with what the topic of the book is about and that is changing someone from the way they are. If they're a messie to being an orderly person. Now my guess is that many people who go into the military go in as disorganized people and come out as organized people. So that obviously with very strong behavior modification principles, if you want to look at it that way, those changes can be made. But I'm not sure that in a marriage is the time to start doing that kind of behavior modification. So that doesn't exactly apply to the usual relationships between husband and wife, but you're quite right. Changes can be made. And I made changes in myself by simply working at it because it was so painful to live the other way. And Messies Anonymous has self-help groups where people meet and they struggle to make those kind of changes. So changes are possible whether they're imposed by the military or whether they're imposed by ourselves. But it requires some strong doing and certainly the military has that strength.

Dr. James Dobson: It is really good to have the chance to talk to you. We still have people who would like to ask you questions. You know what I'd like to do, I'd like to just record some of these questions and answers. Will you hold still for some more questions, Sandra?

Sandra Felton: Sure. But before we finish, I would like to say one more thing to the person that lives with a messie, would this be a good time to do that?

Dr. James Dobson: It sure would.

Sandra Felton: The person who is a messie may change and they may not change. We are simply trying to get the setup so that if they wish to change, they have the best opportunity. We're trying to bring that wish to them, but it may work and it may not. If it does not work, I want to encourage the person who lives with a messie to not give up and say, well, my life is just going to have to be a disaster. They need to think of another plan, how to take care of themselves even under the circumstances. It may be that they will decide to invite people into the house even like it is. That may precipitate a crisis or it may...

Dr. James Dobson: Just make, I think that's safe to say.

Sandra Felton: Or it may be that the person will, their messie spouse will welcome them in and they'll have a good social life that way. Or it may be the person will decide, look, I'm not going to cut off my social life. I'm going to have to find ways to have a social life outside of my home, so we're going to have to join organizations or whatever. Or it may be the person will say, look, I can't stand living in this house like it is, so I will take up woodworking out in the garage. What I'm saying is don't just let it go. Take care of yourself. If the person who is a messie, if you can precipitate change on their part, fine. If you can simply make certain changes in the house that will be, if you can make 20% changes, that will bring 80% change using the 20/80 principle, which is so well known, that may be enough for you, but don't give up. You've got to take care of yourself because living in somebody else's chaos and letting them dictate the kind of life you live is not best for you or for them or for the family.

Dr. James Dobson: In short, you need to develop a plan. What are we going to do with the circumstances we now have?

Sandra Felton: Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: It doesn't help to get angry; it doesn't help to nag. It doesn't help to gnaw your tongue about it. Let's sit down as two mature grown individuals and talk this thing through and see if we can find some compromise. There are compromises necessary in the very best of marriages because you've got two imperfect people and you take that material of imperfection and you try to mold it into a workable hole. And it requires both parties to say, I'd rather you wouldn't be that way, but I will accept you the way you are. So there is a point at which you have to decide whether or not you can live with it. And if you can't, you need to seek some outside counseling and work out plan.

Sandra Felton: Exactly. That's exactly right.

Dr. James Dobson: I couldn't have said it better myself.

Thank you, Sandra, for being with us these two days, and we're going to make you work some more. So just sit tight, will you? I sure will appreciate all that you do on behalf of messies and cleanies.

Sandra Felton: Well thank you and I appreciate your efforts on the part of messies and cleanies as well.

Roger Marsh: Sandra Felton's final encouragement really captures the heart of the issue. Don't give up on yourself or your marriage even when you feel that change is impossible. Sometimes the path forward means caring for the home and caring for yourself in creative new ways. You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and a classic conversation featuring Dr. Dobson and his guest, Sandra Felton, about finding practical solutions when you're living with a messie mate. With the holidays coming up in particular, this is a great conversation to have

because it could be yet another source of irritation in an already tense season of Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings. Now, if you missed any part of this discussion or if you want to share it with someone who's struggling with household chaos right now, go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And once you're there, you'll also find information about Sandra Felton's books, including *When You Live With a Messie* and *The Messies Manual*.

And speaking of practical help, I want to share with you about a resource that has helped countless families strengthen their relationships. It's our free email series called "Conflict in Marriage." Over the course of just a few days, you'll receive biblical insights and great encouragement from Dr. Dobson about why disagreements happen, how to resolve them fairly, and practical steps for turning conflict into connection. So whether you're newlyweds learning to navigate differences, or you've been married for decades, this series offers wisdom that can transform how you and your spouse handle those inevitable tensions in life together. Now, if you are a parent and you've got children who are getting engaged and are getting into the marriage season, this is a great resource to have on hand for them and grandparents, what a wonderful wedding gift for those newly married grandchildren of yours. So sign up for the free "Conflict in Marriage" email series when you go to drjamesdobson.org and search for those words, "Conflict in Marriage."

These daily broadcasts represent the core of our mission to strengthen families through biblical truth and practical guidance. Each broadcast is carefully crafted to address real struggles facing marriages and families today offering hope rooted in God's Word and your partnership makes that possible for us to continue reaching millions of listeners with trusted wisdom. So if today's conversation has encouraged you or it's helped you see a situation in a new light, please consider reaching out today to support the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. You can make a secure donation at drjamesdobson.org. You can make a donation over the phone when you call 877-732-6825, or write to us at P.O. Box 39000 Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code, 80949.

I'm Roger Marsh, and from all of us here at Family Talk and the JDFI, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time right here when Dr. James Dobson and Sandra Felton will answer more audience questions about everything from parenting messy children to considering whether disorganization might actually be a medical issue. That's coming up next time right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you can still trust, for the family you love.

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

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