



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Life with a Messy Mate – Part 1

Guest(s): Sandra Felton

Air Date: November 19, 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. I'm Roger Marsh. In most marriages, one spouse tends to be tidier while the other is a bit less aware of clutter. That's a polite way of course, of saying that one's messy and the other one's clean. Maybe one person leaves dishes in the sink until the end of the day while their spouse prefers to load the dishwasher as soon as those dishes are dirty. Living with a chronically disorganized mate sparks frustration and conflict between two otherwise compatible people. And that's why on today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, we're bringing you a classic conversation featuring Sandra Felton, a self-proclaimed messy who spent years figuring out how to get and keep her house in order. Sandra is the founder of Messies Anonymous, a group dedicated to bringing harmony into homes by understanding and addressing the messy mindset. She's the author of over 20 books, including *The Messie Manual* and *Organizing Magic*, one of my favorite titles, *Messie No More*. So whether you're the cause of household chaos or the frustrated spouse trying to get it back in order, today's program offers perspective and practical help. Here's Dr. James Dobson now to introduce his guest, Sandra Felton on this classic edition of Family Talk.
- Dr. James Dobson: You must know something that the rest of the world is only discovering and that is that there are an awful lot of people out there who have this problem.
- Sandra Felton: Right. I get letters every day from people who are either messy and struggling to overcome it and want more help, or now that my new book is out from people who live with messies. But of course I got people who lived with messies writing to me before, and that's one reason why I wrote the book, because they had their needs too. Their houses were messy, but not because they were making them that way. They were just living with somebody who was so messy that they simply could not overcome it.
- Dr. James Dobson: Well, when you get people leaning in opposite directions in terms of their desire for order versus chaos, you can really get some incredible conflict, can't you?

Sandra Felton: Yeah, that's true because people who are really neat or driven crazy by mess, and I figure for every messy, there are five people out there who are patiently or not so patiently living with them, and it's those people that I wrote for.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, I have a relative and I won't name who, it's not in my immediate family, but I have a relative who cannot leave the house in the morning with a drawer a half inch open. Everything has to be absolutely perfect. You can imagine when that kind of personality collides with one of these white tornadoes that comes through and just leaves everything shattered, that the battles have only begun.

Sandra Felton: That's right. It causes a lot of personal conflict. I've talked to women who are messies and I've asked them, which is more difficult to live with: another messie or a cleanie because some people have been married twice and they've had the experience in both ways. And for those who have had that experience and who've told me, they said that living with a cleanie, that's what we call the other end of the spectrum, is easier than living with another messy because although you have personal conflicts, it's not as bad as both of you having the house as an enemy. But having said that, it's still very hard and especially it's hard on the person who is organized and that of course, as they nag or whatever they do, makes it hard on the person who's a messie.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's get some basic definitions out for the folks because some people didn't hear that and don't really know what we mean by a messie. This is not just someone who gets busy. This is someone who is really disorganized in their approach to life, isn't it?

Sandra Felton: Right. Well, a lot of people, I guess everybody at some time or another has a little touch of messiness in their life just as everybody has a little touch of overeating every once in a while, but not everybody has a food problem and not everybody has a messy problem, but when we define a messie as a person who is chronically disorganized to such an extent that it bothers them significantly and they've tried to stop and they haven't been able to stop, and this has gone on for some time. So those are kind of the criteria we use that sort of stayed by putting it that way, it sort of stayed, but in the vernacular, it's a person who's really disorganized, who hates it and who can't seem to stop.

Dr. James Dobson: They don't necessarily like to live in a pigpen.

Sandra Felton: No, nobody who's sane wants to live like that. I mean, messies are wonderful people. Messies are frequently very creative people, frequently intelligent people, easygoing, fun to be with people. They are just, in my opinion, being a messie, I don't want to say this in a self-serving way, but many messies are really unusually talented and high quality people. It's just that they have this weakness and they don't like it. The people they live with don't like it, but it's a fact of their lives.

Dr. James Dobson: Alright, now go to the other end of the continuum and describe a cleanie for us.

Sandra Felton: Well, I don't have much experience with. I think somebody else is going to have to write a book about those folks, but I do want to say that we don't encourage messies to turn into cleanies. We don't encourage people to go from one end of the continuum, which doesn't work well to go to another end of the continuum, which doesn't work well. What we want is for people to be average successful housekeepers and that's what we aim for.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Let's look a little more closely at the messie and what their frame of reference is. Does this start early in life? Is this the individual who in sixth grade has a notebook that is absolute chaos, that the assignments are mixed in with drawings and debris and clutter? Does this come out of a childhood? Is this a temperament, a long-term temperament?

Sandra Felton: It may be. Sometimes that's true. Sometimes you see it right from childhood. In my case, looking back, I was a messie from childhood, but my mother kept me organized in such a way that I never noticed it. And so as long as I just concentrated on my school books and listened to the bells and she got me off on time, things worked out really well for me. And as soon as I got married, then my whole world fell apart. I couldn't figure out what happened. Everything was disorganized and so forth, and for 23 years I lived that way, so it didn't show up with me until that time. Now other people, they can hold in there a little longer than I did. They can hold in until maybe the first child and then it all falls apart. But some of 'em, as you suggest when they're kids, they can't keep up with things. I know a messie, who as a child lost all of his books, didn't even know they were lost until the teacher told him. But he lived in a state of confusion right from childhood, and I think that's true with most of us.

Dr. James Dobson: You overcame it or at least learned to cope with it. In your own case, you've referred to yourself as a messie who has apparently dealt with it. Explain how.

Sandra Felton: Well it's the same story as all of the stories that you hear about people who have addictions or whatever. This comes this time when they have a crisis experience. And that's what happened to me. And when I had this crisis experience when to make a long story short, the water in my kitchen sink started leaking underneath and I had it full of papers and other debris and didn't know that it was leaking until it had leaked all the way through the bottom of the cabinet and had gone around and was coming out from under the stove. Now this was the straw that broke the camel.

Dr. James Dobson: That's your first clue that you had a problem.

Sandra Felton: No, no. I had had clues all along for 23 years I'd been living with my house insulting me on a daily basis and I was taking these insults. I mean I'd open the cabinet for the bathroom and the medicine to fall out. Me, I'd put the stuff back up there again to fall out the next time. I would try to go to school and I couldn't find but one shoe and my children, I couldn't find the papers to send back that was supposed to be signed in that day. And so I had been living this way for

years, but it was just that final straw that I said, I'm not going to live this way anymore. And that was after 23 years.

Dr. James Dobson: Did your husband Ivan have anything to do with that? I mean, was he nagging you about it and whining about it and complaining about it?

Sandra Felton: Yes, he complained big time of all of our marriage problems. He and I argued most about the house. When you come home to a house that's friendly and welcoming and is serene because it's orderly, but if you come home to a house that's hostile that if you're a woman and you've worked eight hours and you come home and there are eight more hours of work to do, that's pretty discouraging. That saps your energy. But coming home to a home that's orderly and beautiful, that gives you energy and refuels you for the next day.

Dr. James Dobson: I saw a study that was published a few years ago of what a man most wants from his home. All kinds of things that you can think of that might be on his list. At the top of the list was tranquility. When he comes home, he wants to open that door and that things are under control. They're tranquil and I'm that way. I don't care if there's dust around. That doesn't bother me at all. I don't like debris. I like order and fortunately Shirley does too. She's not what you'd call a compulsive cleanie, but she does like to keep order and I'm sure glad she does because I think it'd drive me crazy to live with somebody where the water was soaking out of the sink and coming out of the stove.

Sandra Felton: Well, no, I think that drive most people crazy and it did and it drove me crazy too, but understand that I was the messie and I was, even when I wanted to change, it was not that easy to do.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you have any clue as the psychological roots of some of this, Sandra? Surely you have thought about that there are reasons why people behave as they do. Some of 'em may be just temperament.

Sandra Felton: Yes. In my book, *Messie No More* that deals with causes because people used to write to me and call me and say, I read your other books and I'm trying to do it, but I don't know what's wrong with me. There must be something wrong with me. And so in order to help them sort of see through that and get over that hump and get down to changing, I wrote this book and in the book I suggested that some of the reasons might be simply right and left brain approaches to things. Some people like to take that approach and many messies I'm sure are right brain people. They see things globally and not sequentially and that gives 'em a whole different view of organization. And then some people may be sanguines if you want to look at the four temperaments in that way, and they're happy go lucky and friendly and outgoing. And then some people like to think in other terms, you might look to the possibility of attention deficit disorder that the person who's a messy is distracted, they get half a job done and a distracted away to another job and that leaves just little piles around in a different order. And so there are different reasons.

Dr. James Dobson: I've hired probably 2,000 people through the years, either directly or indirectly through someone else, and I've developed some understandings of what makes a good employee for a certain kind of job and what doesn't. What I've discovered is that people fall into two broad categories that are not unrelated to what we're talking about here. There is the kind of person that gets out of bed in the morning, gets into the shower and then jumps out of the shower, ringing wet and runs to a desk to write something down before they forget it because they hang on to every detail in their lives and their lives are ordered and when it comes time for the income tax to be paid in April, they have all their receipts and all that kind of person.

Then there's the other kind of person who is often very social, very warm, very loving, a real friend type person who is disorganized in their personal life and does not work off a to-do list and kind of goes through life just sort of doing what feels right at the moment instead of juggling balls like an administrator has to do. What I've found is that there are two different kinds of jobs that those two different kinds of people do in an organization like this. You get a type A and a type B position or a type B and a type A position, you've got disaster on your hands. You get an administrator who is responsible for many departments who is the equivalent of a messie in the way he approaches his work and he goes crazy and you do too. He's always forgetting things. He doesn't answer memos and he loses memos and he doesn't get his budget in on time. On the other hand, you get that kind of accounting personality, if we might call it that, over into one of those public relations positions, and that doesn't work either. And the main task I have, the first thing I explore when I'm hiring somebody is which of those two types you lean toward because you may be very successful in one type of role here and not in another, and it really does kind of boil down to a dichotomy there. Have you seen that?

Sandra Felton: That's right, exactly. I certainly wouldn't hire a messie to be my secretary. To balance me off my creative right-brained approach, I need somebody who is left-brained and organized in order to do that kind of work. But...

Dr. James Dobson: I'll take brain matter on either side just as long as I can get it.

Sandra Felton: Right. But if you have a family and they're just two and they're dividing up the system between those two, sometimes they seek out each other to actually have those two different aspects present in their home. And when they do that, then they have to live with the consequences of that kind of organization. The messy person who is creative and warm and so forth has got to please the organized systematic one and the systematic one has his problems because of the disorganization that tends to come along with that personality.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, that really leads us directly to the content of your book, *When You Live with a Messie*, so this is coming from the point of view primarily of the spouse and the frustrations that they have and how do you deal with a husband or wife who would like to do it better but can't seem to pull it off? Who knows that he or she has a problem, can be a man or a woman. It really, I don't know if it's

gender related, but I doubt it. I've seen both of them be pretty messy. How in the world do they approach this flaw in temperament, if you want to call it that, without tearing up the marriage?

Sandra Felton: I offer the same advice you offer in your book, *Love Must be Tough*, and that is that you need to step back in terms of 12 step programs, you need to detach from the problem, not from the person. And that may mean several things. What it first of all means is you quit trying to change the person. If you had a person who smoked, say for instance, and you knew that was bad for them and it was bad for the people around, no matter how important it was to you, you could not stop that person from smoking if they really wanted to. So I recommend that people stop trying to change the person and concentrate instead on changing the house. And that involves a couple of things. First of all, let me say that if you have a person who is smoking, let's use that as an illustration, and they don't stop smoking either they might want to and they can't or they don't want to stop, they're going to keep on smoking, but you don't have to let them blow smoke in your face. And that's the approach we take with the house. They may keep on living whatever lifestyle they wish to, but they simply may not do it in a way that interferes with your living in the way you want to live if it's reasonable. You know what I mean? There are certain give and take you give in all of marriages, but for one person to ruin another person's life with clutter is not reasonable. And so we recommend that they first of all change their minds about letting this continue. You see, the messies don't take care of themselves, but it's also true that the people that live with messies are not taking care of themselves if they let that mess continue. So the first thing is a change of mind, a change of approach, a change of thinking about themselves and saying, I will not let this continue to happen to me. Similar to what you say in your book.

Dr. James Dobson: What I said in *Love Must Be Tough* is that there comes a time where whining and nagging and begging and pleading is of no value. There comes a time where you have to create a crisis that says this is not acceptable and maybe even pull back just a little bit until you get the attention of the other person on problem that you're dealing with. Is that what you're talking about?

Sandra Felton: Exactly the same thing. The person who lives with a messy is tempted to whine, to beg, to threaten, to control, to do whatever, to try and get this house cleaned up. It will not do any good. If it does, alright, then you don't need my book. But in most cases it will not.

Dr. James Dobson: It is very much like living with an overweight spouse.

Sandra Felton: Exactly.

Dr. James Dobson: You can nag the daylight out of 'em about what they eat and it usually does not change anything.

Sandra Felton: That's right. In my book, I use an illustration I think has been used many times before about teaching a pig to sing. You don't want to try and teach a pig to sing because in the first place, it won't work. In the second place, you'll look like an idiot. In the third place, it'll make the pig mad at you. So that's about all it does with a messie, it doesn't help anything. It just makes it, it does do one thing and I'll tell you what it does. If you can get to arguing about it enough, it takes the focus off of the house, off of the real problem and puts it on something else. It puts it on your relationship, which is not where the focus ought to be. So many times people keep arguing as a way of avoiding the real problem and the real problem is changing.

My mother did what I think was really best for me, but I didn't have any messy problem as a child because of her organization. So if you can, if you have a child who's amenable to this kind of thing and you can give them the gift of order and it doesn't cause a conflict, then I think that's a wonderful gift. She gave me that gift and that's why when I started living the way I was living, I knew how bad it was because I had lived the other way as well. However, you may have some children who use their room as a statement of their individuality and they say, "this is my room." They may not say it out loud, but they feel "this is my room and this is the way I want to live." And you can nag and you can do whatever you want to do, but the chances are that it's going to be an area of conflict and you may end up being the loser. I don't know. It doesn't even matter if you end up being the winner because you still got this area of conflict that you had to go through to get the room clean. So I recommend the second step, which I recommend for husbands and wives or for children, and that is not create a crisis, but let the mess create its own crisis.

Dr. James Dobson: Its own crisis, yes.

Sandra Felton: That is invite their friends over. You don't bring the pressure on them, but their way of life brings the pressure on them. And then there's also the aspect. I know a really organized little girl who went through an era of disorganization. I think she was just trying it on as a lifestyle to see if she liked it. Once she saw how unrewarding it was, she left it behind. But I think sometimes children do try on lifestyles.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra, the clock gets away from us it seems like on some programs more quickly than others, and we're going to have to have a precipitous ending to this program. We're going to pick it up if you will be so kind next time right here, because I know there are messies and they're spouses of messies who are just hanging on your words because it is a serious problem. It's caused a lot of conflict, a lot of pain for both members as you've indicated, and we've got a lot more to say about it. We also have a gallery full of people and we're going to let them ask you some questions next time. So if you'll just stay with us, we'll carry on.

Sandra Felton: Great.

Roger Marsh:

Isn't it true that sometimes the smallest changes in how we approach our homes can often make the biggest differences in our marriages, especially when it comes to this issue of who's messy and who's the organizer. Today on Family Talk, you've been listening to a classic conversation featuring our own Dr. James Dobson and his guest Sandra Felton, about living with a messy mate. Sandra's journey from chaos to order reminds us that real change begins not with nagging or even begging, but with understanding and practical action. Her advice to detach from the problem, not the person offers hope to anyone struggling with household clutter and the conflict it can create. Now, if you missed any portion of today's broadcast or if you want to share it with someone who's struggling with this very issue, visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk and be sure to join us again next time when Dr. Dobson will continue this conversation with Sandra Felton. She'll share more practical tips for taming a disorganized home and establishing healthy habits that bring lasting peace.

Here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we are committed to strengthening marriages and families through biblical wisdom and practical guidance. The broadcast you listen to each day are made possible by friends like you who share our passion for helping families thrive. If the program you've just listened to has been an encouragement to you, I encourage you to consider partnering with us. Your gift of any amount helps us continue sharing hope and practical wisdom and practical solutions with families all across the country. To make a secure donation online, go to drjamesdobson.org. That's drjamesdobson.org. And while you're there, I invite you to explore the many free resources available on our website, including articles and videos and broadcast archives covering everything from marriage and parenting to faith and cultural issues. You'll find practical help for whatever season of life you are navigating right now. And don't forget, sign up for our newsletter to stay informed about upcoming programs and receive encouraging content delivered right to your inbox. Just visit drjamesdobson.org to make a contribution or to sign up. You can also give a gift over the phone, by the way, when you call 877-732-6825.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the James Dobson Family Institute, thanks for being with us today. Be sure to join us again next time when we continue our conversation with Sandra Felton, talking about navigating life with a messy mate. That's 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.