



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Life with a Messy Mate – Part 3

Guest(s): Sandra Felton

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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 you know, every marriage has its challenges. Dr. Dobson has written extensively about these. He did so for nearly 50 years. Some couples will clash over finances, others over parenting styles, but what happens when the source of tension is something as basic as picking up your laundry, doing dirty dishes? In other words, how do you keep your home? On today's edition of Family Talk, we're bringing you the final installment of Dr. Dobson's classic conversation with Sandra Felton, founder and president of Messies Anonymous. Over the past couple of days here on Family Talk, we have explored what it means to be chronically disorganized and how this pattern affects relationships. Sandra Felton has helped countless people understand that messiness isn't about laziness or a lack of caring. It's often a deeply ingrained approach to life that the person desperately wants to change but simply doesn't know how.

Sandra Felton is the author of 20 books including *Winning The Clutter War* and *Messie No More*. As a self-proclaimed reformed messie herself, she brings both professional expertise and personal understanding to this topic. She holds degrees from Columbia International University and the University of Miami, and she's dedicated her career to bringing harmony to homes through practical strategies and compassionate insight. On today's Family Talk broadcast, Dr. Dobson and Sandra Felton will answer questions from our studio audience about everything from helping messy children to dealing with "pack rat" tendencies. So let's join Dr. James Dobson and his guest Sandra Felton right now for today's edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's get some basic definitions out for the folks because some people 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 messie problem. But when we define a messy 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 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. Messes 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: Well, that really leads us directly to the content of your book. We've been reviewing really to this point, but your new book is 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 think 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. The person who lives with a messie 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.

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: Sandra, I'm Peggy Littleton from Colorado Springs. If we as parents see that some of our children through their God-given bents or temperaments are exhibiting behaviors of a messie, can we enable them in that messiness by going ahead and picking up after them rather than stopping it nipping it in the bud there?

Sandra Felton: Well, I think it depends on what you do with the stuff you pick up. If you take it and put it back in their drawer, in their closet, wherever it is so that it'll be there when they want it again, then you are enabling them. But if you pick it up and tell them that they're going to have to pay a quarter to get it back again, then I think you're training them so you can enable children, but I think you can also train them. I would not, however, let the stuff lie on the floor or nag until they pick it up. I think I would take a plan of action rather than a plan of talking. You can always talk first. If that works, then you don't have a problem, but if you do have a problem, I recommend the action plan.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra, would you agree that in cases of adolescent rebellion where there is so much conflict and there's so many dangerous behaviors out there including drugs and alcohol and sex and other things that you're worried about, that sometimes you have to decide what you're not going to fight about and maybe the messiness that is in a bedroom where you can close the door and not harass the rest of the family is one of those things that you would just be prepared to choke it down and accept?

Sandra Felton: Absolutely. There's a door and as long as they keep the mess in their room, I would let it go. I had a friend talking to me the other day and she was fussing at her child for the way his room was kept and he said, "Mother, look, I'm on the honor roll. I do this, I do that. I do the other. What are you bothering me about the room for?" And she said he was right.

Dr. James Dobson: Good question.

Sandra Felton: It helped her get perspective on the thing and he was right.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay, next question.

Speaker 5: Yes, my name is Debbie Stanford and I'm from Woodland Park, Colorado, and my question is, my mother's home was what I would call country clean. It had

minimal clutter and it had some dust. It was always presentable, but I was raised about 75% of the time because my mother worked by an aunt who was a definite cleanie, and it's like these two people are at war all the time inside of me. Is it possible for you to be a little bit of each?

Sandra Felton: Yes, it certainly is. I think that's probably a good thing to have a casual attitude when it's appropriate and yet to be able to bring a higher level of cleanliness when you want to. I think that's the best of both worlds.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra, some people like not only disorder but clutter in their houses. They go on a vacation and come home with a piece of polished redwood that says Mammoth, California or something on it, and they've got these things sitting all over the house. I like a house that is simple, and yet there are some people that just enjoy not only not putting things away, but just spreading this clutter all over the house.

Sandra Felton: I think that a lot of that is because some of us have very poor memories and yet we are very sentimental, and so in order to keep the past alive, we keep it sitting around and I think it's a compensation mechanism to try and solve a poor memory problem and honor the fact that we have lived and that we have gone places.

Dr. James Dobson: There's a sentimentality about those things and they want something to hold onto from each trip.

Sandra Felton: Yes, that's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. When you have a lot of that around, it doesn't take very much to shatter a house does it?

Sandra Felton: Listen, I had a Coca-Cola bottle, which was one of these elongated types. They must at fairs, put them in some heat and pull 'em out so that there are these long Coca-Cola bottles and then they get the children to fill 'em with sand so that you have red and yellow and blue. My children did that. I put this in my living room, I kept it in and when I went around, I mean these were my children and this was the fair and it was all wonderful except the unwonderful part was it was this ugly piece of junk sitting in my living room.

Dr. James Dobson: And nobody cared anything about it but you.

Sandra Felton: And I didn't even notice it after a while. I could hardly believe when I went around reorganizing my house and getting rid of junk, this kind of thing that was there. Now messies like to take a lot of pictures to remember things and I recommend that because they take up less room.

Speaker 6: I'm Cheryl Carey from Colorado Springs. I've been doing a study in our women's group on Proverbs and we've looked at a lot of verses that talk about

procrastination and laziness and things that are real issues. Would you look at the messie issue as possibly a sin issue in your life and that it creates disharmony and these things? Is it something that you feel first you need to come before the Lord and confess to humble yourself? I don't know if you look at it as just a character flaw or if it really is something that needs to be dealt with with the Lord.

Sandra Felton:

Well, that's a very interesting question and one I've thought about a great deal and I'm not sure I've come up with a definitive answer. But let me say first of all, that I even hesitate sometimes to call it for some people a flaw because for some people it's simply a lifestyle that does not work in our present society, but would not have been a problem in some other societies. A messie who is creative and who saves too much might've been great in some society, which was not a throwaway society, so I'm not sure that it's even a flaw except that it doesn't work in our society, and so it's a flaw trying to work it here. Now as to whether it's a sin or not, when you have a person who's struggling as I struggled to overcome it and failed, it's a little hard to say that.

On the other hand, there is a point at which if you are deliberately continuing this for some reason, either because you want to get back at your husband. He's mean to you, so you're going to teach him and leave the house like this, I think in that case it is. If it's a matter of being lazy, I think that's true, but sometimes what looks like laziness is not so much laziness as it is just not knowing what to do or being so worn out from doing the little bit you did ineffectively that you just can't go on. You have to stop and regroup. So I think it's only the person can tell whether it's some deeper issue or whether they're just failing because it's a weakness of theirs or that just doesn't work in this society.

Dr. James Dobson:

Sandra, you used the word deliberately there. For me, that's the key word in the relationship with the Lord. I'm no theologian, but I certainly do know what I believe theologically, and I think the point at which you have to get on your face before the Lord is when He's been talking to you about something and you've refused deliberately to respond to Him when it's become a willful thing, when it is an act of rebellion of one sort or another rebellion against Him or rebellion against a spouse where there's some willful element to it, but I don't think you apologize to the Lord for the way He made you. He knows our temperament and He knows what we came into the world with, and there are people with ADD and people whose approach to life is disorganized. God knows that. He made us, and I just say when I come across those sorts of so-called flaws in my own character, I say, "Lord, help me to do Your will with the person that you made" and not get too guilt ridden over it. For me, there's a balance there somewhere.

Sandra Felton:

Yes, I suppose you have a person who has a ADD, which is Attention Deficit Disorder for those who might not recognize the letters, and this person can try as hard as they want, but it's like trying to drive a car with the brakes on until you let the brakes off, you're not going to make much good progress, and for

that person to be berating themselves is just to use their energy inappropriately.

Dr. James Dobson: I sure agree.

Speaker 7: My name's Alice Whiten from Billings, Montana, and for years my kids have called me a pack rat, but is a pack rat really a messie? I keep telling 'em, "Well, I was raised in the depression and we had to save things."

Sandra Felton: Well, it's a good thing the depression came along because otherwise what would we be telling the people? But there are a lot of folks that are what you call pack rats. We don't use that kind of strong terminology ordinarily who weren't raised in the depression and they're saying, "Well, it's because my parents were in the depression." But to tell you the honest truth, I don't think the depression has a whole lot to do with it, although it may. Let me say this, I find that there are occasions where people have experienced serious loss that is perhaps the loss of a loved one or a husband or a wife or something where their messiness comes on at that time because once they have that great loss, then they tend to grab onto everything and not let it go. So sometimes that does precipitate messiness, but let's say that it was the depression.

Okay, the question is not why that's only a small issue. The question is now do you want to change? If you don't want to change, then that's up to you. If you do want to change, then that of course is up to you as well. So it's not really a matter of why. I don't encourage people to spend much time on why. I encourage people to spend time on changing if that's what they want to do. If a person is going to keep stuff, let me recommend that you go through and modify a little bit if it's a problem. That is of the 10 things, which two are the most important, and keep those two so that you don't have to turn into Mrs. Neatnik, but you might want to modify by getting rid of some things. You can take pictures of the things you get rid of. You can also, if it's a coat that you loved but has now moth eaten and you keep it around because it has some sentimental value, then take a picture of the coat, cut out a little swatch of the coat, put it in a scrapbook, and then get rid of the coat. The scrapbook takes a lot less room.

Dr. James Dobson: I went through my closet the other day and if I hadn't worn something in three years, it was gone.

Sandra Felton: Well, that's good.

Dr. James Dobson: Even if I thought it was still wearable. But if I hadn't worn it in three years, I'm not going to wear it and I gave it to somebody who could.

Sandra Felton: Well, if you don't want to get rid of it and you haven't worn it in three years, I recommend you wear it that day and then you can in good conscience keep it a little bit longer.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, we'll make this the last one.

Speaker 8: Hello, I'm Annette Meredith from Forsyth Montana, and I have a question concerning ADD. My question first was does this make a messie, but I'm just learning about this because I have a son who is very creative, he's an artist, and now he's beginning to believe that the reason he is is because he has adult ADD. My question is how can I help him find out what to do about this?

Sandra Felton: I'm so glad you asked that question. It's an extremely important question that deals with organization. If you have attention deficit disorder, sometimes that shows itself in serious disorganization and you're unable to do very much about it because this is as an internal kind of a problem. There are different medical problems that come to the fore from time to time, and this seems to be a time when attention deficit disorder is getting a lot of press, but I think that in this one case that it's going to touch a lot of people rightly. That it really is a serious problem among many people and certainly among messies, and the proper treatment for attention deficit disorder may make that wife, I don't mean any particular wife, but may make somebody's wife who stays home all day and the husband comes home and the house is twice as bad as when he left and she's worked hard all day and is exhausted. It may turn that person into someone who can control the situation, and they may say, thank God that I found out what was wrong with me. And the husband will say, thank God you found out what was wrong with you, because if you have it, there's not much way you can make progress until it's addressed.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra, we did several programs on attention deficit disorder some time ago, and there was a tremendous response, and you're right, it is the disorder of today. These things are faddish and they come and go and at one period of time everybody's talking about, I remember hypoglycemia. It seemed like the whole world had hypoglycemia for a while, and there are people who are hypoglycemic. There are also people who have attention deficit disorder, and it would be wrong to say that this is all imaginary because if you've ever had a child or been around a child who comes from that kind of neurological problem and reflects it, then it is real. I do believe that anything that becomes faddish like that is like a net you've thrown out there that pulls in a lot of other people who would like to say, "Oh, this is why I am like I am. This is why I'm not responsible. This is why I'm not disciplined." Sometimes that's an excuse, but I sure would hate to see, and some of our listeners do feel this way, that it's all phony because it's not. I mean, I have seen it up close.

Sandra Felton: Well, the tricky part is when it's not accompanied by hyperactivity. When you have attention deficit disorder without hyperactivity, it goes undiagnosed, and especially with women, adult women with Attention deficit disorder without hyperactivity appear to be one thing when actually that might be the case. So I certainly recommend it at least as a consideration.

Dr. James Dobson: Sandra, again, it's been a pleasure having you here. We've worked you pretty hard. I appreciate that. Thank you for being with us.

Sandra Felton: It's always a pleasure to be here, and certainly I'm always delighted to be able to reach out to people who are struggling with messiness or in this case with a messy spouse or someone else they love.

Roger Marsh: I really appreciate Sandra's point about distinguishing between a character flaw and simply a different way of approaching life. Sometimes what looks like a problem is actually just a person trying to function in a world that wasn't designed for how they are wired. And as you've been listening to today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, you've heard the conclusion of Dr. Dobson's classic conversation with Sandra Felton about living with a messy mate. If you missed any part of this three-part series or if you know someone who would benefit from Sandra's insights, visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk, and when you go there, you'll find all three broadcasts along with information about Sandra's helpful book. She's written more than 20 of them.

Now, speaking of things we struggle with in our homes and relationships, I want to share with you about a free resource that could literally transform your family. The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute has created a powerful 10-day email series called "Raising Kids with Love and Limits." It's based on Dr. Dobson's best-selling book called *The New Strong-Willed Child*. If you have a son or daughter who seems determined to do things their own way, who challenges every boundary and tests every limit, this series is definitely for you. Now, you'll receive practical biblical strategies delivered straight to your inbox every day, showing you how to guide even the most independent child without breaking their spirit. You're correcting the behavior, you're not crushing their character. Just visit drjamesdobson.org and search for that title, "Raising Kids with Love and Limits" to sign up today. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org.

Conversations like the one you just heard on today's broadcast are made possible by friends like you who donate generously and often sacrificially to the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Since 2010, Family Talk has remained a trusted voice for families navigating life's toughest challenges. This year, we're celebrating our 15th anniversary, and yet the problems are still there. Whether it's marriage struggles, parenting questions, or staying faithful in an increasingly hostile culture, this ministry has been here for you, offering hope, practical wisdom, and an unwavering commitment to God's design for the family. And it was Dr. Dobson's desire that the ministry outlive him. Now that he has received his eternal reward, did so earlier this summer, the ministry of Family Talk lives on, but it's only possible because friends like you choose to stand with us. Your generous financial support allows us to continue broadcasting these conversations to millions of listeners all across America, and your donation today will be doubled thanks to the special \$6 million matching gift in the Dr. James Dobson Memorial Matching Grant. So if today's program encouraged you, which you consider partnering with us, you can make a secure donation at drjamesdobson.org. You can also give a gift over the phone when you call a member of our constituent care team at 877-732-6825. Or write to us at P.O. Box 39000 Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code, 80949.

Well, it's certainly been an eye-opening three days of conversations with our guest Sandra Felton here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and from all of us here at the James Dobson Family Institute, thanks for listening in. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another 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.