



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Cultivating Deeper Connections in a Lonely World – Part 1

Guest(s): Becky Harling

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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 sitting in the co-host chair today, and we've got a great conversation lined up with a very, very special guest. Becky Harling is with us, and she has written a fascinating new book about what it means to be lonely in the culture right now. She's written a brand-new resource on this called *Cultivating Deeper Connection in a Lonely World*. That will be the topic of our conversation. Becky is an author, a speaker, a podcast host. She's written numerous books, and she and her husband, Steve, make their home right here in Colorado with four grown children and a growing number of grandchildren in tow. Becky Harling, welcome back to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.
- Becky Harling: Thank you, Roger. It's great to be with you guys.
- Roger Marsh: It's nice to make the connection, especially with a local author, but someone that I've known for many years and have the great privilege of having conversations about these issues. This new book is called *Cultivating Deeper Connections in a Lonely World*. And you talk about one of the times when you had this kind of come to Jesus moment where you realized, hey, wait a minute. I mean, it seems like we've got all these different devices that connect us. You and I are connected on an app right now as we're having this recording conversation. We've got phones, we've got laptops, we've got tablets, all these different ways of ... My wife has a watch now, one of those smart watches. And so she'll get phone calls or text messages. And I call it her Jetsons watch. It just shows you how old I am. I figured that that's the way they do it. Dick Tracy, something like that. But with all those connections, you realize that the world is also getting lonelier simultaneously. And you kind of had an aha moment with Steve not too long ago. Talk about that.
- Becky Harling: Yeah, I did. So Steve and I are both in ministry. We were traveling around the world speaking. And between, I think for over a period of four years, we hit 65 different countries and I wrote five books and the schedule was ridiculous. And we were always racing through airports, trying to catch the next plane. We'd come home, try to connect with our kids and our grandkids, which are very important to us.

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Becky Harling: But I wasn't getting time with my friends, with people that knew me for just being Becky, not because I write and speak and all that kind of stuff. And I really hadn't had great connecting time with Steve, even though we spent time on the airplane. We get back on the airplane. We were so exhausted. It's like, who feels like talking? We're just dead. And so I realized I was lonely and I realized, okay, for me, the first step was I got to slow down because I am racing through life and I'm not giving enough time to people that I love and treasure and I want to slow down long enough to enjoy them.

Roger Marsh: That's wonderful. And it's life-giving. I mean, we're made for community. I mean, Scripture is replete with the examples of why it's important to have those relationships that aren't necessarily work-related per se. And yet as you're doing ministry and you're doing God's work, you're beginning to realize, Becky, are you an introvert, an extrovert? Are you an outgoing introvert? I mean, do you like being around people as much as you guys talk?

Becky Harling: I do. I love meeting new people. Feel like Steve always says, "Beck, I think you have a sign on your forehead that says 'tell me your story' because whenever we're on a plane, somebody opens up to me and tells me their entire life story." So I love that, but I also need time for the deeper people that I'm connected with. I think Steve and I are both pretty in the middle. We lean extroverted, but we definitely need that time to connect more deeply.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. It's interesting when you talk about having that availability and you have that countenance about you where people say, "Oh yeah, I definitely want to ... She looks like someone I can trust." But you begin to realize at the same time, not only is that a great ministry opportunity, but it speaks to the deeper need that a lot of people have of we're all going places. You're on a plane with several hundred people, you're in an airport with several thousand people, you're at an event speaking and doing ministry in these different countries that you've been to, and yet you realize that you're in a room that's packed full of people who are all very lonely. And that's not just anecdotal from what you and Steve have been experiencing in your ministry. You've got U.S. Surgeon General data to back that up. Can you walk us through a little bit of the science, if you will, on why we're so hyper-connected and lonely all at the same time?

Becky Harling: Yeah. So in 2023, the Surgeon General came out with a health report on this. It's interesting because loneliness is as dangerous to your health as smoking 15 packs of cigarettes

Roger Marsh: A day. Oh my. Say that again because I grew up with grandfathers who smoked and I didn't know them very well because they passed away. But you're talking about loneliness and the dangers. I mean, 15, that's more than a carton of cigarettes every day.

Becky Harling: Yes.

Roger Marsh: Oh my gosh.

Becky Harling: Yes, it is. And we were designed, like you say, for community. And yet, according to the surgeon general, we are now in an epidemic of loneliness. One out of two Americans feel significantly isolated every single week.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Becky Harling: They maybe don't have people they would call in the middle of the night for an emergency. Maybe they don't have people that they're connecting with on a daily basis. And a lot of people say, "Well, that must be the pandemic." No, this has been going back several years before the pandemic. The pandemic was really the great revealer.

It revealed to us, "Hey, we need community and we can't isolate." But our growing isolation has been growing for a number of years. And I think in part because technology has increased. So you would think it would be the opposite. And yet, I just read a really interesting book this summer called *The Anxious Generation*. It's by a *New York Times* best-selling author. He is not a believer and states that in the book. His statistics are crazy about what cell phones are doing to us, what online connections are doing, what social media is doing. And so though people may be connected through all these resources, they're not really connecting face to face like God has called us to be. They're not doing life together.

Roger Marsh: Interesting. Interesting. Becky Harling is with us today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Her brand new book is called *Cultivating Deeper Connections in a Lonely World*, and it's up at drjamesdobson.org. It's interesting, as you mentioned that statistic, Becky, because I was thinking about Lisa and I are blended family. We've got six adult children. They're all either millennial or Gen Z. And I don't know. If I had a dollar for every time I heard one of them say, "I'm kind of independent. I like finding my own..." And they find these restaurants or products or whatever that they use. And the thing that drives them is I want to find it on my own, but then I got to make sure it's got 5,000 five star reviews. So they're looking for that sense of community, but the thought is I'm doing this on my own. And I can imagine that one foot on the dock, one foot on the boat mentality, at some point you realize you're going to rip your trousers.

I mean, you have to either be one place or the other and not both, but no wonder this younger generation is being referred to as the anxious generation. And I'm sure we as adults who have parented these kids and now they're in young adulthood, they're feeling that loneliness and we're feeling their kind of isolation from us. And it has a ripple effect, doesn't it?

Becky Harling: It really does. And the way God designed us, He designed us for relationship. I mean, way back in Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image." And so you have us being designed after the image of a triune God who has lived in eternal community forever in close community. And then He goes on to say in Genesis two, "It's not good for man to be alone." And while we often use that verse for marriage, yes, but it's not good for woman to be alone. We were designed and created for relationship. And so sometimes here in America, we're a funny group of people. Now that I've traveled all around the world, I realize how iconic we are as Americans and we value our independence. But here's the thing, nowhere in all of Scripture do we see God affirming independence. Instead, God affirms interdependence. In other words, we're supposed to be doing life together because that's God's design for us to grow and be more like Him.

Roger Marsh: I think about that in terms of saying something like the apostle Paul saying it's better for a Christ follower to not be married, to be completely devoted to God. And I wonder how many people would look at that and say, "Okay, I'm supposed to live on my own, act on my own, have a few friends at church," that type of thing. But I'm really supposed to be this lone ranger for God. I love the point you just made though, Becky, and I want to underscore it a little bit, the idea that we serve a triune God. God is community. So He created us to live in community and yet as Christians, how many of us find ourselves literally with friends that we only know on Zoom and Google Meet and Skype? And as long as I see you, I mean, you and I have worked together before, but we've not shaken hands.

We've not had a chance to enjoy fellowship. So it's a modern working friendship, but it's not the same type of thing that you're describing when you say there are friends that I'm friends with and friends that I'm deep with. What's it been like for you over the ... You're looking at the decades and the generations that you're seeing this impact. Talk about your anecdotal, but I still, I think well-reasoned take on how loneliness has kind of evolved in the culture.

Becky Harling: Yeah. So I look back on my childhood. Every summer as a little kid, I went into New York City to spend a week with my grandmother and I would go to her VBS and I loved her VBS.

Roger Marsh: Where did you grow up? I'm sorry.

Becky Harling: I grew up in New Jersey. But I would go into Brooklyn, New York. And here's the thing about my grandmother. It was fascinating to me. The thing I remember is every afternoon at 3:00 PM sharp, Aunt Isabelle would come over. Now, Aunt Isabelle was not related to us. In fact, to this day, I don't even know her last name, but we all called her Aunt Isabelle. And my grandmother and her had coffee and coffee cake every afternoon at three o'clock. And then they would spend the afternoon together and then Aunt Isabelle would go back to wherever she lived every evening. But I look at that and I think, wow, how our society has changed. Who has time to have a friend that you have coffee with

every single afternoon? Because with technology, we've become busier and busier and busier, but we've lost something about living an unhurried life and just enjoying each other.

And so I'm trying to bring that back in this book. I'm talking about things like embracing humility and letting go of a critical spirit. I mean, if we look at our culture today, everybody thinks they're the expert on everything, right? And very few people come into a relationship or a friendship with humility that says, "Hey, I just want to learn more about you. I want to understand you. I want to hear your story." And so we have to bring some of these qualities back into our relationships and get off our cell phones. I talk about that a little bit in the book and the power of distraction and all of those things enter in here, getting back to core discipleship issues like hospitality that was so big in the early church.

Roger Marsh:

Yeah. I knew, and you mentioned hospitality, the "h" word in our family, I'm an outgoing extrovert or introvert rather, I don't do hospitality well. It's really difficult to do. I knew I was not called to full-time senior pastoral ministry. And the senior pastor I grew up under, he and his wife, people came over, they played cards and made puzzles. I mean, every night of the week there was someone at their home. And Leland, how do you do this? He goes, "Well, it's hospitality." I mean, we're kind of wired that way, but I wonder how many more Christians would have a more effective witness and healthier relationships if we were more wired to say, "Hey, the so- and-sos are coming over for dinner tonight." Or like you said, you mentioned your aunt Isabelle and my kids grew up with an Uncle Kurt and Aunt Lisa. They still don't know their last names.

They know they're not family at all, but they were just friends of their moms and they kind of grew up with the family. But having those kinds of extended relationships are so very, very important. And in your book, *Cultivating Deeper Connections in a Lonely World*, you really challenge us to do two things. First of all, cultivate deeper connections, but secondly, acknowledge the fact that loneliness and attention and those are the currencies of the day. And I think it's important for Christians to pick up on that if we especially are going to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Talk about that if you would.

Becky Harling:

Yeah, I will. And one of the keys that I bring in right away in the book is this idea of humility. And that goes back to the introverted, extroverted conversation. So yes, we're all called to hospitality. For an extrovert, that might happen four or five nights a week, but part of humility is understanding your limitations, right? And so you have to understand, okay, I'm not wired to have people over five nights a week. I lean more extroverted, but I'm still not wired to have people over five nights a week.

I can have people over and I can invite them into my home for coffee or for prayer or whatever, but I have to know my limits. I have to understand where I stop and another person starts. And how this plays out in relationship to heal our loneliness is oftentimes when we don't know our limits, we try to fix other people or change them or change their ideas. And God doesn't call us to do that.

He calls us to love them and give them the gospel of good news, but we really don't have an opening to do that unless we've listened to understand them first.

Roger Marsh:

Yeah. That's interesting. Talking with Becky Harling about her brand new book, *Cultivating Deeper Connections in a Lonely World*. And we've got a link for the book up at drjamesdobson.org. I think about that as Lisa and I moved into a new community a couple of years ago and we started church shopping and you know that's always just a, especially, I've been to one church for half my life. So I mean, moving into church shopping and the thing that I was really taken with in an area where there were lots of churches to choose from, it was amazing how many places we were able to visit and literally drop in, drop back out and not really have any meaningful communication with anyone because the church wasn't really equipped for it. There was nobody in the greeting pool that looked and said, "I don't think I've seen you before. Have I seen you before?"

And I think back to something my mom taught me years ago where she was in between services church, my dad was the minister of music and a woman came up and asked her what classroom a certain Sunday school class was in. And my mom answered the question and then my mom asked her the follow-up question. She said, "I'm sorry, do I know you?" And she said, "Well, no, I don't." She goes, "Oh, are you new to the church?" She goes, "No, I've been going here for three years." And she said, "It really convicted me in that moment because everyone knew who I was because I'm the choir director's wife." And this woman felt comfortable enough. She must have had Becky Harling's sign on her face here, come tell me your life story. But she said, "I felt horrible in that moment because it was very humiliating for this person to come up to me and I thought, this is our church. It's not that big. I should be more in tune with other people. " This is something we have to be intentional about, isn't Becky? I mean, our natural tendency is not to reach out and try to help other people. We really have to make ourselves do it, if you will.

Becky Harling:

Yeah. And so really, if we're going to move beyond our loneliness, we have to take initiative and sometimes we have to change our narrative. For a lot of people, they think, why would somebody want to get to know me? Or if they knew my story, they wouldn't trust me, or maybe I've been hurt before, I'm not willing to take a risk again. And sometimes we have to sit with those narratives and say, "Where's the truth in this? " It could be like the truth is, let me give you an example. The truth is, if you're in any close relationship, at some point you are going to get hurt, right? I mean, we both know that, right? I mean, we're married. At some point in our marriage, my husband's going to hurt me and I'm going to hurt him, but we still love each other and we move beyond that.

In any church you attend, there is going to be church hurt. You're going to feel overlooked or undervalued or overused or underused or a million different things, but the church is still the body of Christ. It's still the place of belonging that God has designed for us. And so we need to be a part of that. So we need to change our narrative and then we need to take initiative. And I think for a lot of people, they're afraid to do that. And so I like to encourage them, take one

baby step. Maybe it's like reach out to somebody you want to go deeper with and say, "Hey, let's get coffee this week. Let me get your cell phone number so I can call you or text you" and then ask them their story, listen to them rather than just telling them all about yourself.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. Listen without lecturing. I heard it put one time I thought that is so difficult for us to do because you mentioned the cell phone and you're very kind to refer to it as a cell or a mobile phone. Most people call it a smartphone. And if I'm warm with a smartphone and a college degree, boy, howdy, you're going to hear my opinion because I'm right and I can find a thousand other people on the internet who agree with me, so therefore I must be right which leads us to another phenomenon in the culture right now. If you want to cultivate connection in a world of loneliness and deeper connection at that, we have to acknowledge the fact that we have become rather dismissive with people that we don't necessarily agree on. I mean, downright vicious to some people, not only am I not going to have anything to do with you anymore, I'm going to attack you somehow because let me let you know how wrong you are.

I think Jesus said something about a log and a spec or something like that. Talk about why it's important for us to take a step back and ask ourselves questions like, did I really need to be that mean? Was that really called for? I mean, sometimes we have to have tough love with people, but sometimes we fall into that same trap just like the world does.

Becky Harling: Yeah, we do. And it's disturbing actually. I think that as Christians, we've thought we have the message of good news and that means we can shout at everybody and we can scold people. And here's the thing, I have never seen scolding someone else ever change that other person. I don't know, maybe you have, but I never have.

Roger Marsh: Nope.

Becky Harling: Most people don't respond to that. And Jesus was pretty clear on letting go of our critical spirit because he said, "Don't judge." And if you look back on Jesus' life, he actually spent a lot of time with people that we maybe would call sinners and it was the religious people that were giving Him a hard time. And I think it's important, if we're lonely, to step back and think about how do I come across to people? Do I try to come across as the expert like I know it all? Do I come across as argumentative? If somebody has a different opinion than me, do I try to persuade them that my opinion's right? And is that helpful for the relationship? Because there are a lot of things that you're going to disagree on and that's fine. I mean, the early church disagreed on a lot of things and you can love Jesus and be on two different sides of an issue and that's okay. You just extend grace to each other and let go of the critical spirit. I like to say, and this is kind of startling, but we are never more like Satan than when we're criticizing and accusing somebody because that's his job. He is the accuser of the brethren. He doesn't need our help. We're to be like Jesus where we're loving people and loving them into Christlikeness and listening to them and comforting them.

Roger Marsh: Becky Harling, that is such a huge point of contention, I think for a lot of Christians. And it's a great point to make the fact that when you see the example of Jesus in Scripture, when He was dealing with the Pharisees, the guys who were trying to keep the law right down to the jot and tittle, He had contempt for them when they were doing it wrong, when they were misapplying it and hurting people. And even to the point of being sarcastic with them on occasion, which is, I kind of like the Jesus being sarcastic part, I do too.

Becky Harling: I do too.

Roger Marsh: But at the same time, when you see Him confronting the woman at the well, the woman caught an adultery and this, that, and the other thing, He never once backs away from the fact that they committed sin, but the way He approaches them is so different. And I wonder how many of us, because we get in the social media world and we like to see people, what's the term they use, dunking on other people online, "Oh, well you said this, but oh, they got you there." And it becomes a part of who you are. And then at the same time we're saying, "Gosh, I feel so lonely. No one really wants to hang around with me. Gee, I wonder why." Maybe we do need to hold up the Scripture as a mirror and say, "Well, let's ask that question, Becky Harling. What's a good first step for someone who's facing that right now and says, I need to make some changes."

Becky Harling: Okay. So I'm going to suggest something that's going to seem very scary, but I'm going to go for it.

Roger Marsh: Do it.

Becky Harling: I think ask the people closest to you. If you're married, ask your spouse. If you have a really good close friend and invite them to be honest and say, "Do you see me being critical a lot? How do I come across to you? Am I a good listener or do I always need to state my opinion and am I argumentative?" And if you really want to get brave, ask your kids because your kids will be blatantly honest with you.

Roger Marsh: And they'll be more than happy to tell you too, that's for sure.

Becky Harling: Right. I mean, my kids are, right? I mean, they'll for sure tell me if I ask them, and yet we have to know how we're coming across to people and we have to make some changes. One of the changes you can make immediately is focus on listening to people more than talking immediately going into any coffee conversation. I go into a coffee conversation and on the way, if I'm meeting at like a Starbucks, I'm praying on the way there. Lord, help me to be a good listener. Help me to ask good questions. Help me to find out as much about this person as I can. Help them to see Christ in me. If I'm inviting them into my home, the same thing. Lord, help me to listen because it's easy to talk. I mean, I was born to talk, right? I do that for a living, but I got to learn to listen.

Roger Marsh: That's great counsel. And we're just getting started in this conversation here. Becky, we're going to come to a halt for today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and ask you if you can join us again next time. We'll continue talking about her book called *Cultivating Deeper Connections in a Lonely World*, which is up at drjamesdobson.org. Becky, thank you for being with us today. Can you join us again next time for part two of this conversation?

Roger Marsh: Yes, I can. Thank you.

Becky Harling: It's easy to scroll past a hundred faces or more per day and still feel like no one really knows you, but Becky Harling reminds us that God designed us for real intentional connection. You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk in a conversation with our guest, Becky Harling. If you missed any part of today's program or if you'd like to send it to a friend, visit jdfi.net and make sure you check out information about Becky's newest book as well. We've got that linked up on our website in addition to today's program. Everyday families across America are searching for trusted biblical guidance on the issues that matter most, from strengthening marriages and raising children who love the Lord to defending Christ-centered values in our culture. Your generous support makes it possible for the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute to keep reaching those families with truth, encouragement, and hope. You can make a secure donation at jdfi.net. You can also call us, a member of our constituent care team will be happy to assist you when you dial 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the JDFI, thanks so much for listening today. Be sure to join us again next time as I'll continue my conversation with author Becky Harling, discussing cultivating deeper connections in a lonely world. It's coming your way on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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

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