

Angry and Frustrated with Your ADHD Spouse?

If you are angry, frustrated or just plain feeling hopeless about your relationship with your ADHD partner, you would not be alone. Many couples get married not realizing that one or both of them has ADHD. The undiagnosed symptoms encourage very specific, and often very destructive, patterns in their relationship. These can lead to intense anger and frustration. It's not that it's the "fault" of the person with the ADHD – both spouses contribute to the degradation of their relationship. Typically there is an ADHD *symptom* such as distraction, then there is a spousal *response* to that symptom (such as anger at being ignored) and, finally, a *response to the response* (such as defensiveness in response to a non-ADHD partner's anger.) Interactions become a reinforcing cycle of negatives and you both become quicker and quicker to explode and more and more hopeless. Often, the ADHD partner begins to avoid the non-ADHD partner to distance himself (or herself) from the conflict. This only makes things harder.

Unfortunately, if ADHD is a problem at all, then anger is almost inevitable for as long as ADHD is not addressed in the relationship. Harriet Lerner, an expert on anger, notes that anger is inevitable as long as you are "giving in and going along" and don't feel in control of your own life. This is just what both partners are doing when they don't know what to do about ADHD symptoms in the relationship. The ADHD – and responses to the ADHD – are "in control."

So how do you address the anger and frustration you are feeling? It's obviously a complex issue (if it were easy, you would have done it already!) however here are some of the most important ideas:

- **Seek comprehensive treatment for the ADHD** –To really manage ADHD, you need to put a "full court press" on treatment. When I work with couples, I talk about good treatment in three legs – like a stool, you need all three legs to stand up. The first leg is physiological treatments such as medication, exercise and fish oil. Since ADHD is chemical in nature, these improve the chemistry of the brain to enable better focus. The second leg is behavioral changes in the ADHD spouse – new habits this person creates to be more reliable and more focused. Alarms, calendars, lists, setting aside time for specific tasks and much more is included in this leg. (There are many books with ideas in this area.) The third leg is "interactions with your spouse" in which together you learn ways to communicate better, coordinate better, not respond angrily and the like. Comprehensive treatment includes doing as many things in all three legs as you can or need.

- **Better define your boundaries.** As “giving in and going along” leads to anger, setting boundaries around what’s really important to you can alleviate feelings of anger. Think carefully about what these boundaries are and try to keep them at a conceptual level that can be applied in multiple situations, such as “I wish to act in respectful ways and be respected.” Boundaries help you decide what to “let go of” and what you really need to push back on. Note that boundaries are for YOU, not your spouse. So “I don’t want my spouse to argue with me” is not a personal boundary. “I will respect others, respect myself and request respect” is a boundary – it tells you yourself how to behave and what you will and will not put up with. This form of taking control of the really important things can help you feel freer and less angry.
- **Learn “ADHD-friendly” ways of communicating and being together.** Some examples include: scheduling time to be together (not just waiting for it to happen – ADHD partners are often too distractible for this to be a successful strategy!); using verbal cues to stop a conversation when it starts to escalate out of control before you hurt each other; making sure a non-ADHD partner doesn’t “parent” and nag an ADHD partner. Finding ADHD-friendly approaches can be thought of as “trying differently” vs. “trying harder.” The latter is probably what you’ve been doing and it often isn’t very effective when ADHD is present.
- **Increase your empathy** by learning more about your partner’s “way of being” and experiences. ADHD partners often are shocked to discover how much their ADHD symptoms impact their partners once they really start to try to learn about it. Non-ADHD partners are often hugely surprised to find out that the reason their partner avoids them or fabricates stories is in response to the non-ADHD partner’s anger and disappointment. This is a bit tricky – one good source that is balanced and provides perspective on your differences is my book, *The ADHD Effect on Marriage*. You can also work with a therapist or counselor to find ways to “reveal” your feelings effectively to your partner to increase his or her empathy.
- **Stop all nagging and criticism, cold turkey.** Nagging often starts as a way to “remind” an ADHD partner to do something that he or she has forgotten about or is having trouble completing. As ADHD inconsistency continues over time, nagging becomes a habit – and many non-ADHD partners say they can’t think of other ways to “ensure” things get done. Over the long-term, though, nagging and ongoing “critiques” of what an ADHD partner is doing wrong are hugely destructive to a relationship and one of the main reasons ADHD partners harbor anger and resentment. This means the more you nag the less likely your partner is to wish to interact with you. Find more positive ways to interact around and address the issues that you are currently nagging about. This might include scheduling a coordination meeting, having the ADHD partner set up a structure for remembering better as part of treatment, and more. There are other ways...and they are more effective, too!
- **Pursue the positives.** When possible, try to have some fun together so you can remember what you’re not mad about and what you love about your partner. Don’t let the negatives in your relationship be the only thing to define it.

Overcoming anger and frustration in marriages impacted by ADHD is the work of two people. Success is the result of a sort of “dance” that the partners do together. The ADHD partner gets ADHD symptoms under control (thus undermining the destructive patterns) while simultaneously the non-ADHD partner gets his or her own issues under control, as well. (These typically have to do with anger, controlling behavior, nagging, and too much criticism.) You rely on each other to make progress, just as dancers do. Gradually, by implementing the ideas above, you can diffuse your anger and rebuild your love.

A presenter at the 2012 CADDAC conference, Melissa Orlov is the author of the award-winning *The ADHD Effect on Marriage*. A marriage consultant, she helps ADHD-affected couples from around the world rebalance their relationships and learn to thrive. She also teaches marriage counselors and other professionals about effective marriage therapy for couples impacted by ADHD. Orlov writes for *ADDitude Magazine*, blogs for *Psychology Today*, and blogs at www.adhdmarriage.com. She has been interviewed on the topic of ADHD and marriage by the New York Times, CNN, Today, US News and World Report, CBS, AOL and many others. Ms. Orlov is a cum laude graduate of Harvard College.