

ADHD and Couples

By Erin Bernhardt

Are you frustrated because your spouse's ADHD is affecting your marriage? What if ADHD is a factor in the marriage from both partners? My spouse has ADHD type inattentive and has known it since childhood; but I was only recently diagnosed with ADHD type inattentive as an adult. We have been married for two and a half years, and are both young professionals without children. The "honeymoon" period of our marriage was extremely rough due primarily to the ADHD issues that created undercurrents of tension in our relationship. In this article, I will share with you some of the things we have learned. Then I will provide you with some research about ADHD couples. And finally, we will feature tips and experiences from our National Director, the wife of an ADHD spouse who has been dealing with ADHD in her marriage for 37 years!

Here are my tips for dealing with ADHD in the marriage:

- Research ADHD. Learn as much as you can about the symptoms so that you can clearly identify what can be attributed to the disorder. This will help you take things less personally when frustration is imminent.
- Leave time between a request and the expectation of action. An ADHD person's brain has a difficult time switching from one task to another (even if it is from watching a football game to doing the dishes). This will avoid arguments due to frustration. Example: "You don't have to do it right now, but I'd like it if you could please do the dishes sometime before bed tonight." There might be some grumpy complaining (ignore this), but it usually gets done!
- This brings me to my next point. Ignore the minor complaints. It can be difficult not to take it personally, but choose your battles. Most of the time, the ADHD person forgets they even did this about ten minutes later. It's not personal. It's a frustration effect of executive functioning issues.
- Along with the last point: avoid escalating the frustration. It will turn into a contest of seeing who can hurt the other the most, and no one ever wins this contest. If tempers flare, it's always best to walk away and revisit the situation once feelings have calmed.
- Give your ADHD partner clear instructions. Do not assume they know your needs or desires. They must be explicitly told what you want them to do. Guessing games are a recipe for disaster.

- When communicating your feelings, try to avoid placing blame, but do be explicit about your needs. Example: “I feel like I hardly ever see you anymore, and I really miss doing things together. I really need some time with you this weekend.”
- Organization is important. Use a system with plenty of visual reminders (it’s harder for the ADHD person to stay organized if everything is behind a door or a drawer). Make it easy and convenient to put things away, so if there is a pile that usually happens in one spot, this is where you need an organizational tool. Example: Place various hooks by the door for keys, backpack, purse, scarves, hats, etc.
- Allow your partner to decompress after work. ADHD people need transitional time from one activity to the next. Try not to bombard them right after work. Give them some time to transition to family activities, for instance.

Here are tips from my husband for dealing with ADHD in the marriage:

- Be aware that frustration may not be the other partner’s fault, but due entirely to the ADHD. The partner isn’t even usually aware of their tone, and is only frustrated at having to refocus their attention.
- Clearly define roles for household chores with a schedule of completion (I think he’s trying to tell me something here).
- When there are things to be remembered (appointments, grocery lists, etc.), both partners should make a list and put it somewhere where both partners can see it and remind each other.
- When arguing, things are sometimes said due to impulsivity that are not meant. Forgiveness is key.

Adults with ADHD receive many detrimental messages from those around them because people do not understand the disorder. “If only you tried,” “why can’t you just do it,” or “you have such potential if only you’d use it” are especially damaging because no matter how much the person with ADHD tries, they are unable to concentrate, complete tasks, or sit still. It is not an issue of willpower. So when the individual with ADHD tries their hardest to no avail, they are forced to conclude that they are “lazy, stupid failures.” An equally difficult message for an ADHD adult to receive is “You are doing that wrong.” ADHD individuals tend to think outside the box and have unique approaches to working through a task. To be shut down by more traditional thinkers again brings home a message of worthlessness. It’s no wonder many people with ADHD have low self-esteem!

Being in a relationship with an adult with ADHD brings some difficulties:

- Difficulty staying tuned into conversations.
- Difficulty with time management and commitments.

- Difficulty saying no and setting boundaries and limits.
- Difficulty finishing tasks due to distraction.
- Difficulty coping with change.

Individuals with ADHD spend untold amounts of energy just maintaining focus throughout their day. When they arrive home from work, there is little energy left for focus at home. It takes a lot of effort to maintain attention, suppress impulsivity, stifle hyperactivity, constantly remind oneself of tasks and push oneself to finish said tasks. Individuals with ADHD do need time to decompress and restore their energy for a period of time after work. Setting up a routine for household chores, keeping in mind decompression time, with larger projects during weekend hours is helpful.

Follow-through is difficult for those with ADHD and intensely frustrating for the partner, especially because the ADHD partner will agree with you! Try not to take this personally; the ADHD person's brain is so "noisy" they may not have even heard you, or they have forgotten entirely in the wake of the "brain noise." For a person with ADHD, it is like five conversations going on in their brain at one time. It's no wonder they have difficulty remembering that you told them to take out the garbage.

Don't blame yourself for not "doing enough to help my ADHD partner." Don't attempt to micro-manage your spouse. It's not good for you, and it's not good for the partner. Eventually, this kind of relationship breeds resentment because it begins to feel more like a parent-child relationship than a relationship between spouses. You can only change yourself and how you respond to your partner; you cannot change your partner. Boundaries and limits are important for the non-ADHD partner, too!

Positive reinforcement is important. Notice when the ADHD individual does something you asked, especially if they do it without you having to ask! Also realize that people with ADHD may try to control a situation because they feel so out of control with their thoughts and behaviours. Realize that at times, an argument exists only because it is an ADHD issue, not as a result of the subject you are arguing about! Try to focus on your partner's talents, accomplishments, and positive attributes.

Regarding ADHD treatment, it is important for the spouse to be aware of the treatment plan. Educate yourself about ADHD and learn about what type of treatments are available to your spouse. Contribute by perhaps visiting his/her therapist or coach for a session together. Perhaps even consider couples counselling as a part of the treatment plan.

Despite these issues, often adults with ADHD are bright, articulate, and interesting. They tend to be quite attractive to the people they meet. They are exciting, energetic people who know how to have fun and often have a fabulous sense of humour. Those with ADHD are often creative and see the world in an “outside the box” way. They tend to have varied interests and sometimes cycle through them quickly, but this can make for fantastic conversation! Most are caring and empathetic people. They are persistent and determined, quite capable of picking themselves up after a setback and dusting themselves off to try again. Adults with ADHD have attractive personalities; it’s no wonder we are attracted to them! These tips will help your relationship with your ADHD partner flourish.

Resources:

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