



CHADD and the National Resource Center on ADHD

Ask the Expert Chat Series

Feb. 22, 2012 – Relationship Survival tips for the Non-ADHD Spouse/Partner

Moderators – NRC Staff

Expert – Terry Dickson, MD, ACG, and Anne Dickson

Moderator 1: Today's topic is "Survival Tips for the Non-ADHD Spouse." You may begin submitting your questions. It's likely that many of you may have similar questions dealing with the same issue. Even though your particular question may not be posted, please try to see how Terry and Anne Dickson respond to other question may apply to your situation.

Welcome to our new participants. Thank you for joining us today. Terry and Anne Dickson are responding to your questions about Survival Tips for the Non-ADHD Spouse.

Thank you Dr. Dickson and Mrs. Dickson for being here today and lending us your expertise.

Liz: Would love some information to better understand the behavior of someone with ADHD as it often appears to be forgetfulness or an unwillingness to use a crutch or tool to help them stay on track or recall Honey-do items. For example, I'll write out the grocery list and my husband will somehow forget the list or lose it between the front door and his car. I try not to fault him; and trust me I do my own deep breathing and try to have compassion, but what can I do to help him be more successful and not stress him out given his condition

Terry Dickson: He may not even be aware of how his behaviors affect others. It is the way his brain is wired. Structures definitely can help to keep him on track. You can't take his behaviors personally, even though it is difficult at times. Use gentle reminders. Encourage him to make lists. He may not be able to remember more than a couple things to do at once.

One thing that you can do is speak directly to your spouse, face-to -face with good eye contact. Check in with him or her to make sure that it was heard and understood.

Anne Dickson: I know it's frustrating. A sense of humor always helps!

Anne: So, is there a way to hold his attention without having to scold him? He is constantly telling me that I am always reprimanding him.

Anne Dickson: When I have something to tell Terry, I always try to make sure I have his attention first – "Terry? Terry?" – before I start giving him the information I'm trying to tell him. If he's looking at the computer or otherwise engaged with something, I make sure he's stopped that activity first.

Terry Dickson: Yes, I would always withhold criticism and negative feedback if at all possible. Remember that your spouse probably grew up with a lot of criticism to begin with. You are responsible for not tearing down your spouse. Your love for him or her must be unconditional even if you don't agree with his or her actions.

Anne Dickson: Patience is key!

Charles: For Anne, my spouse gets frustrated if I remind her or suggests lists. She feels micromanaged and it doesn't work well for the relationship. How can we avoid that frustration?

Anne Dickson: It might help to ask her how she would want to be reminded, or how she would want you to help her keep track of things. Even if seems like her way would be ineffective to you, it's important that you honor where she's at, and that she feels part of the game plan. It just might work, too!

Also, I would suggest making sure you're giving her space to make mistakes. She will feel more like working with you on this, probably, if she knows her mistakes or shortcomings will be met with patience and compassion and forgiveness from you (I know, that's easier said than done!).

That will hopefully help it from getting into a pride thing on her part, where she feels like she has to defend herself. Hopefully she'd be more open to your help if she knows she'll be met with a positive response on your part, even when she's made a mistake on her end.

Terry Dickson: Remember that a person with ADHD may be totally unaware of how his/her behavior affects others, and that your spouse is not defective or flawed. His or her brain is just wired differently.

Moderator 1: CHADD's 25th Anniversary Celebration Conference is a great way to learn more about ADHD and now is a good time to start planning your trip! Our next annual conference will be in San Francisco, California, from Nov. 8-10, 2012. World-renowned experts will be on hand to provide the latest science-based information about ADHD in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Visit www.CHADD.org for more information!

RJP: "Follow through" is the thing my spouse and I have the most trouble with. He has all kinds of tools and resources and we make all kinds of plans on how to deal with various situations. It seems to me, the non-ADHD spouse, that he just doesn't often hold up his "end of the bargain" of our strategies. Any tips?

Anne Dickson: That can be a challenge. The ADHD person can start a project with great enthusiasm and then at some point become bored or lose interest, and then it's quite difficult to get them going again. It might help to revisit the plan with him in a friendly way, when it seems to be going by the wayside.

It might help to do this revisiting of the plan, if it's a good time to talk constructively, when the situation you've planned for is actually breaking down, so he can see the results of his lack of follow-through immediately. But that's only if the discussion at that point can be constructive (calm, not accusatory, good listening).

It's also good to see where the plan is breaking down. Is it unrealistic for either of you? Does it not mesh with your individual ways of doing things? It might need to be tweaked.

Terry Dickson: Your spouse may seem 'unmotivated' to change his or her behaviors. Again, it is usually not because he or she is trying to 'hurt' the other person. If at all possible, try to transform blame into empathy and understand that your spouse's actions or lack of actions may not be due to 'lack of caring.'

It really can help to hire an ADD Coach. I strongly suggest that if you do hire a coach, it is someone who is well familiar with ADHD and is experienced in coaching individuals with ADHD.

I agree with Anne, work on building better communication. Agree to certain times during the week when you and your spouse can spend time together without distractions or interruptions. Talk about what has been working and what hasn't been working in the marriage. Work on one or two issues at a time. Learn to talk less and listen more. Be transparent about how your spouse affects you in a non-judgmental way.

Dejavu: I married ADHD, I gave birth to ADHD, I work with ADHD & it's sucking the life out of me. I've done a better job of attending to my children than my marriage, but after many years of frustration I'm not well equipped to deal with the spousal challenges. Where to start?

Terry Dickson: One thing that comes to mind is to encourage your spouse to get an accurate diagnosis and treatment if needed. ADHD can be associated with other conditions (such as chronic depression or anxiety) and they may need to be addressed too.

You cannot take his or her behavior personally. Remember who has the disorder and don't take all the blame for everything. Ultimately, the person with ADHD needs to take responsibility for their actions and seek help when needed. There are times when you HAVE to step in and there is no excuse for the behavior such as physical or mental abuse. Your spouse may need professional help if he or she loses control and cannot handle emotions on his or her own.

Anne Dickson: It's difficult to be the one having to help everyone else manage their lives all the time – kids' homework, spouse's schedule, where are the car keys, have the bills gotten paid and so on.

As much as you can, learn about how ADHD affects adults can help – through books, the internet, support groups and any other resource you come across.

It always helps to know that you are not the only one going through these challenges! It also helps to remember that the ADHD person can't help how their brain is wired, and as Terry said earlier, they often don't realize how they're affecting the other person.

Moderator 1: To learn more about the challenges faced by couple affected by ADHD, please see the topic "[Marriage and Partnerships](#)."

Kathleen: Good afternoon, can you suggest ways for me to reframe my husband's responses to my requests? When I'm calm, I accept his condition easily, but when I'm stressed, I misinterpret him. My gut reaction is that he is unloving, which is not true but I tend to read him that way.

Terry Dickson: Easier said than done, but try stepping back from the immediate situation and be an outside observer, like a meta-view, and realize this may not be a good time to talk. During an ADHD-charged moment, things may seem too overwhelming for your ADHD spouse. Overwhelmed can lead to defensiveness for folks with ADHD.

In our marriage, late evening seems to be the worst time for us to discuss anything. I tend to get upset over the stupidest things. We have learned through experience not to discuss anything late at night if possible.

Anne Dickson: It can help to ask yourself during those times, "Is he really trying to irritate me right now, or is it just the way his brain works?"

Not that he's not responsible for how he responds to you, but it can help to deflect some hurt or anger on your part if you know he's not really trying to hurt you; he just has more difficulty in this area.

When you are feeling stressed and that you're not going to handle the situation as well as you like, you might want to say to him something like, "I'd like to talk about this, but I don't feel like I can talk as well as I'd like to right now. Can we reconvene on this in a few minutes?"

If you can learn to stay calm when he isn't calm, it can help a lot. Just because he is not handling the discussion well doesn't mean you can't either.

Moderator 1: For more information about ADHD and married and partnered relationships, check out Gina Pera's monthly CHADD blog, "You and Me... and Adult ADHD," at www.CHADD.org. In addition to Ms. Pera's blog, Nadine Taylor-Barnes' writes monthly on parenting, and Nancy Ratey discusses coaching. Stay updated on our new blogs by visiting www.CHADD.org weekly!

Raegen: How do I get my husband to stick to a budget? I am so tired of telling him "no", but the alternative is to let Mr. Impulsive spend family money. This makes it very difficult to feel like my values are coming across with our children and we don't do things that I like to do as a family because there is never any money to do them.

Terry Dickson: Monetary challenges can be a big issue. Sometimes I advise my clients not to ever carry a credit card and have a list of what they are intending to buy before they ever enter the store. Many families suffer huge debt when there is an ADHD spouse.

Unfortunately, this can lead to further miscommunication and stress in the home.

Anne Dickson: That's a tough one, in a lot of different ways. It might help to set aside part of the budget for him to use for whatever he wants, even if it crimps some of the other things you want to use the money for; at least there might be some more control there. He would have some freedom to spend the way *he* wants –"budgeted impulsivity."

It might help to get someone else involved too, like a financial planner. Your husband might take the budget more seriously, or be able to see the big picture more clearly – how his impulsive purchases are hindering other financial goals.

Jim: My better half asks me to do things all the time and I honestly forget. Does the bad memory cause the ADHD or ADHD cause the bad memory?

Terry Dickson: Working memory problems are common with ADHD. That is why making 'to-do lists' and keeping planners is not a bad idea. Many smart phones now come with alarms and bells that remind you of deadlines, etc...

Uptohere: My ADHD husband has always had a bit of a temper, but lately, it seems worse than ever. What can I do to get him to control himself? He always regrets "losing it" afterwards, so why won't he think about that before he lets loose?

Anne Dickson: With your non-ADHD brain, you're able to stop yourself from blurting out angry or hurtful things, even if you're thinking them (and we all think them). You may think, "That was really a stupid thing for you to do," but you're able to stop yourself from saying it.

Your husband's ADHD brain isn't equipped so well to take that extra split second to assess what he's about to say, so if he thinks it, he says it, with no assessment between the thought and the speech as to how it will affect you. That's really hurtful and difficult for the person on the other end of the anger.

Maybe you can together come up with a signal that it's time to postpone the discussion until a better time when he starts to lose control – a certain word or phrase.

Terry Dickson: Your spouse may not even be aware of how he or she is affecting you, especially in 'ADHD-charged moments'. Learn to differentiate between facts and feelings. Your spouse may have hurt your feelings and made you feel unloved during an emotionally-charged moment. But the fact is that he or she may not even be aware of how he or she is affecting you.

One thing I did not mention is DON'T ENABLE. Remember that you married an ADHD adult and that ultimately he or she is responsible to learn strategies to cope with the challenges of everyday life. Remember that you can't FIX your spouse.

Moderator 1: Missed part of the chat? Past chat transcripts are available to CHADD members as a benefit. To learn more about joining CHADD, visit: www.chadd.org.

We have less than ten minutes left. Terry and Anne Dickson will move through as many questions as possible. If we are unable to get to your question please contact one of our Health Information

Specialists on ADHD by calling 1-800-233-4050 between 9 AM- 5PM EST or by clicking on the “[Ask A Question](#)” link on the top of our [website](#).

Jim: Should a person with ADHD avoid seeking out a partner who has ADHD also? Does it make each partner more understanding or do the shortfalls end up becoming too frustrating?

Anne Dickson: Both! I think it would really depend on what traits of ADHD each person has, in what degree.

The two people can be more understanding of each other, but ADHD can be a challenge in any relationship, and with another ADHD person it just might be overwhelming for both.

Terry Dickson: Good question. As a matter of fact, I have met many couples where both spouses have ADHD. There are definitely challenges but it can work. It is good if you both can openly communicate what works and what doesn't work for both of you. ALWAYS be honest with one another. If you feel that you just can't work together effectively, seek professional help.

Give positive feedback to your spouse every day. Go on a date together and get away from the daily grind. Have times when you both can simply celebrate being together and not discuss problems!

Be patient with your ADHD spouse. Change takes time. Again, find ways to give positive feedback every day. ADHD can be challenging, but concentrate on your ADHD spouse's strengths whenever possible.

Moderator 1: And that wraps up our chat on Relationship Survival Tips for the Non-ADHD Spouse/Partner. Thank you Dr. Dickson and Mrs. Dickson for sharing your knowledge and insights with our participants. The NRC hosts *Ask the Expert Chats* every month. Join us March 21 at 3 PM when Holly Graff, CPO, PCC, takes questions on ADHD, Organization and Clutter Control. Thanks to all who attended today!

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