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Ask the Expert Chat Series

July 14, 2010 – Working Together When a Spouse/Partner has ADHD

Moderators – NRC Staff

Expert – Nancy Ratey, EdM, MCC, SCAC

Moderator 1: Welcome to today's Ask the Expert chat, "Working Together When a Spouse/Partner had ADHD." Our expert this afternoon is Nancy Ratey

Nancy A. Ratey, EdM, MCC, SCAC, is a Strategic Life Coach specializing in coaching professionals with ADHD. She has a master's degree from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and is a Master Certified Coach and a Senior Certified AD/HD Coach. Nancy was instrumental in establishing the field of ADHD coaching and is a former member of the CHADD Professional Advisory Board.

She has written extensively on the topic of coaching, including co-authoring three books. Her most recent book is *The Disorganized Mind*, (St. Martin's Press, 2008). Nancy runs a private practice in Wellesley, MA, and lectures internationally.

Confused: After my wife left me, I found out I had ADHD, I feel much better after the Adderall and counseling, but I cannot get my wife to understand that I was not in full control of my anger and words, any suggestions?

Nancy Ratey: I'm SOOO sorry! AND congrats on getting help! That is the number one thing – acknowledge you have a challenge, learn about it and then get in action! Unfortunately, I hear your story many times over – however, it's not always to the point of one of the spouses leaving – at least they have reached out for a coach.

The first thing is to understand that there is a long history in her mind of you not following thru, etc. and I'm SURE that for years you tried 100 times over to be more consistent – most likely to no avail. I see so many non- ADHD spouses who are always waiting for the other shoe to drop and end up never recognizing the ADHD spouses efforts – which is NOT full leave turn over! If nothing else I would try to make amends with her and ask her to try again – but I would fortify yourself with a coach!

Before I forget--everyone is welcome to contact me directly at nancy@nancyratey.com if they need further help/clarification.

Jbrizendine: Often I feel like I am parenting my husband. He needs me to make notes for him to remind him what he needs to do. He also needs help being reminded to do the things on the notes. Are there other ways to help him be more independent in doing the necessary things that will keep me from having to do this for him? We have a 10 year old daughter with ADHD that I have to do this for. I feel like I shouldn't have to do this for him, but he truly struggles with getting things done.

Nancy Ratey: Bh boy! This is THE MOST COMMON issue I hear about. I would truly suggest he try a coach. But to do that, he has to acknowledge that he needs the help and be willing to put the work into changing things. Also, I see so often in couples--especially wives--who STARTED out doing the reminders, etc. and then things change after kids come along. And they call their husbands "the 3rd child."

I would also suggest you both read my book- *The Disorganized Mind*- it has sections in there that have lots of strategies. FOR THE SOLUTION:

1. Try to find out --have him explore with you-- ways of communicating that work best for him. E.g. - visual written notes, electronics- WHATEVER--and then use those to communicate so you can take the "toxicness" out of the equation. EXAMPLE: a white board where you post things to be done (then he should be accountable to coach to look at every day, or a communication note book in the kitchen (um, with a pen attached to it! lol) and create a system where you write in things to be done, and then he writes notes to the issue. For example, "Pipe broken" - then he writes called plumber on XX date, he is coming out on XX to fix. At least this will make the communication easier and less toxic. BUT he has to acknowledge how much this is paining you and take responsibility to pull his weight.
2. Be realistic and delegate things out if you can- if he is not good with paying bills and you are, then you do it. And make tradeoffs. I once coached a CFO of a company and his wife INSISTED he pay the hse bills (she was an accountant) and he NEVER did – the electricity got turned off all the time, etc. but it was out of PRINCIPLE that she pushed him. FORGET IT! Hire a student to do paperwork, whatever- but enjoy one another when you can!

Spooky: When I speak to my husband, he listens to the beginning of the statement, but stops listening and thinks he knows the rest of the statement. Is this racing thoughts and how can he control them?

Nancy Ratey: OMG! This is SOO typical too! My husband and I had that problem!

1. He needs to acknowledge this is a problem
2. PLAN for talks. Most woman- no offence- start barking orders at their husbands right when they get home from work - the husband has a problem with transitions from work to home - and it always ends up in a screaming match (hence white board like I suggested). Try taking walks while talking, create a date night, find out what is best for him--written outlines of things you need to go over or what. Ask him what makes him do this and what his suggestions are.

Often the men say 'she is always saying the same thing over and over again.' I help then with a dialogue "I want to hear you, and right now I'm overwhelmed - can we set a time to talk and you send me a few of the things you want to address?" But, the most important is for him to recognize that although his "intuition" has served him well in his life and career- that there is ALWAYS that 12-20% where they are WRONG.

Also, I would suggest you give the "context" of what you want to say in the begging. "Is this is good time" (that's first actually) then "I want to go over dates on the calendar" OR WHATEVER - but give the context.

Moderator 1: CHADD local groups provide support and networking with other individuals who understand the difficulties of parenting a child with ADHD. In addition to supplying each other with local resources and support, the meetings usually have a speaker who talks about current events or research in the ADHD community. Each local group is different, so use the CHADD website to find the group closest to you. To get started, visit [the CHADD chapter locator](#).

Jeff Siegel: How does one handle the inevitable arguments over financials (how to handle them, WHO should handle them) when the non-ADHD partner is the major breadwinner?

Nancy Ratey: You are a team - what does money have to do with it? If its division of labor- couples have to learn to pick their fights. BUT, the main thing is, is to be in communication, NOT assault people's characters, and NOT NOT make it about individuals. Rather, look at the BIG PICTURE – this is about how to GROW THE MARRIAGE My next response would be: Hire someone else to do the bills and GET THIS ISSUE OUT OF THE MARRIAGE! It's SURE to kill it!

Moderator 1: Being a CHADD member not only provides valuable members only benefits, such as Attention magazine, to you and your family; it also supports CHADD's work on behalf of individuals with ADHD at the local, state and national level. [Join CHADD today!!!](#)

Jen: I was diagnosed with ADHD last year and am still working to manage my symptoms. But my husband of 18 years still can't be sure what's ADHD and what's simply "laziness" or an unwillingness to cooperate on my part. How do you separate symptoms from normal marital issues?

Nancy Ratey: He has to be willing to learn about ADHD – there are a few books that are good ones to read that explain the attention system etc in a non-clinical way. *A Users Guide to the Brain* by J. Ratey" is one example. I would put a post it in the pages you think he would benefit from. AND, this is going to take YOU learning about how the ADHD affects you and explore as a team ways to GROW THE MARRIAGE without casting blame, etc.

Jbrizendine: My husband's lack of follow through and consistency often leave me feeling angry. It feels personal, like he just doesn't care about me. I know in my heart this is not the case when I really sit down and think about it, but I often get so angry first. What can I do?

Nancy Ratey: First, know it's NOT on purpose! SOOO many spouses of the people I coach take their actions personally. When I was first married, my husband used to open the mail AND THEN LET THE ENVELOPE FALL TO THE FLOOR AND WALK OVER IT! OMG! .

I just about DIED and one time stood up screaming "WHAT DO I LOOK LIKE TO YOU? A HOUSE SERVANT?????" There was a man I coached who used to WALK OVER THE TOP of dry cleaning bags when all his wife was asking was for him to HANG IT ON THE DOOR on his way out to work. She wanted TO KILL HIM! And my husband would do the same- WALK OVER THE TOP OF THINGS I HAD ON THE STAIRS FOR HIM TO TAKE UP! Grrrrrrr...

I soon learned that my husband's brain was just "checked out" and he NEVER realized what he was doing when I confronted him – same with the client. SOOO it's up to the couple to communicate so each understands the other and come up with ways to help – for example: my client would set his alarm as a reminder to take out the dry cleaning. BUT WE CAN NOT NOT NOT NOT take this stuff personally! TALK! COMMUNICATE IN STRATEGIC WAYS! EXPLORE issues – "what is it that would help?" "How can we solve this?" NEVER USE "WHY." That insinuates blame and the other person will get defensive.

And just to let you know, the men I coach literally have CRIED on the phone with me about how much it pains them that they do things wrong and how much they TRUELY want to please their spouse. So please, explore ways of communicating about this in a non-blaming, non-toxic way!

Trish: I have a 22 year old daughter (unmarried) with ADHD who seems to be constantly in and out of relationships. What can she do before she even enters into a marriage that will increase her odds that her husband (non-ADHD) will understand her and be willing to work with her? What things should she do to establish a good foundation right from the start?

Nancy Ratey: Well, first of all, heck! She might marry someone with ADHD! <g> Good question – again, like I say over and over in my book, its ACKNOWLEDGING first that you have the problem and LEARNING ABOUT IT. A coach might really, really help her learn more about herself and ways of coping. Bottom line: she needs to want to change (for example- perhaps being on this chat??? – She needs to understand how her ADHD impacts her relationships. I'm SURE it's just not limited to men!

Moderator 2: Our next question is a bit different than ones up to this point and deals with intimacy in significant relationships

Mrscrole: I'm an adult woman with ADHD. My husband and I can go for months without having sex, mostly because I just dread it. In my mind, it's too much energy and takes too long. I'm constantly thinking about all the other things I have to get done and sex just gets in the way. Have you heard of this problem before with ADHD and how can I improve the situation?

Nancy Ratey: To be REALLY open and honest here, I used to have the same problems in relationships! It wasn't until I was on meds that I could "pay better attention." But it was AWFUL (the grocery list in my head was much more urgent and interesting to me! lol!).

SOLUTION: Discuss this (um, I'm sure he's noticed this and it might be eating away at him) and create times that are good for you. BE CREATIVE! Go to a rooftop! Exercise, be more in control – can you make the moves? Intimacy is a HUGE issue and I coach on this topic A LOT. Make a date night and DON'T EVER SKIP IT – know that this is affecting both of you but mostly THE MARRIAGE. If not taken care of, it will fester! Life is too short! Also, I would visit a GYN and talk with them. I've ended up being put on testosterone to help me out. (Um...it really helped my boxing skill too – haa haa!). But you both MUST be in communication as to how each other feels and come up with solutions TOGETHER!

Spooky: My husband finds other family members' things annoying. To keep focused, he likes very little lying around. The rest of the family resents this, as things are important to us. How can we help him cope, without resenting his control?

Nancy Ratey: Okay, this sounds like an issue of transitions – I write about that in my book *The Disorganized Mind* – look at that chapter – it's important stuff to know. ALSO plan, plan and plan! If it is transitions, then hanging a family calendar, etc. to know what is coming up will help.

I used to be this way. when my kids had friends over unexpectedly- um -- ALWAYS- I would freak out with the unknown –so all I did was prep the house for friends so I wouldn't worry about being "shocked" when kids ran in the house, AND I would have them call me, even if 15 minutes beforehand, to let me know. Again, you MUST communicate your feelings with him and be CURIOUS as to his suggestions on how to fix it. If it's just you imposing demands on him, it won't work. Ask HIM what would work for him.

Moderator 1: Are you an NRC Facebook Fan? If not, please click on the Facebook icon on the NRC homepage – www.help4adhd.org – and don't forget to “friend” Phil Fidgety in order to keep informed about all NRC activities and updates!

Sunny: How can I help my husband to understand why I can't control my tendency to hyperfocus at times? He thinks it's as simple as getting up and walking away from the computer or simply putting down the book, when reality for me is that it's like a few hours of being in the grips of an addiction. I just can't stop, even when I want to.

Nancy Ratey: Okay, first of all set an alarm to go off every 30 minutes and do a self check in "do I really need to be doing this RIGHT NOW?" AND also so you can hear the passage of time. Next – you've acknowledged the problem, now plan for it. Don't get on the computer when its family time! History tells you, you get stuck!

One of the biggest things I do as a coach is to remind people of the pain of the past and to help them keep the future goal in mind – "practicing not getting stuck on the computer." It also sounds like you might be struggling with transitions too. Realize that you can better plan for transitioning off the computer and paying attention to him.

Moderator 1: Do you Tweet? Follow the NRC on Twitter @help4adhd and receive daily tips on how to better manage ADHD, and be notified about future Ask the Expert chats!

jessica141709: It is very hard for me sometimes to keep up with the energy level in the house (my husband and stepson both have ADHD). How can I keep my sanity without offending them and let them know when I just need them to stop talking for a few minutes?

Nancy Ratey: How about if you create a rating system of when you are at the end of your rope? The family needs to be involved with this so they take part of the responsibility. For example a hand signal or saying hey guys! I'm at a 4 (5 being the highest) right now. The other thing is, you know this about yourself, so take breaks for yourself. Take control of what you can for you.

I too have that problem. I can't stand crowds or lots of people - it drains me- so I get in my car and drive to a parking lot of cool off and get perspective. Of course, I've had to explain this to people around me and be sure they know not to take it personally.

Nancy Ratey: OMG! I have to go! THANK YOU ALL SOOO MUCH! This is was a lot of fun! And again, feel free to contact me any time. Put in the header "CHADD chat" or something like that so I know who you are. THANK YOU THANK YOU! Warmly, Nancy

Moderator 1: Thank you Nancy for your perceptive responses! Your experience has undoubtedly presented you as a true sage on the topic. To read more advice from Nancy Ratey, please visit her monthly blog on coaching at <http://www.chadd.org>

If you have a question that was not answered today, please contact us online (National Resource Center's Web site at <http://www.help4adhd.org>) or by phone (800-233-4050) between 9AM and 5PM EST and one of our health information specialists will respond.

The information provided in this Ask the Expert Chat transcript was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number 5U38DD000335-03 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

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