

Survival Tips for the Spouse Who **DOESN'T** Have **ADHD**

IF YOU ARE MARRIED TO SOMEONE WITH ADHD—and you do not have ADHD yourself—you have probably experienced how the disorder affects a marriage. Classically, the relationship begins with much excitement and energy as your partner intensely hyperfocuses on you. You feel like you are the complete center of his or her attention and you are all that matters to him or her. The courtship can be very stimulating.

Then things change dramatically. You may end up feeling confused and unloved as the person you married appears to have lost interest and spends more time with TV, computer, or hobbies. As time goes by, you feel ignored and neglected. You begin to realize that your spouse doesn't help much around the house and you end up doing most of the work—as though you are doing ninety percent of the chores around the house while your spouse does ten percent. In essence, you have become the janitor. When you ask him or her to do something, he or she seems to agree, only to forget afterwards. You complain and it only leads to more tension and misunderstanding between the two of you. You find that he or she fails to keep certain commitments, procrastinates, and doesn't seem to listen to what you have to say.

You begin to nag and over time begin to feel that instead of being married to an equal, you are raising “a child.” In time, you feel emotionally abused and because you don't feel cared about anymore, you become more resentful and angry, and you typically react to your spouse in anger. Your spouse's behaviors are consistently inconsistent and your marriage is like a rollercoaster ride. You become hypervigilant as you stomp out “fires” to avoid calamity. This turns into a vicious cycle of a downward spiral. If this cycle is left unchecked, many of these marriages end up in divorce.

The partner who does not have ADHD may fear that things will stay the same or that the partner who has ADHD could cause harm to the children. When anger and resentment set in, there can be an emotional void and withdrawal from the spouse with ADHD. You get the feeling of walking on eggshells and you get used to not getting much positive feedback. You feel trapped and unworthy of your spouse's love or attention. You can become so preoccupied with your spouse who has ADHD that your own self-help, desires, and goals are put aside.

Fortunately, there are things that you can do.



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- **It is easier said than done, but don't take your spouse's behavior personally.** Remember who has the disorder and don't take the blame. It is not your job to “rescue” him or her. You cannot make his or her ADHD go away, and you are not responsible for his or her disorder. Ultimately, he or she needs to take ownership for his or her actions and seek help for the disorder. He or she must learn to deal with his or her anger and frustration in an acceptable way. On the other hand, you too are responsible for your actions in response to your spouse's actions. It is important to act but not react.
- **Your spouse may seem to be unmotivated to change his or her behaviors.** Remember that the problematic behaviors are usually a result of the way his or her brain is wired and that he or she is not purposely trying to annoy you. With increased awareness and understanding of the disorder, many adults with ADHD are able to acknowledge how ADHD has affected their marriage and accept responsibility for their actions. It is important that you transform blame into empathy and understand that your spouse's actions may not be due to a lack of caring. Remember that your spouse may not link cause and effect because of poor working memory problems and may actually not see how his or her behaviors affect you.
- **Learn as much as you can about ADHD.** Read articles, books, attend support groups—whatever it takes.
- **Remember that your relationship is most important.** Go on a date together (getting away from it all) where you can talk about rebuilding your relationship one step at a time. Find things to laugh about and celebrate about your relationship. Don't attempt to “fix” the other person. It doesn't work. By all means, resist accusing and being defensive. Visualize possibilities for the relationship and do not bring up past hurts.
- **Be patient with your spouse who has ADHD.** Change takes time. Find ways to give positive feedback everyday as your spouse has probably grown up with a lot of negative comments and criticism and may be very sensitive to it. Be supportive and a cheerleader for positive change in your spouse. Concentrate on his or her strengths.
- **Do not tolerate abuse whether it is physical or verbal.** ADHD is not an excuse for those things. Your spouse may need professional help if he or she cannot manage emotions on his or her own. You must insist on being treated like a human being with feelings! Likewise, you too 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.

- **Don't enable.** Remember that you married an adult and you don't have to do everything for your spouse. You can be a helper but you are not a personal slave. It is the responsibility of your spouse to learn strategies to cope with the challenges of daily life.
- **Work on building better communication.** Agree to certain times during the week when you spend time together without distractions or interruptions. This is a time to clarify what hasn't been working in the marriage and what is truly important for the relationship. Perhaps choose one or two issues to work on together. Learn to listen more and talk less. Be really transparent with your spouse how his or her ADHD traits affect you. Ask open-ended questions to explore your spouse's feelings and explore together the possibilities for change. Try to resolve misunderstandings by seeking clarifications rather than by getting angry. Express your thoughts and feelings fully and encourage your spouse to do the same. Always be honest with each other. That is the best way for a healthy relationship. If you feel that you can no longer communicate together, seek professional help such as a mediator or marriage counselor.
- **Work with an ADHD Coach.**
- **Your spouse is not defective or flawed; it is just the way his or her brain works.** His or her brain is just wired differently. Learn to look for positive traits (yes, everyone has them!).
- **When you speak with your spouse, try to speak directly face-to-face with him or her with good eye contact.** You might want to check in to make sure that he or she understood what you were saying.
- **Learn to recognize when your spouse is in an "ADHD-charged moment."** This may occur when he or she is overwhelmed, frustrated or running on stimulus overload. It can happen anytime, but often it happens in the evening or late at night after a stressful day. This may not be the best time to bring up certain subjects that may lead to a heated discussion.
- **Your spouse may have experienced years of rejection due to ADHD behaviors and traits.** Chances are that he or she grew up with a poor self-image. So it is important that you show him or her respect and that you value his or her opinion and that he or she is accepted by you. NEVER bring up past hurts. Learn to forgive and forget.
- **Give your spouse unconditional love.** This may not be easy to do in light of years of feeling unloved by him or her. You are modeling the kind of love that he or she has not been able to give you.
- **Encourage your spouse to get an accurate diagnosis and the best treatment available from a health provider who has a lot of experience treating ADHD and associated conditions.** You might approach it by saying, "This may help you finish projects or get your paperwork done." (Remember nothing is broken that needs to be fixed.)
- **Learn to differentiate between "facts" and "feelings," especially during emotionally charged moments.** Your spouse may have hurt your feelings and made you feel unloved by apparently not listening to you. But the fact is that he or she may not even be aware of how he or she is affecting you.
- **It has long been known that people with ADHD tend to be behind in social maturation.** They may not recognize certain social cues or appropriate boundaries. There may be times that your spouse does not seem emotionally connected to you. This can be very hurtful, leading to frustration and often anger. You might feel like you are parenting a child. Be open and honest about your feelings and express your concerns out of love and concern for the relationship and your spouse.
- **Look for your spouse's strengths and point them out to him or her.** Champion your spouse whenever possible.

To your success in building a better marriage! 🎯

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ASK THE EXPERT CHAT
with Terry Dickson on February 22, 2012.
Visit help4adhd.org for more
information.