

Negotiating with Your Spouse

DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT ADULT ADHD?

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What advice can you offer me when my husband, who has ADHD, does not want me to share his diagnosis with anyone but a trained therapist? I don't think he gets how much ADHD affects our marriage and how lonely and isolating it can be. It would be great to talk with others in similar situations.

There are no hard and fast answers to this situation. On the one hand, it is reasonable for you to be able to discuss the things in your life that are affecting you. On the other hand, this is your husband's personal information, and he has some right to be able to limit what is revealed about him.

My advice is to ask him what his concerns are about your talking with others about this and to see if there is a way to meet your needs for social support and also his needs for privacy. For example, you can talk to your one friend who is good at keeping information private, but not your chatty sister. Also, explain to him how you would benefit from being able to discuss this with a select few people.

Although he is the one with ADHD, anything that affects one spouse also affects the other. This situation is like many in relationships, where competing needs need to be negotiated out. If your husband is new to the diagnosis, it may take him some time to really get used to the idea of having ADHD and become more comfortable with your sharing it.

Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA | Psychologist | Author of *More Attention, Less Deficit* (ADD Warehouse, 2009)

How can you get your spouse with ADHD to listen to the things you are asking for, like returning things to their proper place instead of just randomly putting them away anywhere? How can you help him understand that this is not just nagging—that it's essential to our ability to be our most productive selves—which SHOULD benefit the whole family!

To best understand your spouse's behavior, it's helpful to view it in the context of what ADHD brains want—high stimulation. Let's use the example of a pair of scissors that he or she spouse puts down randomly after using them. No longer essential for his task, interest in the scissors plummets, and his focus drifts to the next source of high stimulation. Since the location of the scissors has become irrelevant to him, it's hard for your spouse to appreciate why it matters to you.

Although your spouse's behavior may be frustrating, and even appear oppositional or uncaring, it's important to understand that for people with ADHD, abstract logic like the “proper place” or what “should” matter rarely engages their brains to focus optimally. Instead, ADHD brains seek the rewarding dopamine boost associated with high stimulation.

Take advantage of this knowledge: Tell your spouse how happy you'll be to find the scissors in the drawer, and link that behavior to a concrete reward. Increase her motivation with the promise of verbal praise, emotional connection, and a kiss or a treat—you'll know what pleases her. The intensity of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral rewards will likely focus her, and reinforce the motivation to return the scissors to their home in the future.

Ellen Littman, PhD | Clinical Psychologist | Coauthor of *Understanding Girls with ADHD* (Advantage Books, 2015)

How do you get your husband to believe in ADHD, even after therapy appointments and reading things to him? He's an engineer and truly believes it's mind over matter.

Your struggle with your spouse over this exact issue is very common in relationships. I can think of two factors that come into play for him.

First, he's an engineer; in other words, a science guy who wants “just the facts, ma'am.” So, perhaps he would respond to research and scientific ar-

ticles, not magazine articles or books. Point out brain-imaging scan research as objective measures of brain differences.


Second, and more importantly, the “mind over matter” comment tells me he values the persistence that has helped him in life. He may believe that daily behavior is simply an issue of self-discipline. Here, the distinction between unable (like deafness) versus unwilling (able but choosing not to do something—like choosing not to listen) is important. He believes the ADHD “symptoms” are by choice and not inability. ADHD is difficulty to see. Often, ADHD-based behaviors are ascribed to motivation. Thus, people are called lazy, stupid, or crazy. This unable versus unwilling distinction may resonate, especially if there is something he is simply



unable to do and no amount of effort will overcome it.

Remember, it takes time for people to change perspective. It’s like planting a seed. Water (discussion) and fertilizer (new information) over time may yield an attractive addition to the landscape (your relationship).

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David Goodman, MD | Psychiatrist | Professor of Psychology, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine 

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CHADD’s National Resource Center on ADHD

Science, Information, Resources, Support

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The National Resource Center on ADHD (NRC) serves parents and adults with ADHD, health professionals, educators, and policymakers by providing information on the most relevant topics about ADHD and related disorders:

- › Diagnosis
- › Treatment options
- › Educational rights
- › School and workplace challenges
- › Tips on parenting, time management, legal issues, social skills, coaching, and more
- › All information in English and Spanish

Access the NRC

- › **CALL** toll-free at **800-233-4050**
- › **CONTACT** specialists online at www.help4adhd.org (Se Habla Español)
- › **SEARCH** the Web’s only library dedicated to ADHD

Health Information Specialists are available to answer your questions and help you find the help you need!

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