

ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER: A CULPRIT IN SOME MARRIAGES

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

All couples face trials and tribulations throughout their marriage. On occasion, a couple's problems are strongly connected to an unrecognized psychological disorder in one of the spouses. Let's examine how an adult's *undiagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)* can wreak havoc on a couple's well-intended marriage.

Data suggests that a few million men and women are probably married to someone who suffers with ADD. Many times, an adult with ADD doesn't even know s/he has this neurological disorder, particularly when it was never detected and diagnosed during grade school years. I frequently notice that a parent will suddenly realize s/he has ADD after a professional therapist has diagnosed one of their children with the disorder. This experience triggers a feeling of self-recognition in the parent and for the first time, the adult finally makes sense out of their earlier life struggles. Usually, that moment is filled with relief (i.e. "Now I know what is wrong with me."), sadness and a sense of loss (i.e. "Why did I have to suffer all those years in school?"), and apprehension (i.e. "What do I do now?").

Many of the more common symptoms of ADD can create significant barriers to negotiating a strong, intimate marital relationship. For instance, consider how often the following behaviors are the cause for marital fights: procrastination, impulsiveness, lateness, forgetfulness, social inappropriateness, frequent employment problems, irritability, and addiction. These observable symptoms are also complicated by more subtle repercussions of living with untreated ADD during formative childhood years. Growing up with undiagnosed ADD can contribute to an adult who lacks self-confidence, feels ashamed of years of academic underachievement, and one who feels as if they were always letting others down, never living up to expectations, etc.

As you can imagine, living with a spouse who struggles with undiagnosed ADD can also contribute to the non-ADD partner having many doubts about themselves and the marriage. For instance, the ADD spouse's forgetfulness might be attributed to a lack of caring; procrastination might be viewed as a refusal to take their partner's needs seriously; an inability to alter problematic behavior might be viewed as evidence for not truly being loved; frequent money screw-ups might be seen as failure to take marital responsibilities seriously; etc. In short, it becomes easy for the non-ADD spouse to personalize and/or interpret the behavioral problems in a manner that causes both partners to feel trapped in an unhappy, no-win marriage. By the time they seek marriage counseling, one of the spouses may already be psychologically out the door. When solutions aren't obvious, people lose hope and consider bailing out.

In any marriage, a river of hurt already washed under the dam is not easily repaired. However, once the spouse with ADD is properly diagnosed, it can become a key component to helping resolve some of the couple's earlier misunderstandings. Both of the couple need to become educated about ADD and work together to develop new solutions to some of their old problems. For instance, one couple found that the husband no longer resented having to "remind" his wife to make crucial weekly bank deposits, once he understood how ADD adversely affects memory.

Another non-ADD spouse no longer felt ignored when her husband spent two hours playing computer chess with a buddy, but couldn't pay attention to her for 30 minutes of face-to-face talk. Once she understood how ADD individuals go into "hyperfocus" (concentrate at a deep level when involved in highly engaging material), she realized that talking about unstimulating household issues for more than 10 minutes at a time was simply not engaging enough for her ADD spouse. His lack of attending was due to an inability to attend, not due to a lack of interest in her or family issues. This couple soon developed new ways to problem solve about household decisions that didn't exceed his ability to focus and concentrate.

Women tend to be natural caretakers who focus a lot on relationship aspects of life. Hence, they oftentimes feel responsible for managing the emotional climate of the marital relationship. When couples' problems remain chronically unresolved, women often believe the problem is a statement about their failure as a wife or as a sign of a failing marriage. They are less inclined to see their ADD spouse's problem as a statement about a chronic "disorder" residing within their husband, and not necessarily reflective of a poor marriage. Once the spouse with ADD is diagnosed, the partner often has a new framework for understanding past problems and no longer view everything as evidence that "their marriage is a failure."

When treating these couples, I frequently observe the non-ADD spouse feeling relieved to have a new way to understand their ADD spouse's behavior as "not personal to them." Yes, the spouse's behavior directly affects them, but it is not necessarily an "unconscious message" to the spouse that they are unhappy in the marriage or some intentional retaliatory behavior. Hence, a major task of couple's therapy is to help the couple develop more realistic expectations of each other and to re-establishing mutual trust and respect.

Another advantage of a proper diagnosis in a married adult with ADD, is that active steps can be taken to reduce negative symptoms. Some of these steps will involve creative problem solving, once the couple is on "the same page" with respect to the cause of various problems. At other times, ADD medications or Neurofeedback may be very helpful in increasing concentration, focus, and even sleep. While medication can produce remarkable results in some people, it doesn't always work, or may only partially help. In addition, other strategies are taught to help manage ADD symptoms, such as time management, organizational strategies, and effective list making.

To increase marital success, both of the couple must begin to make accommodations for how ADD is affecting their lives. Accommodations might involve things such as changing roles and responsibilities in the family to better fit each of their personal strengths and weaknesses. Realistic accommodations may result in new decisions about who acts as the primary earner, where they should live, who should manage finances, etc. Many things about their life as a couple or family may need to be re-negotiated in light of their understanding about how ADD impacts their family life.

If you or your spouse has ADD, let me suggest several great resources to increase your understanding:

Women with Attention Deficit Disorder by Sari Solden
ADD in Marriage06

A comprehensive Guide to Attention Deficit Disorder in Adults by Kathy Nadeau
ADD in the Workplace, by Kathy Nadeau
You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy, by Kelly and Ramundo

In addition, you can join a supportive network called CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder). Their website is <http://www.chadd.org>.

Remember, when a marriage is accepted as a true, committed partnership, it is the most rewarding experience you can have as a healthy adult. If you both decide to function like partners on the same team, you can discover creative, cooperative ways to make your formerly distressed marriage become successful. Since marriage is the number one factor in the happiness of most adult's lives, isn't your marriage worth nurturing?

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