



ADHD and Marriage: An Interview With Melissa Orlov

Stephanie Sarkis, Ph.D. | Jun 18, 2012 06:31 PM EDT

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*Melissa Orlov is a marriage consultant and one of the top experts in how ADHD affects relationships. She has been writing and speaking about the topic since 2007, researching it since 2005. She has worked with Edward Hallowell, M.D. since 2004, writing ADHD articles and newsletters and assisting with educational programs delivered by Dr. Hallowell and John Ratey, M.D. She teaches couples, therapists, counselors and coaches about how ADHD impacts relationships, blogs for Psychology Today and writes the "Your Relationships" column for ADDitude Magazine. She also consults privately with couples who wish to improve their ADHD-impacted relationships. She is the author of *The ADHD Effect on Marriage*, which was awarded "Best Psychological Book of 2010" by ForeWord Reviews. Orlov's website is www.adhdmarriage.com.*

What are the main concerns couples face when one or both partners have ADHD?

Over 80 percent of adults with ADHD are undiagnosed, so most couples are not aware that ADHD is impacting their relationship. What they see is one partner (the one with ADHD) is chronically distracted or is "consistently inconsistent" when it comes to completing agreed-to tasks, may not remember agreements well or has significant difficulty financially -- seeming to underperform his or her potential. Planning is often difficult for this person. In addition, an ADHD partner often isn't aware that they aren't paying as much attention to their spouse as their partner would like. The non-ADHD partner becomes frustrated and angry at the lack of reliability in the ADHD partner, quite possibly misinterpreting the symptom of "distractibility" as "my partner doesn't care about me anymore." Non-ADHD partners often report feeling unloved and lonely, as well as very angry and frustrated. It's almost impossible to understand how an adult can promise to do something, then not do it... over and over again... never seeming to "learn" to do better.

With these kinds of issues (and more) certain predictable patterns develop. For example, the non-ADHD partner tends to become a "parent" figure -- controlling and nagging in order to remind the

ADHD partner to get things done, while the ADHD partner becomes a "child" figure who lacks authority or responsibility in the relationship. In all, ADHD symptoms encourage 12 specific patterns in relationships, and there is very good news about this -- once couples know about the patterns they have the power to dramatically improve their relationship.

When should couples consider talking to a mental health professional about their relationship issues?

Any couple, ADHD or not, should consider getting professional help when they feel as if their communication has broken down to the degree that their needs simply aren't being heard. In fact, the sooner the better, so that problems don't compound to an unmanageable level. For those who suspect that ADHD might be an issue, it's helpful to get a professional opinion, though it can be very hard to find a therapist with ADHD counseling experience. There is a small but growing list of these kinds of professionals on my website (www.adhdmarrriage.com). Another good source of names might be any local clinic that is dedicated to the treatment of ADHD, if you have one near you.

What are three things ADHD couples can do right now to help their relationship?

- 1.) Learn more about ADHD and its impact on relationships -- I have a book on this (*The ADHD Effect on Marriage*) and also give phone and recorded seminars on the topic. Do some research -- you'll be amazed. In this situation, knowledge really is power. (One of the things you'll find is that you are not alone -- MANY couples struggle with this, which can be very reassuring.)
- 2.) Set aside some time to attend to each other (and nothing else). Don't leave this to chance -- schedule it! Research suggests that connections can be most easily made when doing "challenging and new" activities together, but a romantic date night or even creating a regular routine to get into bed together and read for a while can help you feel closer.
- 3.) Get an evaluation for ADHD if it seems possible there is undiagnosed ADHD in the couple. An evaluation is the gateway to a wide variety of resources that can help you improve your lives together.

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