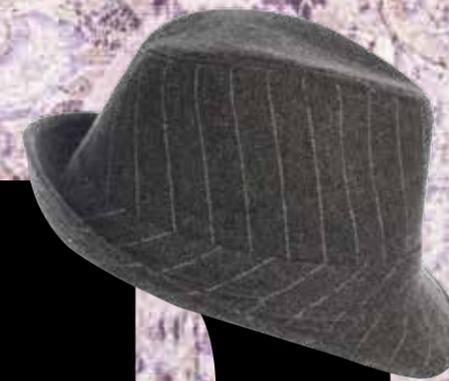


you, me, and

ADHD



When your spouse forgets to pick up the kids, can't keep the house clean, and can't carry on a conversation with you for more than two minutes, ADHD might be at play. How to live – and grow – with a spouse with ADHD

GILA ARNOLD



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My husband views time as an endless pink cloud that can be stretched and shortened at will



Do the letters ADHD conjure up an image of a rowdy, Energizer-Bunny young boy who needs medication to sit still in class? It's time to broaden the picture. Up to two-thirds of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder continue experiencing symptoms as adults. And when the challenges of the disorder come up against adult demands and responsibilities, an afflicted adult can have quite a difficult time staying afloat.

But what about the other half of the story? Behind every married adult with ADHD, there's a spouse dealing with the ramifications of his or her disorder. What's it like living with someone else's ADHD?

CAN'T YOU JUST PAY ATTENTION?!

The ability to focus on an important signal (like the teacher's voice) and filter out the buzz of surrounding stimuli (like the hum of the air conditioner) happens naturally in those without attention disorders. But for someone with ADHD, this task is exceedingly hard. Attention deficit disorder (the H stands for hyperactivity, which is present in about two-thirds of cases) is a neurochemical disorder that encompasses difficulties in sustaining attention to tasks (distractibility), poor impulse control (impulsivity), and excessive activity/physical restlessness (hyperactivity).

While there has been a marked increase in public awareness in recent years, the disorder is still misunderstood, as are those suffering from it. Children with ADHD are often decried as "lazy" and "unruly," labels that may stick into adulthood — when, in the majority of cases, the disorder doesn't disappear; it simply rears its head in new and more complex ways.

"An adult with untreated ADHD may come with lots of baggage," says Dr. Avraham Oren, a Jerusalem-based pediatrician and ADHD specialist. "He's emerging from what was likely a difficult childhood, feeling like a failure both in school and socially."

Aside from the emotional burden, adults with ADHD have trouble with executive functions, a cognitive ability that is not very taxed in children, but suddenly moves front-and-center in adulthood. "Executive functions — the ability to organize and manage cognitive processes (such as working memory, reasoning, and problem-solving) in order to plan and execute a task — is a huge challenge for the ADHD brain," explains Dr. Oren. As an example, the task of getting a child to school requires the ability to wake the child up, get him dressed, get his lunch ready, get him out to the bus on time — and to give yourself and your child enough time to accomplish all this.

Many people have trouble with such life tasks, but go through their days wondering what's wrong with them, rather than getting the help they need.

This was Riva Pomerantz's motivation for writing *Split Ends*, her current popular serial in *Family First* focusing on ADHD. "A while back, I wrote a true mini-serial about a woman with severe, untreated ADHD whose house was a complete disaster. The response to that piece was epic — I think that was the most feedback I ever got from anything I've written. It made me realize that adult ADHD is a big deal, and I wanted to address it in fiction form."

Riva's goal, she says, was to bring ADHD to the Shabbos table; to validate those who are struggling with it, and to try to jump-start a healthier, more open-minded and information-driven attitude to dealing with ADHD, especially in adults. "Many of my ADHD readers have told me how refreshing it is to read my story because they often feel so alone and dysfunctional."

SO THAT'S WHAT I HAVE!

It may seem odd for a person to only discover he has ADHD as an adult, but it's not so uncommon or unfathomable, says Ellen Cornfeld, CNT. A certified narrative therapist (a form of therapy which uses a person's "narrative," or how he relates his personal story, to identify problems in his life and their solutions), she works at the Jerusalem Narrative Therapy Institute and in private practice both in Israel and abroad. Cornfeld often sees the ADHD issue crop up in her couples therapy. For many clients, it's the first time the issue comes under serious consideration.

"Some adults with ADHD have no clue that they have the disorder. For others, the idea might have floated around them at some point, but they never did anything about it," says Cornfeld. "They might have been told as kids that they'll outgrow it, or they might have had other strengths that allowed them to compensate and kept them going."

"Attention deficit disorder is still not diagnosed effectively," says Rabbi Mordechai Be'eri, director of the ADHD Program at the Achiya Center in Bnei Brak. In conjunction with Israel's Ministry of Education, the Center screens 1,000 children annually for ADHD, and offers comprehensive treatment for those diagnosed. "If a child has ADHD — with the hyperactivity component — his needs will be addressed early on, because parents or *rebbeim* can't handle his behavior and will send him for an evaluation. But a child with ADD who doesn't act up but just sits quietly, not able to focus — he can go through his entire schooling without being diagnosed."

Sometimes the guidance counselor at a child's school is the first to break the news that the parent himself has ADHD. Ellen Cornfeld relates, "Some of my clients are called into school because their child has a suspected learning disorder, or ADHD, and they tell me, 'The counselor thinks I have a problem, that I, too, must get my life together!'"

Recognition of the problem, as any good therapist will tell you, is the first step toward its solution. But what exactly does this label mean? What does life look like from the perspective of an ADHD adult? Ellen Cornfeld provides some sketches from her clients:

"There's no routine in my home. My kids are always late for school; they don't eat breakfast, and they're always looking for clean clothes. Dinner is a do-it-yourself affair. I usually end up cooking for Shabbos on Friday afternoon. My home is in chaos, and we're starting to hear from the schools."

"I feel incompetent at work; I'm always coming late, and when I do get there, I spend a lot of time spacing out on the computer. When I get home, I head for a book or a computer game. My wife will try to sit me down for chats, but I have so much trouble focusing on what she's saying for more than a minute or two."

"I was never officially diagnosed with ADHD," says Miriam. "But as a child I was always daydreaming in class, and as an adult, I have trouble coping with too many organizational tasks. When I went to see a marriage counselor once, she told me, 'It sounds like you have ADHD.'"

She describes how this irritates her very-organized husband. "My desk is very chaotic, with papers all over the place. He's always asking me, 'How can you work like this?' If he needs to use the desk, he cleans it up first." She recalls his frustration when once, after he'd painstakingly worked on organizing his bills, laying them out in neat piles on the floor to be finished at a later point, she'd decided that she needed the floor space, swept up all the piles of bills in one big armload, and stuffed them into a drawer.

She often forgets things he requested, like scheduling dentist appointments or picking up medications. And cleaning for Pesach is an act of torture. "I get distracted so easily. One moment I'm



tidying up, and the next, I've found a bunch of old letters and spend the rest of my day reading them."

SPOUSE OR PARENT?

Being married to a person with ADHD can be arduous, requiring a grueling workout on the muscles of patience and self-restraint.

"Husbands may resent having to take over the child care and housework at home, thinking, 'This is her job! Why can't she get it together?'" explains Ellen Cornfeld. And wives can resent that their ADHD husbands offer no help at home, and *also* have trouble holding down a job. Some women describe it as feeling like one has another child to look after.

"I didn't know my husband had ADHD before we were married," says Ariella, whose husband of 15 years had been on Ritalin as a kid, but had stopped taking the medication long before they met. "I found out in a very 'by the way' manner, which made me feel duped. Afterward, I kept saying, 'If I'd known, I'd never have married him.'"

She describes herself as lucky in that the disorder "only" affects her domestic life, and not their finances, as her husband has a permanent job with a family member. Still, the effects take their emotional toll.

"When I talk to him, he's doing everything but looking at me and listening," Ariella says. "I rely on him very little in the house and learned early on to thank him profusely when he remembers something or helps in any way, so he'll be motivated to do it again. It was hard at first — going on and on about how wonderful he is for remembering to bring back the garbage bins from the curb, when I'm the most unappreciated person in the house! — but I see that he needs that positive reinforcement.

"I had to learn that my husband is not my 'be all and end all.' When I first got married and expected him to be my new best friend, I was constantly disappointed. I had to readjust my expectations: 'This is my husband, we have kids, we work together.' Then, if I need someone to listen to me — since this is where he falls significantly short — I call a friend."

In contrast, when Yael was dating her soon-to-be-husband, he was up-front about his condition; he had been taking the medication Adderall for a year beforehand, but stopped soon after they were married because he felt that he'd mastered the skills he needed to sit and learn, which had been his goal. "And, baruch Hashem," she says, "he's still sitting and learning!"

Yael is enthusiastic about the positive aspects of ADHD, even while she acknowledges the drawbacks. "My husband crams what I do in a week into a single day. He accomplishes a tremendous amount, to the point where it's dizzying. That said, the hardest part for me is what I call 'the pink cloud versus the box.' My concept of time has firm parameters and boundaries and defined lines. I know how long it takes me to get up, get out, get where I need to go. It's all very concrete in my head — a set amount of time can fit into a specific-sized box. My husband, on the other hand, views time as an endless pink cloud that can be stretched and shortened at will. When he hears five minutes, he thinks, 'Oh, great! I can eat lunch, take a nap and



He'd just been fired from his 37th job — all in the span of two-and-a-half years!

review my *vaad* in that amount of time!" They've missed not just appointments, but also airline flights.

Time management is an incredibly difficult skill for people with ADHD, confirms Rabbi Be'eri, and people who don't have this problem have a hard time understanding it. He lists four parameters of cognitive ability that can be affected: focus, impulsivity, time management, and hyperactivity.

As an example of how these impaired abilities play out in a person's life, he relates, "I'll never forget the time a depressed young man came into my office at his wife's urging — she was fed up with him. He'd just been fired from his 37th job — all in the span of two and a half years! One of his jobs lasted only a few hours. He felt like a total failure."

Rabbi Be'eri explained to him that his difficulty with focus and attention meant an office job wasn't right for him, and helped him find a job that involved more fast-paced action.

"A wife may feel like her husband's completely irresponsible, because he'll make decisions or jump into new ventures on the spur of the moment, without thinking through the ramifications. But this is the hallmark of ADHD's impulsivity," he explains.

MAPPING OUT SOLUTIONS

If identifying a problem is the first step toward its solution, understanding exactly what the problem consists of is the road map for arriving there.

"When an adult with ADHD comes into my office, we evaluate his performance on the four parameters of ADHD," says Rabbi Be'eri. "The manifestations of the disorder are so individual — the treatment needs to be so as well."

For some, he says, merely coming up with a list of aids and compensatory tricks is enough — such as giving themselves an extra hour in the morning if they have a problem with time management, or setting a rule not to sign any documents or make important decisions without a time lapse, or consultation with a spouse or friend, to correct for impulsivity.

Miriam says that she can't survive without lists; when she runs errands, she carries her notebook along, checking off each item as she goes. "Otherwise I'll come home with ten things I noticed when I was out shopping, but not the thing I meant to purchase."

Many individuals find that seeing a counselor to help organize their daily life is the lifesaver they need, says Rabbi Be'eri. "To a person with ADHD, the typical day with appointments, commitments, and tasks to complete is like a thick, confusing jungle. Having an outsider help map it all out is very helpful."

Then there's the option of medication, though it's not as readily prescribed for adults as it is for children. "For children, a dose of Ritalin will often effect a magic cure, since it addresses exactly what the child needs," says Dr. Oren. "Once they're able

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to sit still and focus in school and in social situations, their lives improve. Adults, however, have greater responsibilities and their needs are more complex.” He recommends cognitive behavioral therapy as particularly effective at addressing these challenges.

“Some people use medication for specific purposes, such as to accomplish a one-time task that needs extra concentration,” Rabbi Be’eri says. “Others take it all the time, viewing it the way a hearing-impaired person views his hearing aid, or a visually impaired person his glasses.”

But side effects that can result from these medications tend to discourage adults from using them, says Ellen Cornfeld.

“I worked with a mother of six, who tried using Ritalin, but soon stopped. She said that she didn’t feel like herself on the meds, that her creative brain, all her out-of-the-box activity and energy, was stymied.”

The three-pronged approach Cornfeld advocates is exercise, therapy, and support.

Research shows that exercise mitigates the effects of ADHD. Setting aside time every day, or a few days a week, to bike or swim can give the individual back some semblance of control over his life.

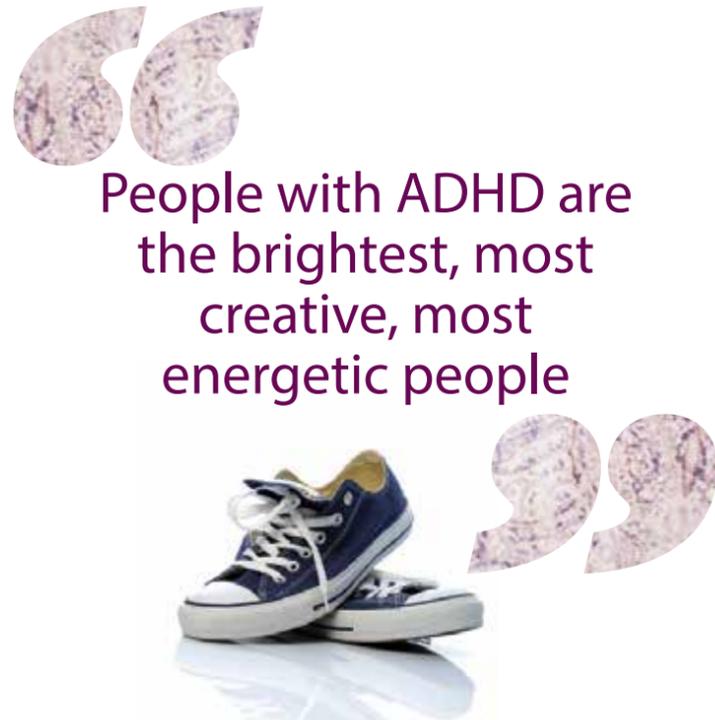
In her therapy practice, Cornfeld uses the narrative approach in which she has the person relate his or her story — how he views his ADHD, how it affects his life, how this makes him feel — while the spouse listens in, hearing without reacting to the narrative. This gives the speaker emotional space to describe his difficulties in a secure setting, and enables the spouse to process them in a detached way, externalizing the problem from the person. Afterward, the couple works on problem-solving together.

“For example, when a husband hears that his wife has real difficulty with the organizational skills needed to keep a household running, he can step back from the anger and blame, and instead focus on what she needs to help her — maybe hiring household help, or asking family members to pitch in. He can also learn to adjust his standards for what a clean and orderly house looks like.

“And the wife, for her part, can come to an understanding that she isn’t a failure, that it’s okay to say that her life is challenging and she needs help, while also hearing from her husband about how *he’s* experiencing things, and the difficulties her ADHD is posing to his own life. Together, they then generate a list of goals, and steps they can take to reach these goals.”

(Cornfeld warns that, because of these prolonged feelings of failure, a person with ADHD may present with accompanying psychological disorders, such as depression, eating disorders, or bipolar disorder. It’s important to consult with a competent therapist if such disorders are suspected.)

Support is key to the therapy process; she encourages the couple to involve parents or whatever extended support system they have. And the key to support is education.



People with ADHD are the brightest, most creative, most energetic people

“We give the spouses professional literature to read, so they can understand the disorder better,” says Rabbi Be’eri. “We produced a booklet for parents of children with ADHD, *A Day in the Life of Davie* — a boy with ADHD. I’ve had parents come to me in tears after reading this book, saying, ‘I wish I’d had this 20 years ago! I would have understood myself so much better!’ ”

Spouses of people with ADHD say they’ve learned to use certain strategies over the years with their mates. “The hardest thing for me is that my husband doesn’t complete tasks,” says Ariella. “He’ll take out half the garbage and then leave the house, or rinse a few dishes and think he’s ‘washed the dishes.’ If I complain, he’ll say, ‘You didn’t like how I did it, so I’m not doing it anymore.’ My solution is to say very clearly what I need done: ‘I need you to take this one out... and this one... and that one...’ ”

Yael, too, has learned that the key to getting what she needs from her husband is clear communication — along with repetition. “If there is something I absolutely cannot be late to, I make sure to prep him the day before, a few hours before, and then an hour before, continuously stressing what time I need him home!”

Similarly, though her husband has a hard time sitting still for a talk, if she has an issue she needs to discuss, she tells him, “I need you to sit down and totally focus on me.” Then, she says, he’s a fantastic listener.

FUN, QUIRKY, AND WONDERFUL

Despite the challenges, living with an ADHD spouse can have distinct advantages. “Even though it’s called a disorder, character

traits that come along with ADHD can be very positive,” emphasizes Dr. Oren. “They tend to be very creative, and their hyperactivity means they have lots of energy to accomplish things.

“If you want a good example of a bunch of successful ADHD people, from all different sectors of society, flung together in the same room — just look at the Knesset!”

So how is one to know, when contemplating a potential spouse with ADHD, whether she will be taking on a lifelong burden or a future Knesset member?

It all boils down, says Dr. Oren, to good old-fashioned *middos* work. “You can check the person’s diagnosis, whether he has issues with impulsivity, working memory, time management, etc. — but with these traits, a person can go on to become a big *rav* or a mafia head. It all depends on what he’s done with his character traits.”

Rabbi Be’eri also stresses the positive aspects of the disorder. “There was a man who ran to Rav Steinman for a *brachah* after his child got a diagnosis of ADHD,” he relates. “The Rosh Yeshivah responded, ‘This news is nothing to worry about. It

means we have one more Jew who will establish many *mosdos!* ”

Spouses agree that there are definite benefits to being married to someone with ADHD. “My husband doesn’t do everything the ‘right’ way, but he’s fun and keeps life spicy!” says Ariella.

Yael eagerly shares the wonderful side of ADHD that she sees in her husband. “I reap all the benefits of having a super energetic, communicative, funny, and fun husband on a daily basis. People with ADHD are the brightest, most creative, most energetic people. They are the young CEOs, the most successful individuals... if, of course, they survive the system. Baruch Hashem, my husband, after working on himself, has survived, so now I get to enjoy!

“Many people say to me: I wish my husband played with my kids like yours does! In the yeshivah where he teaches, his *shiurim* are packed, and boys love talking to him. No, he can’t sit through financial meetings, he hates reading, I have to ask him to take out the garbage five times before he gets to it and he definitely needs to work on time management. But considering all the good — I’m okay with the challenges.” ☺

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