

Lee: Does My Partner Have ADHD? This is Stay Happily Married: Episode Number 203.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Is an undiagnosed case of ADHD to blame for your spouse's lack of attention to your relationship? The acronym ADHD summons several images to mind. We're more likely to think of overactive children unable to concentrate in school, not our full-grown adult partners.

The truth is that ADHD is a condition that does not discriminate based on age. The effects of ADHD are just as likely to manifest in adults. However, many adults are not even aware that their behavior could be linked to a medical diagnosis.

Have you ever felt like you were being the parent to your spouse, always micromanaging and making sure they do what they promised? Is it possible that your spouse has ADHD? Perhaps on the flip side, you feel as though your partner is always nagging you and constantly repeating themselves. Is it possible that you have an undiagnosed case of ADHD?

In this two-part series of Stay Happily Married, we'll uncover how to spot the signs of ADHD in your spouse, as well as how an undiagnosed and untreated case of ADHD can eat away and destroy a marriage.

Dr. Susan Orenstein received her PhD in Counseling Psychology from Temple University. She's a licensed psychologist and director of the group private practice Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina. Susan specializes in adult relationship issues, and she's worked extensively in treating couples where ADD and ADHD impact one partner.

Susan has been happily married for 23 years and her husband and she co-facilitate the Pairs Couples Workshop where they continue to refresh their own communication skills in front of workshop participants.

Susan, welcome back to the show. I'm so glad you could join us.

Susan: I'm delighted to be here. Thank you.

Lee: Let's really dig in on this ADHD thing. Let's start right off the bat with a little bit of background. Tell us what exactly ADHD is, what does it stand for and what does it mean?

Susan: The letters ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It's kind of a misnomer. I think the experts in the field are trying to change the name because it's not really about attention deficit. Individuals with ADHD don't have a deficit in attention. They have a problem regulating their attention. They're either hyper-focusing or they're shifting their attention too quickly.

The hallmark of ADHD is difficulty regulating one's attention. Some of the other hallmarks are difficulty with executive functioning, the mastermind of the brain that helps us see the big picture, plan, and avoid temptation. That long-term thinking that helps us resist distraction is what's really lacking in individuals with ADHD.

Lee: That helps. I mentioned in the introduction that all of us know about kids having ADHD. I think that most of us that think about it generally think of kids running around doing crazy things. It's hard for us to think of it as an adult issue. What are the differences between seeing it and feeling it as an adult versus what we imagine it would be like as a child?

Susan: That's a really good, important question. I think the reason we don't think of adults as having ADHD is because in the field it's a relatively new phenomenon. Not that it's new in that it's just occurring, but that it's being studied more, talked about more, and treated more in adults.

I think one of the key things differences is that in adults we don't see as much of that hyperactivity and that acting out. I think you typically think of ADHD as maybe like a four-year-old boy who is really active, jumping off counters and screaming and running around. I think the difference in adults is it's primarily the difficulty with impulsivity, regulating your attention, getting distracted. It's more of that in adulthood.

Lee: When you take all of that in an adult and put it into a marital relationship, how do you see it impacting the marriage?

Susan: That's a really important question. I think that the way it impacts the marriage is that the partner that is the non-ADHD spouse often feels that they're not getting attention, that it's hard to get their partner to focus on them, to have a meaningful conversation in the moment, and their spouse is easily distracted. That's one piece. They feel like they're not getting the attention they want, and that hurts the relationship.

The partner with ADHD often feels like they're being micromanaged, that their spouse will be reminding them, nagging them, or telling them what to do. That can feel degrading or insulting. So there are two parts. Each partner in the relationship has a different experience.

Lee: That's interesting. Today, with everybody carrying around these little computers in your pocket, it's got to be more challenging than ever because it's so easy to be distracted and for your spouse to feel like you're not paying any attention to them.

Susan: It's funny you say that. I think yes, distractions are 24/7. When I was growing up, and I'm giving my age, but there were four major TV channels and by 10:00 nothing else was on. Now, we can be distracted in our pocket with the iPhone at any second. The distractions are just always there.

Lee: What are some of the relationship patterns that you see playing out with these couples? How do things progress?

Susan: When they come to me, the partner, either the husband or wife, that doesn't have ADHD, and I'll refer to that person as the non-ADHD spouse, is exhausted and frustrated. They've had it up to here because they feel like their ADHD spouse isn't listening, they're not following through, and they feel like they have to be the parent in the relationship.

How it plays out is the non-ADHD partner is exhausted and the ADHD partner is also feeling pretty lousy. They can feel some shame, and they can also feel annoyance, like, "I wish my partner would get off my back." Generally, there's a lot of tension and a lot of frustration when these couples come to me for couples counseling.

Lee: Right. When you have one spouse who really is just an undiagnosed case of ADHD, is the relationship doomed? I would assume this probably can result in the end of the marriage for a lot of folks.

Susan: Right. It's a good point that you were making the distinction of undiagnosed, because once folks get diagnosed and treated there's really a much more positive outlook. But when this isn't diagnosed and treated, there is a higher divorce rate among couples when one partner has ADHD.

I believe I read it can be up to 60%, which is 10% more than the average. It does put a marriage in a more vulnerable place. And then to complicate things, ADHD has a genetic component and so often when one partner has ADHD, if this family has children, some of the children might also have ADHD. So there is a lot going on. a lot of stress.

Lee: I think a lot of us either think we have ADHD or we think our spouse does. What tips do you have, what hints do you have for determining whether you have it yourself or whether your spouse has it? How do you figure it out?

Susan: Lee, I have those days where I wonder if I have it or my spouse has it because we're in an ADHD world in a way. We are all so over-stimulated. Once a week I'm losing something or my husband is losing something. We even have a game called 'Find It', because we do that.

We all get distracted, but the hallmark of ADHD that makes it different and makes it so much harder for people who have it as opposed to just other folks who are dealing with an overly crazy fast world, is that this is a pattern that's begun in childhood. That's one major consideration. This is a lifelong pattern. This isn't something that's just happening when you have children or when you have a job. It's a lifelong pattern that occurs in different areas of your life, not just at home but also in school or at work.

The interesting thing is that there are some other emotional difficulties and physical difficulties that can mimic ADHD. When women are going through menopause or their menstrual cycle, their hormones shift and they can have attentional difficulties. There are thyroid problems that can lead to attention difficulties.

Then there are other mood disorders like bipolar disorder, substance abuse, and some learning disabilities that can mimic ADHD. I think the best way to really tease it apart is to go to an expert, go to a psychologist who specializes in ADHD and have a consultation, and really tease apart all these things.

Lee: When you find it in a person, has it always been there and the symptoms just weren't diagnosed or is it something that you may not have had as a child but you developed as an adult?

Susan: That's a great question. The diagnostic category for having this diagnosis is that the symptoms had to be present before the age of 18. It is considered a disorder that begins in childhood.

Lee: That's very interesting. So it's always in there. When you have someone come into your office and they feel that either they or their spouse is suffering from ADHD, what do you do? What's next? Where do you go with this?

Susan: We make sure to get that clear diagnosis because that's really important. Where we go next, generally what I see is people feel some relief and some optimism because now there is something tangible to work on. The really good news is that once people get the diagnosis, there are next steps of treatment.

What we look at for treatment for adults with ADHD can be a combination of things. Often medication is a piece. Another piece is

getting skills training to learn organizational skills. Then with couples, a really important piece is the couples counseling. You might want to look at it like a three-legged stool; having the biological medication piece, the organizational skills piece, and then the relationship or the couples piece.

Lee: If you believe that your spouse is the one that has ADHD, how do you go about talking to your spouse to convince them to get an evaluation?

Susan: That is an interesting question and people have posed that to me. I think when you are approaching somebody and you want to let them consider that they have ADHD, you have to proceed gently and delicately. The first thing you would do is tell your spouse, "Honey, let's find a time to talk." You want to be able to get their attention. If they have ADHD, you want to make sure there aren't distractions.

Actually, I'd say this with any couple in any touchy topic. You want to make sure the TV is off, that the kids aren't around, that you can actually be in a calm place and listen. Then I would say you would just tell the partner what you've observed, what you've noticed that makes you wonder if ADHD is part of the picture, and that you'd like them to consider getting an evaluation.

I think to tread lightly and to propose it as something for your partner to consider, as opposed to, "I know you have ADHD. You have to get treatment." I think that force-feeding approach will probably elicit some resistance. My major theme here is tread gently.

Lee: Once you believe that you have ADHD, or if you get the diagnosis and you know you have ADHD, are there things that you can do on your own to improve the situation? Are there exercises or things that you can do to sort of move forward with this?

Susan: There are things that you can do. I would say there are certain basic things that are really important, like getting enough sleep, eating regularly, just really good self-care. Making sure you're not abusing alcohol or marijuana. There are definite things that an individual can do for their health to make sure that they're doing their part.

I would say in isolation that probably won't give you everything you need. Generally, people also need some kind of professional treatment, like I said, medication and counseling. Everyone's different, but most people need a combination of those things.

Lee: Right. I want us to spend some time talking about where you go as a couple and how you work on the relationship. I know we're going to have another opportunity in a few weeks to work through that.

Between now and then, if you're listening to this show and you're wondering, "What do I do? I believe I have this spouse with ADHD," where would you start? Would going in for an evaluation be the very first thing you would want to kick it off with?

Susan: I think so. I think that would be a really good idea to go to an ADHD specialist, have that initial consultation and see what's going on. Also, make sure that you've had a physical in the past year, because like I said, if there's something else physically going on like an undetected thyroid condition, you want to make sure that you treat that.

I would say get your check up and go to a psychologist that specializes in ADHD and have that consultation. Those would be the first two steps that I would recommend.

Lee: Right. That is a good start. I know we're going to go into more detail in the next episode, where we really dig in on how we work on the relationship.

Susan, I appreciate you taking the time to work this through with us today. Thank you so much.

Susan: I love chatting with you. Thank you.

Lee: Be sure to stay tuned for part two of this program, airing on Monday, July 30th. To find out more about Susan Orenstein and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their website at www.OrensteinSolutions.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach their office at 919-428-2766.

Thank you so much for listening in today and being with us. I really appreciate it. If you have feedback about this episode or any episode, we'd love to hear from you. You can reach our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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