

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

I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Living with a family member on the autism spectrum can make communication difficult. Whether it's your spouse, your child or yourself trying to break through the communication barrier to have a fulfilling relationship can be so taxing that it takes away from other family relationships. In many cases, families' lives begin to revolve around the needs of just one person and then everyone suffers. Adults begin to feel isolated from one another because they're suffering from guilt, stress, and grief. When the special needs family member is a spouse, feelings of isolation can become even more extreme and can even lead to divorce in some instances.

How do you move past these challenges and lead a happy, fulfilling life? Is it possible to salvage a relationship that's been eroded by years of difficult struggles? Abbe Colodny is an outpatient therapist with Therapeutic Partners in Raleigh, North Carolina. Abbe received her Masters in Mental Health Counseling and has extensive experience in diagnosing and working with those with autism and other developmental delays. Abbe has used her specific training and experience to work with individuals, couples, and families struggling with autism. Abbe, welcome to the show.

Abbe: Thank you for having me.

Lee: Well, I'm really glad you could join us. This is a tough topic, but it certainly comes up with some frequency. It's obvious that dealing with a special needs family member can be really hard on a marriage, but can you help me understand why? What are the unique, the special challenges that face these families?

Abbe: That's a good question. A lot of these families feel very isolated. There's usually a grief period that tends to come hand in hand with the diagnosis because people have to change their expectations and how they are leading their lives and having autism involved in the family or any for that matter, developmental delay. The family has to reassess how they're working and the dynamic tends to change. Stress and tension tends to increase as does grief and sometimes because of misunderstandings and not understanding how the person's perceiving the world, there's often a lot of anger that comes into play. And then there's also that balancing of how to deal with the person who has been diagnosed, and that sometimes puts in very hard and difficult challenges getting past that.

Lee: Right. Right. Now I've heard a lot of stories of families where a child has been diagnosed with autism. What's the situation when it's not a child, but it's a spouse? Does that have more of an impact on the family dynamic?

Abbe: It does, but at the same time it doesn't. A lot of times the family member gets the diagnosis later in life and that 'aha' moment after getting that diagnosis often leads to answers of why things hadn't worked in the past, and it does sometimes explain why

there's stress in the relationship, especially if it's a couple and a married couple. Sometimes, that diagnosis does explain why people are not as close and why there's been withdrawal with the family member who has been diagnosed with autism and also why the communication has not been as easy as it could be with a person who's not on the spectrum.

Lee: Right. Right. Now, you know communication in marriages, I mean, it's always difficult. You see every couple, regardless of any particular diagnosis has trouble with communication, and I see couples where it takes their whole lives to sort of get it right. How is communication different for couples when, say, one spouse has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome?

Abbe: That's a good question. Communication often, what happens is that the person who has the Asperger's tends to be very literal, and with that it's very difficult for that person to usually explain their personal thoughts or how they're feeling in that sort of a situation, so details get passed up and there's a bridge on how to figure out exactly what the person with autism might be trying to really get at. A lot of times, the communication becomes a barrier, and there's not a connection with that communication. There is a lot of difficulty having a give and take in conversation. There's a lot of lack of reciprocity which you see with younger individuals on the spectrum, but even in marriage, couples and spouses, that connection is broken and is not there.

Also, a lot of times the person who does not have autism tends to internalize a lot of the frustration and feeling like they need to second guess themselves every time there's a decision or an additional situation because again, the person with Asperger's tends not to express emotional state of this. So it's often very common, you hear people say it's very one-sided or "I have to extract teeth to get the information that I need to be able to make a decision or just even function on a day to day basis".

Lee: Right. Right. It sounds like it would be very challenging. One of the characteristics, as I understand it anyway, of Asperger's syndrome is the inability to express the right emotion at the right time. Are there other symptoms of Asperger's? A) does that one make the marriage difficult, and B) are there other issues with Asperger's that makes being married really challenging?

Abbe: The expression of feelings is the big one. Sometimes, feelings are altogether jumped over because it's very difficult and painful, or the person just does not understand how the feelings interact or deal with the marriage or the spouse, so therefore there's a lot of times that individuals just do not, as you said, express the feelings in the appropriate manner and/or time. Also, the social element, there's a lot of times individuals who have higher functioning autism or Asperger's who are socially awkward or are not comfortable in social situations. So you might have a set of spouses, one of which does have more of a need to be out socially, and the other one who may be diagnosed with autism who wants to withdraw or just be in situations that they're very comfortable in or high interest activities, and that can be isolating because it's very restrictive for the couple to not have that social engagement. Again, communication plays a big role.

Lee: Right.

Abbe: Again, a lot of times what you also see is not just the communication of daily events, but it gets so tied up with the social element, too, that people who are high functioning or have Asperger's may not express themselves appropriately in social situations, or they're perceived as awkward or because their comfort level steer away from that, and that becomes a major source of conflict between the couple because again, one wants to be more social than the other and the individual on the spectrum may not necessarily understand that.

Lee: That's really interesting because I don't know that it's obvious to us as lay people whether somebody has Asperger's syndrome or whether somebody is just awkward. You know, we're not professionals. We don't know how to diagnose it. Are there situations where you actually have adults who have Asperger's syndrome in a marriage but have not actually been diagnosed by a professional? I guess more importantly, if you're worried about that, if you think maybe, you or your spouse suffer from Asperger's syndrome, where do you start? How do you go about dealing, addressing that? Where does one go for help?

Abbe: That's a good question. Often what I've seen in my practice is that what happens is either a child gets diagnosed with autism or Asperger's and then the family or the parents basically turn to one another and say, "Hey, you have some characteristics. Maybe, we need to explore that", or a lot of times people who are higher functioning or have Asperger's are often undiagnosed because they can function in school and academically maybe the awkward individual or maybe not socially engaged, but when kids are growing up and they are not having behavioral issues that they get flagged basically as a child or in their early development. People slip through the cracks and often if you're able to function but may be socially awkward or not the best communication skills, those individuals do not get diagnosed because they're not really having an issue.

What happens is again, as I said, a lot of times when a family does have a diagnosis in the child, parents then turn inward and start thinking about it or what I've also heard and seen a lot is that couples end up finding or knowing somebody who has a child who has autism. As they get to know a little bit more about autism and Asperger's, they start questioning, "Well, is this maybe possibly why we're having problems or I'm having problems?" Oftentimes, it's the spouse who does not have the characteristics that kind of start investigating. A lot of times people go online and read about Asperger's and the characteristics and then start looking for possible diagnoses or help. There's not a lot out there for adults but they do teach at Chapel Hill. Duke also has a lot of diagnostic facilities and then there are practitioners.

If you're questioning if autism is affecting you as an adult, talk and get a consultation. I think that's one of the biggest things, but also read about individuals on the autism spectrum and as it starts ringing true, that, I think, also helps a lot to kind of help move through that diagnostic process but also kind of learn about yourself.

Lee: Right.

Abbe: There's Temple Grandin out there and there are a couple other really good individuals who have written books like, "Look Me In The Eye" by John Elder Robinson. A lot of times what I'm finding is individuals are coming to me saying, "Hey, I read this book because one of my friends recommended it and it sounds like me".

Lee: Right. Right. And I think that's all very important stuff, and it helps a certain group of people, but let's shift gears just a little bit, and let's talk about couples who have a special needs child.

Abbe: OK.

Lee: Now obviously, to deal with a special needs child you've got to be sort of an extraordinary person. I don't have special needs children and my kids drive me crazy. I can only imagine how hard it is when you're dealing with a kid who is facing these sorts of challenges. What happens when you have a couple and you see a lot of this where the whole marriage seems to be focused on, emphasizing the needs of that one child? What goes on in those families?

Abbe: What you see is a lot of isolation because usually the family doesn't know what to do or where to turn once that diagnosis has been discovered or placed on the child. Families tend to turn inward. There's a lot of embarrassment. There's a lot of grief, sometimes anger and frustration, and what happens is when their friends tend to push away from them because they're seeing the frustration or they're not the happiest people in the world, and that becomes very isolating or the family itself just starts isolating because they are comparing their child with other friends who have kids that are successful on a different way. Let me rephrase that. What they do is they compare their child and seeing their child's struggles and then they look at their friend's child who might be developing more appropriately or on target, and they get embarrassed or frustrated or their child is misbehaving and it becomes very difficult to always been explaining that.

Also what happens is a lot of times there's one family member parent who is the breadwinner and then the other one who basically becomes saddled with that obligation and responsibility of taking the child to therapy, putting in a structure in the house that needs to be maintained to try to help with some of those outbursts and melt downs. That also is complicated if you have other children in the family, so it's not just one child who is dealing with special needs. It also gets more complicated if you have one or two children or even more, for that matter, who are struggling with their own special needs, not even mentioning mental health issues, and it becomes a very overwhelming situation for the caregiver.

Lee: Right.

Abbe: What also happens is because there's the great divide as being the breadwinner versus the one who's dealing with the kids all the time. It's very difficult for that couple to then keep themselves on the same page because a lot of times one knows what needs to be done and the other one is so outside of the house trying to provide for their family that it's very difficult to keep communication open.

Lee: Do you think those parents, I mean, their marriage is obviously going to struggle with all of what's going on in their family. Do you think they recognize what's happening or are they able to see the situation as it is or are they so focused on the kid that they just can't?

Abbe: I think at some point it becomes so overwhelming and so stressful that these families do realize that they're getting pulled apart. I have seen many families who have worked really hard to keep the communication and the family going and trying to get a balance so that the kids that are not special needs are getting attention as well as that the couple itself is nurturing their own relationship. So really, what I find is that a lot of times there's something that, to use a cliché, breaks the camel's back basically. And at that point the family either continues to be in survival mode or they go and find help to get extra resources for the house and the family and the kids and themselves. It is out there, they just need to search for it.

Lee: Right. Is there a point of no return for those families? Is there a point where it's just like this is more than any marriage can reasonably take?

Abbe: Well, you know, there's a lot out there that I don't like to focus on the negative because I think if the people are willing to work on it, they are able to work and find some balance, but I think it's an individual case. It really is, because depending, I guess before 2010 the main comment was that most families who have a diagnosis with autism or special needs have an 80% chance of divorce. That was debunked by a couple studies that were published up in Maryland around 2010 because what they were finding was these families already were in some stress before the diagnosis, basically that a diagnosis was put on the individual or the child so they were already coming in with some stresses prior to the extra complication of having a child with special needs.

So again, it's really just like a regular family that is dealing with stress and lack of communication or people just moving apart, that does happen in families that have autism. The thing is that they have a tendency of having more stress and less resources because it's very difficult for those families to find babysitters who can deal with their kids. Therefore, they don't have the opportunities always to go out and spend quality time as a married couple, and that is something that needs sometimes to be done when you're struggling and fighting for your marriage.

Lee: Right.

Abbe: So again, it really is an individual case by case, but there are things to do to help alleviate some of that stress.

Lee: Yeah, it really does sound very challenging. You're in the room with families all day, every day, dealing with families where kids have been diagnosed with different issues or where the parents have been diagnosed, and I'm sure you've learned a lot over the years. I'm wondering, any final words of wisdom for whether you're dealing with a spouse, whether you're the one that's diagnosed or your spouse is diagnosed or you have a child that's diagnosed. What final tips can you give us before we let you go?

Abbe: I think one of the most important is that the person with autism or special needs that is just one person with special needs or autism and every case is different. So what might work for a friend or a family might not necessarily work for the family in question. When you have the desire to work on something, there are supports out there that are available to help support you through whatever crisis is going on and to help with the marriage. It's a question of finding it and asking for help because a lot of times individuals on the spectrum need to be taught how to ask for help and help's out there. It's just a matter of not getting overwhelmed and closing down but asking for the help.

Lee: Boy, it's a tough job you're doing, Abbe. I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to talk us through some of these issues. Thank you so much.

Abbe: You're very welcome. Have a great day.

Lee: If you'd like to find out more about Abbe Colodny and her practice, Therapeutic Partners, you can visit their website. It's at therapeuticpartners.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can also call their office at 919-233-7360. Thanks so much for joining us today. I really appreciate you listening in. If you'd like more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. Until next week, I'm Lee Rosen. Stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.