

Anna: Please Understand Me, Managing ADHD within a Marriage, this is Stay Happily Married episode number 222.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is it possible for an ADHD diagnosis to actually strengthen and reaffirm a marriage? It's no secret that navigating and maintaining a marriage can be difficult sometimes. But what if your spouse has been diagnosed with ADHD or is undiagnosed and living with ADHD behavioral characteristics?

In either case communication within a marriage becomes extra challenging and seemingly impossible at times. Our guest today is Dr. Jennie Byrne, a board-certified adult psychiatrist who specializes in cognitive problems like attention deficits and memory loss.

She counsels couples that are dealing with ADHD using coaching and behavioral therapy to facilitate good communication and regain happiness within a marriage. Welcome to the show, Dr. Byrne. I'm so glad you could join us.

Dr. Byrne: Thank you for having me.

Anna: So, all right, when we're talking about ADHD what kind of impact do you see this having on a relationship and more specifically a marriage?

Dr. Byrne: Well, typically what I see is ADHD which has been undiagnosed or untreated in one of the members of the couple. Typically it causes a negative impact on the relationship in the marriage.

Anna: So what kind of negative impacts do you see when - like what kind of situations do couples get it when one partner has ADHD and, say, it's undiagnosed?

Dr. Byrne: So typically most of the problems tend to be in communication. The spouse that has ADHD they may do things related to being distracted while they're talking to the other person. For example, they might seem like they're not really listening. They might be distracted. Their mind might be going elsewhere. Or they tend to be very forgetful and have trouble with time management.

So, this is very common in couples who have to share household duties that one person, the non-ADHD partner will say "It's your job to take out the trash every night." The ADHD partner will say, "Okay, no problem." But then they'll never do it.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: This leads to a lot of small instances of conflict, which overtime can really build up into large conflict and serious problems in the relationship.

Anna: Right. So, oftentimes it seems like those problems will start out pretty small, like you said, something as simple as taking out the trash or doing the dishes maybe. If those things build up then the other partner, they just get really frustrated.

Dr. Byrne: Right, typically ADHD we think of as being very consistently inconsistent.

Anna: Okay.

Dr. Byrne: So, maybe they'll take out the trash every night for two weeks and then they'll forget for the next two weeks. Or maybe they will remember to do it some nights, but not others. The non-ADHD partner tends to have a real difficulty understanding why they're so inconsistent. It's very difficult to predict if somebody has that kind inconsistency and that lack of predictability can lead to a lot of anxiety and frustration.

Anna: Right. So if the non-ADHD is dealing with the other partner having ADHD, how difficult can it be when it is undiagnosed or misdiagnosed?

Dr. Byrne: It's very common that ADHD in adults goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. One of the reasons for this is that we're still learning a lot ADHD. We didn't even used to think that it happened in adults. We used to think it was a problem that only happened to young children.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: We used to think that it happened to boys, not girls. Now we know that it can happen to girls, maybe just as often as the boys and that probably about 50% of people who have the symptoms as a child will continue to have them as an adult.

Anna: Okay.

Dr. Byrne: So the numbers recently I've seen are that maybe 5% of the adult population has ADHD, but only 10% of those people are diagnosed.

Anna: Wow.

Dr. Byrne: It's a huge number of people who are potentially misdiagnosed or undiagnosed.

Anna: Okay.

Dr. Byrne: In terms of being misdiagnosed, what typically happens is that a couple will come in with problems and they'll identify it as depression or anxiety.

Anna: Ah, okay. Yep. That's what's I was going to ask.

Dr. Byrne: They might have depression or anxiety because overtime when these ADHD symptoms aren't managed, they can lead to anxiety because you're always anxious, "Well, are they going to do what they say? Are they really listening to me? Do we have a problem?" It can lead to depression, especially in the ADHD spouse. They can get very depressed because they see this pattern of inconsistency and they feel like a failure.

Anna: They don't know how to deal with it, maybe?

Dr. Byrne: Right. So, often people will get treated for depression or anxiety, but then the ADHD symptoms persist.

Anna: Okay.

Dr. Byrne: So the problems in the relationship persist.

Anna: Right. So, I guess we kind of addressed this a little bit about communication, but if you could go into that a little bit more about it being a big problem between couples when one partner has not been diagnosed with ADHD.

Dr. Byrne: The main communication problems that I see are, one, that the ADHD partner does not complete tasks. Again, that's kind of the take out the trash example, but it can more significant like picking up a child.

Anna: Oh.

Dr. Byrne: Or getting things at the store, or remembering important appointments. That's number one, the time management forgetfulness. Then number two, the ADHD partner may just seem disengaged. This is probably due to some of that distractibility.

So when you're talk with them they may seem like they're not listening. They may seem like they're thinking about other things. The non-ADHD partner assumes that maybe they don't love them anymore.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: Maybe something's wrong. Maybe there's a problem, when in fact, it may just be the distraction from the ADHD.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: Then the third set of problems tends to stem from the impulsivity part of ADHD, and that is making impulsive decisions, which can lead to poor choices.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: For example, the ADHD partner impulsively buys things, maybe online or goes out to the store and sees something that catches their attention and they impulsively buy it, and comes home and the non-ADHD partner is very upset. This pattern over time can lead to serious financial problems for the couple...

Anna: Yeah.

Dr. Byrne: ...and a lot of trust issues. Again, it may be that the core issue is impulsively related to the ADHD rather than a malicious intent to wreck the family's finances.

Anna: Right. Exactly. So I can imagine, though, that if it is undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, the non-ADHD partner would be very frustrated. So, I think it's important for people to know that for sure that they will encounter frustration and they'll see that.

So maybe if they are dealing with problems like that, maybe it's something they should get checked out. Maybe ADHD is something that is a part of their relationship and they don't even know it.

Dr. Byrne: I always recommend that if you have any question about it or you even suspect that this might be an issue, that you get evaluated. The reason for that is, there can be attention deficits that aren't necessarily ADHD.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: So, an evaluation will help tell you could it be something else that's going on. A common example is medication. I've seen people who go in for depression and put on medication which alters their attention, and then their attention is off. So it may be something that's not ADHD that you can fix fairly easily. Substances, a lot of substance abuse appear as an attention problem.

Anna: Okay.

Dr. Byrne: That's obviously something that would be good to treat. Another reason to seek professional help is that you may benefit greatly from medication.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: People think about ADHD and little kids with Ritalin, and there's a huge debate about that in literature, but again in adults it tends to be under diagnosed and under treated. Some adults with medication make huge changes in their lives, and medication is all they need to make those changes.

Now most people, in my experience, medication only helps part of the problem. So again, seeking a good diagnosis - you may be able to do certain types of therapy or coaching...

Anna: Okay.

Dr. Byrne: ...that are very practical, like cognitive behavior therapy. This really focuses in on the specific problems, for example the forgetfulness problem. Well, the ADHD partner is always forgetting their keys. What's a very practical solution that we can come up with to make sure they don't forget their keys?

Anna: Tie them to their hands. No, I'm just kidding.

Dr. Byrne: But it may be something as simple as put a nail beside the door and the keys always go on the nail.

Anna: Right, hang them up every time you come in.

Dr. Byrne: It may be something as simple as that. So getting the diagnosis can be very helpful. Not everyone needs to take medicine. There are other changes you can make that might have just as big of an impact. The other final thing I would add here is that getting professional attention in ADHD in particular, can be helpful because ADHD people tend to have people with the self-help.

Anna: Oh, okay.

Dr. Byrne: They have trouble with self-help for the exact same reasons they have problems in other arenas of their life. They have difficulty with getting started, with finishing projects, with not getting distracted. So self-help programs require that you get started, that you finish, that you stay on track, and that's already a challenge for an ADHD person.

So, unfortunately, the self-help option can lead to problems. Professional intervention may be helpful.

Anna: It seems like they definitely would have issues with those self-help things because of, maybe, like the impulsivity. So they would not be able to necessarily follow through with what they are trying to do to help themselves.

Dr. Byrne: Right, and then they can feel down on themselves. "Well, why can't I do this self-help? Why can't I fix myself? Why can't I make these changes?" That can contribute to the depression and anxiety, which is already present.

Anna: Do you see guilt in these people after, like they're not able to help themselves? Do you ever see them experiencing a level of guilt in a way?

Dr. Byrne: Definitely. These are people who can be highly successful, highly intelligent people and the frustration that they cannot modulate their attention to do what they want to do in their lives, and sometimes they're underachieving their whole lives is very frustrating. They want to help their partner.

They want to be part of the team. They want to have a relationship, and they can't understand why they can't stop themselves from doing certain things. That's very difficult for them and there definitely can be a lot of guilt, a lot of remorse, a lot of regret.

Anna: Yeah. I see that. So, if they're coming to finally get some help, they maybe have a diagnosis - and then they're going through, like you said, the cognitive behavioral therapy, kind of managing their medication and the coaching - it's probably a lot of one-on-one.

But do you also, if they're in a marriage, do you have the other partner come in as well so they can try to understand what's going on and they can be a part of the healing process?

Dr. Byrne: Mm-hmm. The non-ADHD partner can be very, very helpful in this whole process. The first step is really the education component and understanding what part of the problem is ADHD and what part is not. Because obviously in a couple, there can be many issues and they're not all going to be due to the ADHD.

So just having the education around symptoms to know what is something that can be worked on with ADHD and what is something that has to be handled differently, that's important. So education is the first thing.

Then in terms of if you're doing cognitive behavior therapy and you're coming up with new strategies, the partner might be part of the strategy. So if you're going to delegate household responsibilities, maybe the partner is going to do the tasks that require a lot of detail-oriented work, if that's something the ADHD person is struggling with.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: The partner really needs to be part of that plan of who's going to do what in the household. So having them part of the planning can be very important. Then also, just for the partner sometimes they even go for their own individual counseling to help them understand and cope with their partner and....

Anna: Right

Dr. Byrne: ... and how their relationship is going to be.

Anna: Yeah. It seems like there would definitely need to be a lot of understanding for that. They'd have to be willing to understand it, so they can understand their partner.

Dr. Byrne: Right. ADHD is something that can be part of your partner and just the way that something else could be - substance abuse, or a trauma background, or a difficult family. It's just one component that makes the partner who they are. So ultimately, it's understanding them and coming up with ways that you can have a partnership with that person, with all their flaws and all of their...

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: ...strengths.

Anna: Yeah.

Dr. Byrne: Understanding what part of them is related to ADHD and what part is not, it's really a process of understanding and empathy. I think the good news is that I see with couples come in, once the diagnosis had been made and some sort of treatment has been started, I've seen really dramatic improvements in relationships. Even in relationships, I had a couple that came in and they were in their 50s, and he had been misdiagnosed since he was 20.

Anna: Wow.

Dr. Byrne: Even at that age, you know, they've had great changes in their relationship. Now it's not perfect. He has a lot of habits that have been 30 years in the making.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: So it's a little more difficult with is age to undo some of those habits. But I think their overall satisfaction in their relationship has really improved. I had another couple come, a younger couple in their 30s, just had a baby, and their relationship with the diagnosis and treatment has dramatically changed.

So I think the good news is that although ADHD is sometimes confusing and frustrating, it is something that can be worked on, not always with medicine, but sometimes with medicine.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: Trough the process of learning about each other and understanding each other I do think it can strengthen the relationship. It's not easy, but I do think it can happen.

Anna: Right. That's what I was going to ask you about next was if you think that it can actually help and you've already answered that so that's great.

Dr. Byrne: I mean one thing I see a lot which is unfortunate is there's a lot of misperception from media or from books.

Anna: Yeah.

Dr. Byrne: It's kind of a hot topic. So there's a lot of misperceptions out there. So people will come into the relationship with a lot of misperceptions or judgments about it and sometimes it's hard for the partner to change their mindset about it. So that's unfortunate. I think, again, that's where the education part is almost the most important. But if someone is willing to put the time and effort into the relationship and really work on this, I think they could see good results.

Anna: Right. So if someone was maybe starting a relationship, they're not necessarily in a marriage yet, but they're kind of starting a relationship and getting those conversations out there with the new boyfriend or girlfriend. Do you think that if they were nervous or maybe anxious about telling...

If they knew that they had ADHD and they were wanting to tell the other person but they weren't sure how to do it because of the stigma attached to it, do you think that the best way to go about that maybe is just being honest and, kind of, trying to get them to understand?

Dr. Byrne: If I were that person I might start out by, not framing it in negative way, but saying something like, "I just heard a podcast and they were talking about ADHD and they were talking about all these different symptoms and what can happen. I've noticed that sometimes you have some of those same kind of issues and I wonder if you've ever thought about this." Just, again, it's kind of having a neutral tone...

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: ...a non-judging tone. Just throw it out there to them and say, "Do you know anything about ADHD? Do you think that these are things that you notice in yourself?" Just kind of make it a question and see what they say.

They might surprise you. They might come back and say, "Oh yeah. I was diagnosed with it when I was a kid. But only kids have that."

Anna: Right. I see.

Dr. Byrne: "So I must have outgrown it." Or they might say, "Oh I never really thought about it. But, yeah, you're right. I do kind of do that." Now they might get upset or defensive. But again, I think it's more the tone...

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: ...and how you approach them, if you're approaching them with love and caring and a kind of neutral stance. It'll be important in your relationship, so it'll be important to know.

Anna: Right. Definitely strengthen it for sure. So, Dr. Byrne is there anything else we should know?

Dr. Byrne: I think the most important thing to know, I started to say a little bit is that ADHD is out there. It's in adults. It's way more common than most people think, like I said maybe 5% of the population, men and women. It looks different in adults. We're adults so we're not bouncing out of our chairs like little kids would.

Anna: Right.

Dr. Byrne: But it's there and it's still a good amount of stigma around it, mostly because of the medications that treat it. The medications are often stimulants, so they get a lot of media coverage. So, there's a lot of misperceptions out there, and I think that's unfortunate. But the good news is there's also a lot of information you can gather that's helpful.

So, I just encourage people to learn more about it. If it's something you think is an issue for you, just ask someone. Go and ask and get an opinion.

Anna: So, that's it. Do your research. Dr. Byrne, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Dr. Byrne: Thanks for having me. It's really great.

Anna: Absolutely. To find out more about Dr. Byrne and her practice, Cognitive Psychiatry of Chapel Hill, you can visit her website at www.cognitive-psychiatry.com. Or call 919-636-5240 for an appointment. Thank you so

much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Anna Riley, until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer:

Thank you for joining us today 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.