

A Word To The Wives

by Ellen Kingsley

When Jessica met Josh it was love at first sight. He was affable, fun and outgoing, not to mention darkly handsome and athletic. When he told her about his ADD, it didn't faze her. "He was succeeding in law school," she says. "His ADD didn't seem to have much of an impact on him or on anything he did."

But Jessica soon would feel ADD's impact on their marriage.

That's because Josh's style of coping with ADD was to stay strictly organized and create a rigid structure for his life. From his desktop to his sock drawer, everything had to be in order and in place. "He had to have his keys in a certain place," Jessica says. "If I messed with them, he freaked out."

He was the same way about their bank account. "Before each month began, everything had to be budgeted and accounted for. I had to know exactly how much I had to spend on what each month. Otherwise he'd be anxious and upset."

Jessica, a 30-something professional used to her independence, found the money part especially difficult to swallow. "If something popped up and got us off track, he couldn't handle it," she says. "It got to the point where if I got a \$50 traffic ticket, I was afraid to tell him about it."

If something didn't change, their marriage would be in jeopardy. So says Lynn Weiss, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and expert on ADD in relationships. "Women often find that ADD guys are great to date because they're active, fun to be around, joyful and outgoing," says Weiss. "But when you get to the point of running a household and running a life, it's a totally different story."

"The differences between men and women are exacerbated when the man has ADD," says Weiss. If you agree with Weiss's premise that women tend to personalize more often, and that men tend to be more detached emotionally, you can understand what she means. If the husband acts a certain way that seems to speak of his detachment (say, forgetting the time and showing up late to meet her at the movies) the wife may feel he doesn't care enough about her. When ADD is involved, such scenarios take place more frequently.

Dealing With The Un-huh Scenario

The wife says, "Honey will you take out the trash?" and the ADD husband responds "Uh-huh." Three hours later the trash is still sitting there. The wife personalizes: "He's being oppositional," or "He never listens to me," and that makes her angry. A fight ensues. It will be the first of many.

"Wives of ADD men need to understand that the husband's level of attention to task is extremely shallow," says Weiss. "He is not behaving that way on purpose. But once she starts personalizing his behavior, the marriage is in trouble."

To emerge from the troubling Uh-Huh Scenario trap, the wife first has to understand what the issue is: difficulty focusing and staying on task are hallmark symptoms of ADD. Accepting this fact of life, she then needs to frame her request in a way that penetrates at a deep enough level to be implemented. Weiss suggests a four-step strategy:

Touch your husband when you make the request. People with ADD receive information more readily and thoroughly when several senses are engaged.

Make eye contact with your husband, and engage him conversationally. Tell him, "Thanks, I really appreciate your taking out the trash." Wait for him to respond.

Give him a time limit. Say, "I will feel better if you take out the trash by 3 o'clock." (Note the use of positive language.) Ask him what he thinks about that.

Remind him again if need be. He may need you to do so.

Weiss notes that many women bridle at such advice, suggesting it's easier to take out the trash themselves or that such studied interactions are "like raising another child." Big mistake.

"If the strategy is framed in a condescending way there will be secondary problems," Weiss says. "The wife has to understand that if she views listening or organization or follow through as more mature behaviors, the marriage will suffer."

In short, don't judge moralistically your husband's ADD behavior. Be responsible for your part of the equation. This is the man you loved enough to marry. You owe it to both of you to learn about ADD and develop the tools to work together.

The Controlling-Highly Structured Scenario

Jessica's description of her husband's "freaking out" over out-of-place keys or out-of-budget items speaks to his intense anxiety over losing control of his world. People with ADD, whose internal ability to remain organized and in control of their universe may be lacking, often cope by creating a highly structured environment for themselves.

"They truly feel that if they lose one thing, the whole thing falls apart," Weiss says. And non-ADD people need to respect that.

Then again, a marriage consists of two people, who must work together as a team. A few helpful tips:

FOR HER: Don't touch his stuff. Each spouse should have separate areas for work or personal items. . If it bothers the ADD spouse to have his things rearranged or somehow lose control of them, then try not to touch them. "She really shouldn't be at his desk," says Weiss

FOR HIM: Own your behavior. He needs to realize that his over-controlling, over-structured habits are compensatory and that angry acting out is not fair or acceptable. It helps to develop a self-deprecating sense of humor about it too (e.g., "If I didn't have my head screwed on, I'd probably lose it too.") Over- controlling types can be very hard to live with, but a husband's personal insight and good humor will make his wife feel a lot better.

The Non-Goal Directed Behavior Scenario

Imagine it's Saturday and you have seven tasks to accomplish. They have to be done by six because the movie starts at 7:30 and you'll want to grab a quick bite at a nearby restaurant first. You know that the dog needs to be walked by nine and the lawn needs be mowed by 11:30 in order to make it to Johnny's soccer game by noon. You'll have to do the groceries by three, have the kids' dinner prepared and ready for the sitter to heat by five, and be showered and ready to leave the house at six.

Got that straight? Not if you've got ADD.

People with ADD have a different clock system, and it doesn't tick to standard time. "People with ADD live in the process," says Lynn Weiss. "The task defines the time."

If that concept is hard to imagine, here's an example. Your husband walked the dog, alright, but now it's time to mow the lawn. About halfway through the task, the mower runs out of gas. Off he goes in the car to the gas station.

While there, he sees an old MG much like the one he had in college. The station owner comes out and the two chew the fat over how much better cars used to be. The MG owner shows up and joins the conversation, then asks your husband if he'd like to take a ride. When your husband turns up at home nearly four hours later, the lawn isn't mowed, the groceries aren't done, and he forgot to get the gas.

The critic might berate him with: "You don't have your priorities straight," but scolding would be pointless. People with ADD have little sense of time and limited ability to prioritize. To function according to everyone else's watch, they need your compassion, assistance and practice, practice, practice.

"Without scolding, they need to be aware together that time and prioritizing are a problem," says Weiss. Which means he has to ask for your help. Here are some strategies you can try.

Agree to check in with each other periodically say, at 2 o'clock and 5 o'clock in the scenario described above. This arrangement helps the ADD spouse break down a lengthy time period into smaller, more manageable components.

Prioritize mid-stream. If by 2 o'clock only one task is completed, or by five only three tasks are done, the ADD spouse needs to take responsibility and work with the non-ADD spouse to change and prioritize the remaining list of tasks.

Don't get angry. Get busy. Your ADD spouse is doing the best he can, and you can help him do better by working with him as a team. At first it may seem like a lot of work on your part, but once he becomes habituated to the routine he will train himself to better plan and carry out his tasks.

Reinforce the routine. Routines are not natural and need to be reinforced periodically. Once habituated, your spouse may lapse back into old patterns. Agree at the outset to re-establish your routine of checking in and re-prioritizing if this happens.

Take responsibility for yourself, not your spouse. If you remain detached, objective, and accepting, you'll be less angry in the end, Weiss believes.

Indeed, Lynn Weiss has walked the walk. Not only does she have ADD. She married a man who has it.

In fact, she's especially proud of the way she learned to deal with her husband's chronic lateness, which used to drive her up a wall. "He'd show up late to leave the house for our son's football game, and then we'd have to stop on the way because he'd forgotten to eat and want to stop for food along the way."

Her solution: "I learned to go places separately " she says. "I disconnected myself from his inability to be on time by going places myself and arranging to meet him there. I found I disliked him a lot less if I didn't have to be late too."

The lesson: if she couldn't have an effect on him, she could at least minimize his ADD's impact on herself and their relationship. "ADD couples are most successful when the husband works on himself, and the wife works on herself. It helps them work better together."

Jessica, now expecting the couple's first child in a matter of weeks, couldn't agree more. "Rather than try to keep up with his frenetic pace, I've learned to do my own thing," she says. "He's beginning to understand that he overestimates what he can accomplish in a given day. And we've agreed that when we drive somewhere together, I'm the one who drives because he's a nervous, aggressive driver."

In short, Josh has begun to own his behavior, and Jessica to accept his ADD. "It's all about acceptance, compromise and negotiation," she says. "But it's mostly about clear and honest communication. If we don't let the little things build up, then the negative feelings don't persist."