

Mike's Notes from 2021 ADHD Conference

Session: Non-ADHD Spouse/Partner Panel Discussion, Q&A

Presenter: Mike Fedel with Dr. Helene Brenner & Dr. Larry Letich, Elizabeth Rice and Dr. Jennelle Kariotis-Rice, and Audrey and Dr. Larry Jones

Recorded: yes - my CL and available for download

Handouts/slides: no

My Summary: *[I can't really summarize as there was so much good information here and I don't want to tempt anyone to just read the Summary.]*

My Comments [mostly for myself]: Liz had the most practical bullet list of suggestions. I was excited that there was so little overlap, no filler, all content in the comments. The understated optimism of everyone in this group (or is this just was radical acceptance looks like?) was inspiring.

Everyone here understands that the ADHD is **a** problem but is not **the** problem. It's how it's integrated into the relationship. **Jennelle** said that accepting 'this is our reality – ADHD is part of our life' and there was a great balance between that broad statement and **Liz's** very hands-on items. **Helene** stated flatly that the partner can get exhausted being the executive function but knows they're better at it so they do it. But you still ask the ADHD partner to do what they can, keeping it from overloading/overwhelming them and realizing it still might not be 100%. **Larry L** brought the balance again – the person with ADHD has to be able to hear what they're doing – the pain they're causing – without letting the shame bury and paralyze them. **Larry J** emphasized that the ADHD partner needs to open up, to be vulnerable. The non-ADHD partner isn't going to know what we're feeling *unless we tell them*. (I like this a lot. I've felt rejected in areas the other person didn't even know mattered to me.) Also that we (men) need an accountability partner. **Audrey** made 2 points I liked a lot; 1) NT couples have problems too and 2) remember what drew you together. That's still there.

Other Memorable Bits: Audrey's degree is anthropology. Want to talk to her about that someday.

Notes

(To myself: I put ** after my favorite bits)

History and Structure of the ADDA Group

Mike and Melissa started it in 2017 – Lisa Z was instrumental in encouraging ADDA to have one.

Not therapy but mutual support with Mike and Doug there for 1) history, 2) offering perspective from *inside* an ADHD-wired brain.

Best Advice – Jennelle (non-ADHD)

(Mike introduced each person and asked for their best advice for non-ADHD partners.)

(these are paraphrases)

What saved us was **radical acceptance** that it's always going to be there. It's a permanent part of our relationship. That doesn't have to be dark cloud, just an acknowledge that it's there to manage. Hoping that someday it won't be there or won't have an impact is non-acceptance.

Accepting that sometimes it will be better/worse than other times helps me the most.

When we're in a new month and the tools aren't working anymore, "let's try something new", instead of "why is this still happening?"

Best Advice – Helene (non-ADHD)

(Mike introduced each person and asked for their best advice for non-ADHD partners.)

(these are paraphrases)

It's something that catches you *by surprise* sometimes. Things are going smoothly then,, BAM! Like stubbing your toe.

Remember they're also wonderful adventurers, creatives, and then there is this thing that happens.

What's hard for the partner is that you tend to be the Executive Function for the family and sometimes you just need a break. It gets to be a strain. You need a space to talk about that without your partner feeling attacked. **

Be careful not to ask for too much at once from the ADHD person. Ask for the main thing you really need right now. Asking too much is like stacking dishes too high. You don't always get even the one or two things, but it gives you a better chance.

Remind, but remind without attacking. For the ADHD person, accept that they aren't putting you down, they are just reminding you.

Part of the challenge here is that you don't know which thing they're going to forget.

For the non-ADHD person, accept that I'm good at being the Executive Function. There are times I want to let it down, so find the things you *can* count on them to do and let them do it. Examples: Larry is good at long distance driving, so she *can* let go and let down during those times. Also, they do ballroom dancing and he's a good leader.

[my comment: this sounds like a way to handle the "why are you reminding me?"/"thank you for reminding me" conundrum. BOTH of you need to accept that's just the way it's going to be. The partner can't *stop* reminding, so the ADHD person needs to accept this and hear it as support, not criticism.]

Best Advice – Larry J (ADHD)

(Mike introduced each person and asked for their best advice for non-ADHD partners.)
(*these are paraphrases*)

Most ADHDers need an accountability partner. **

Especially true for men, we're less detail oriented, more big picture oriented, we miss the finer details. (Audrey has been that for him.)

The ADHD partner needs to not be afraid to be vulnerable to their partner/spouse so they can understand some of your own insecurity as well as strengths. Many of us are impacted by the Imposter Syndrome and our partner don't know this. They could help us if we let them know. **

Learn to pause! Allows us to remove ourselves from the immediate situation and take time to be able to give the best answer/response based on a working (not over-excited) Executive Function.

Best Advice – Larry L (ADHD)

(Mike introduced each person and asked for their best advice for non-ADHD partners.)
(*these are paraphrases*)

Learning/thinking about "hidden ADHD" is a key idea of his. People who have not been diagnosed or who have but it's not visible. People do not understand what we are struggling with.

At the heart of the problem is that, at some point, the non-ADHD partner get to feel "you just don't care, if you cared, you wouldn't be making these errors, you wouldn't be forgetting this and that, you wouldn't be ignoring my problems" and the ADHD partner says, "I have no idea why I'm not as good as I should be. I believe I care, I believe I love." The friction from the frustration starts to tear the relationship apart.

Knowing ADHD is involved can at least give you a different way of talking about it - other than "you just don't care".

One Big Thing - the ADHD partner *needs to accept how much pain this causes your partner without falling into shame*. Without "you'd be better off without me". That isn't supportive. Let them know I am doing my very best, knowing I am not always going to succeed, but I'll do my best. And when I fail and it hurts you, I am willing to show up and understand and accept and support without getting shameful and defensive. **

Best Advice – Liz (ADHD)

(Mike introduced each person and asked for their best advice for non-ADHD partners.)
(these are paraphrases)

Clarify all plans, no matter how simple they may seem. We are famous for having half-conversations. We hear half and fill in the blanks and don't realize that the other person is thinking something else. **

We are black / white thinkers. She told a good story that when she saw this was a panel supporting non-ADHD partners, she didn't digest that I was asking for *both* partners to give their advice. [*I think this is similar to me reading email but skimming and thinking "OK, I have the basics" and missing essential details.*]

It's hard for us to follow long stories or multiple directions (I'm assuming multiple-step projects or instructions).

It is very hard to think about the future. When you're talking about plans 2 weeks from now, it sounds like 2 years from now and we don't even know to look for it in the calendar since it seemed so far away when we talked about it. **

[I have a similar problem at boundaries – week to week, month to month. I try to avoid scheduling things on Mondays because I may not have looked at the calendar since last Monday. Same thing with the 1st-3rd of the month. Even on January 30th, February seems like it's a long long way off.]

It helps us to see things in multiple dimensions: if something is in the calendar, maybe an emoji or some other visual hint. The words just all look the same.

Give encouragement and in a gentler tone, both of us in a calmer state.

Best Advice – Audrey (non-ADHD)

(Mike introduced each person and asked for their best advice for non-ADHD partners.)
(these are paraphrases)

If you are the neurotypical and you are seeing ADHD-like behaviors, help your partner get a diagnosis. Then from that point, you can see what kind of support you need.

Remember what drew you together - that's still there.

Remember too that some of the frustrations happen to all couples, ADHD or not. **

"Don't sweat the small stuff - there is plenty of big stuff going on."

"Pick your battles."

Best Advice from our ADDA group

I mentioned to them that when we did this the first time (2018?), the most important thing the ADDA group wanted me to bring to the room was this: they were tired of doctors telling their partner it was OK to take a medication break on nights and weekends. That's exactly the worst time because that's when you're around your partner and family.

Everyone chuckled at this – very validating to the group's experience. [Crop that clip and put it on the FB page]

Q&A

Q: what do you do when your partner gets disregulated?

Jennelle: it's a challenge especially with an ADHDer. When you – either of you –

recognize it's coming, it's OK to step away and say "I'm starting to spiral / escalate / etc" **but** *it is on the person who requests the break* to ask for how much time they need and when they will get back to the conversation. Otherwise, we will never get back to it.

Larry L: both of us are very emotional people. Emotion and feeling are what is behind this. Emotional intensity is part of the relationship. There are set boundaries - no name calling or attacks.

Sometimes people attack when they're desperate. Behind anger is often a feeling of panic. "I'm losing you. I can't get through to you. I can't reach you. You hate me. I can't meet your needs. I'm screwed up. I'm hearing you say I'm a failure. I'm letting you down again."

There is always pain underneath this. **

Telling someone to calm down will *not* work. Don't just walk away from someone when they're super upset - at least say 'this is getting escalated, let's take a break', not just walk away. You have to keep the connection open.

Helene: if we can slow down, we can often hear the story that caused the emotional dysregulation and have some compassion. Hearing the story of the pain often changes things. "now I get it, now I know why you're feeling this way"

Q (from me): it's different when kids are involved, right? [I told my story about leaving the girls with kids at the playground]

Helene: there is a 'managing a business' aspect to marriage. It's already hard with no kids, with kids it get more difficult.

Repeating to the ADHD person why this is so important to them can help. She talked about sharing schedule changes - how one little change has a domino effect for the EF person who can see all the other things that are going to be impacted.

Larry J - we had 3 kids so we needed to present a united front. We made a point of agreeing on important issues so they could not play one against the other.

Audrey: to this day, they call her "The Enforcer." You always have to be firm. You just hope they don't end up seeing you as the mean one.

Her kids learned to take the pause, their wives also learned to do this too. [modeling works!]

With the Internet and social media, it's critical that what the ADHD partner does during an impulsive time does not leave the home - don't talk about your partner behind their back. [I think she meant; impulsive posts could contain just about anything right after a fight.]

Financial impulsivity is also a big deal.

Jennelle: Late night spending - ordering things online in the middle of the night

Larry L on fighting in front of the kids: it's OK for them to see some disagreement , seeing how it happens and how it gets worked out. Larry said "I'm embarrassed about some of the times I look back on" when he couldn't cool himself down, and it happened in front of the kids.

ADHDers become the pursuer in the relationship often, and we get loud when we feel disconnected. But that makes the other person run away. Larry recommends touch - it grounds you and can bring you back: "let's not do this in front of the kids. we'll come back to this but not now. Move *toward*, not *away from*."

Q: I feel bad saying something to my child because I know she's trying her best. Why don't I have patience like I know I should?

Helene: it's a balance – they have to come to terms with the fact that that do have this issue. Helpful to do it when they're younger, before they might get defensive, to explain to them that certain actions get certain responses. It's important to have empathy both ways. Teaching kids that sometimes even when you're doing your best, it's going to upset some people and at the same time learn to express your needs.

Jennelle: they were seeing a lot of impulse control challenges with one of their daughters, when there was a diagnosis, it made a difference. It can make the parent think "I should have more tolerance", but the fact is it's hard. Parenting is a lot under any circumstances.