



## **Episode 007B- “How adult ADHD impacts romantic relationships and knowing how to maintain them”**

**Guest: Alexine Thompson-de Benoit FSP, LMFT, EFT**

**Sam Jinich, Ph.D:**

Welcome to PeakConnection, a podcast for individuals, couples, and therapists, about engaging life with vitality, deeper emotional connections, love, intimacy, and authenticity. My name is Dr. Sam Jinich and today I'm pleased to have a conversation with my friend and colleague Alexine Thompson. Alexine is a certified emotionally focused therapist, supervisor and trainer. She lives in the Lausanne area in Switzerland where she trains, supervises and provides emotionally focused therapy in French and English. Alexine lived in the United States for 12 years. She received her master's degree in marriage and family therapy from the Fuller School of Psychology in Pasadena, California. And since 2013, Alexine has focused her attention on bringing the model of emotional focused therapy to Switzerland. And since 2018, has focused her attention on training therapists in emotionally focused therapy, also known as EFT.

**Sam:**

Alexine has a special interest in how attention deficit disorder plays out in relationships and how emotionally focused therapy can help. She also is interested in how hypersensitivity plays out in relationships and its unique connection to ADHD. Today I'm going to speak with Alexine about how adult ADHD impacts romantic relationships, and what couples should know and what they can do about this to have a more loving, connected, and satisfying relationship.

**Sam:**

Welcome, Alexine. I'm so glad to have you on the show to be able to talk with you. I've been wanting to have you on for a while and I'm so glad you and I are finally making the time.

**Alexine Thompson-de Benoit FSP, LMFT, EFT:**

Thank you, Sam. It's wonderful to be here with you and talk about this topic and it's a pleasure.

**Sam:**

Such an important topic. I am really interested to hear about how ADHD and how hypersensitivity plays out in relationships and the impact that it has on couples. Why don't we start there with just kind of a broad overview of how adult ADHD tends to present itself and what kinds of problems does it tend to cause in relationships and when you're partnered with someone with ADHD. And by the way, at some point I want to hear about the hypersensitivity interest.

**Alexine:**

Yeah. Sure. So yeah, the hypersensitivity is an interest that I have separately, but as I was exploring those two topics, I realized they're connected. So how adult ADHD presents itself? Well, the main feature is inconsistent attention. But you're also going to see difficulty staying on task, staying organized, poor time management. If there is hyperactivity, you will see hyperactivity, you will see impulsiveness or self-regulation or emotional regulation. And so what that will mean for the relationship is that the ADHD partner will feel often like a failure, unloved and unwanted because their partner will be irritated with

their forgetfulness or distractibility. They're going to feel afraid of failure, that's a big one, because they're so used to failing, right? So then it becomes something that they try to avoid or going to feel scattered, can't remember what their partner is asking of them, feeling like their partner is always angry and upset and never satisfied. They can't live up to their partners standards and it's overwhelming.

**Alexine:**

And for the non-ADHD partner, what we observe is they feel let down and forgotten, they feel lonely and unwanted. They feel like they're not important to their partner because their partner seems to be distracted with other more fun, more interesting, more important things. They will often say that their partner is reliably unreliable, consistently unreliable. They feel burnt out and stressed all the time because they end up having to think that, we talk about the mental load, that's a concept we've heard a lot lately. Well they carry the mental load of making sure things are done, making sure nothing's forgotten, the bills are paid, things like that.

**Sam:**

They're thinking for two people.

**Alexine:**

They're thinking for two people, yeah.

**Sam:**

And maybe more because if you have children, then you really have the entire company.

**Alexine:**

If you have children, of course. Of course it's exponential. And the strain on the relationship gets a lot worse when the children arrive. They also feel very disappointed and a lot of anger.

**Sam:**

Do they take it personally, Alexine?

**Alexine:**

Absolutely.

**Sam:**

Yeah. That's for partners who don't quite understand ADHD, is that right?

**Alexine:**

Yeah. Yes, completely. So the ADHD symptoms will take on a whole meaning to the partner.

**Sam:**

They attach meaning to it.

**Alexine:**

Right. So distraction of the ADHD partner will mean, to the non-ADHD, will mean I'm not important to you, I'm invisible. This organization will mean you don't care about me.

**Sam:**

And my sensitivities and the importance that I give to order.

**Alexine:**

Right. Hyperactivity will mean I'm not enough for you. You're always buzzing around. You're always seeking the next thrill. I'm not enough for you. Impulsivity, depending on how it manifests itself, can mean you don't respect me because you interrupt or you don't ask for my opinion before doing something or spending money or you react with anger, rage. And forgetfulness will mean I don't matter to you. What I say is not important. And I am forgettable.

**Sam:**

I'm starting to think that maybe I have ADHD, right now. I think I've done all of those.

**Alexine:**

I heard you say recently, it must be in the water. Everybody seems to have it.

**Sam:**

Wow. So interesting how these natural signs and symptoms of ADHD, how they're experienced. So helpful to hear you talk about that. And what typically happens then when you start to feel, when you interpret your partner in these ways, what tends to happen generally for couples? Do they start to fight, they start to get more and more disconnected? Do they start to enter into rigid patterns of disconnection? Can you speak a little bit about what you might typically see in a relationship?

**Alexine:**

Sure. So what you might typically see as the non-ADHD partner that attributes meaning to all these symptoms in this way, ends up feeling really burnt out and angry, and will start carrying more and more of the load on the home front and complaining about it and making reproaches and criticism to their ADHD partner, accusing them, attacking them, insulting them, maybe, like if it escalates really high. And depending on whether the ADHD partner is a pursuer or withdrawer or impulsive or not, it can become really volatile.

**Alexine:**

But if it's a non-ADHD pursuer that someone that will seek out the connection, seek out a response from their partner. And an ADHD partner, that's more like a withdrawal that tends to hide and shut down and wait until the storm has passed, you will see a typical pursue withdrawal cycle where the more the non-ADHD criticizes and protests, ADHD partner feels ashamed and inadequate and afraid to fail, and then stops trying. And that's easy, right? Because it's already sort of wired in, that fear of failure. It's not wired in, but it's something, it's a byproduct of a lifelong experience of being told they're lazy, they're mean, they're rude because they're impulsive or they're stupid or they're clueless or whatever.

**Sam:**

So they themselves, at times start to develop that narrative about themselves.

**Alexine:**

Absolutely.

**Sam:**

And it lowers their own self esteem.

**Alexine:**

Right. And it can look like they're not feeling the pain because they forget or they get distracted by something else. They don't tend to necessarily dwell on these things. But deep down, there's a lot of pain. It's a very difficult thing to live with.

**Sam:**

Right. It's very difficult for they themselves to have it, you're saying. And it's also very difficult for the non-ADHD person to live with.

**Alexine:**

Right. Exactly. Yeah.

**Sam:**

I'm interested in though, hearing the upside of ADHD.

**Alexine:**

Yeah.

**Sam:**

There's also something very appealing or attractive about people with ADHD.

**Alexine:**

Absolutely. Yeah. They're creative, they're artists, they're adventures, they're thrill seekers. So they do great in high adrenaline jobs, for example, they are very spontaneous. They can be the life of the party. They are flexible. I think they can more easily roll with the punches because they live in the now. And so if the plans change, okay, well, not all, but some will adjust more easily. They don't tend to hold grudges. They don't live in the past, they live in the now.

**Sam:**

They're more forgiving, Alexine?

**Alexine:**

Yes, I think so. I think so.

**Sam:**

It sounds like a lot of vitality expressed by them. And so that's very appealing.

**Alexine:**

And a lot of energy. So you combine that energy with the hyper-focus that they can have for something that they're really stimulated by and interested in, and they can be super productive, on certain tasks. And the problem is it's inconsistent, but if they are really passionate about something and they love what they do, they can move mountains with that energy.

**Sam:**

So I can see how this can be both a very, it can kind of pull you in with attraction and with excitement and with passion and pleasure. And I'm assuming that this also plays a role in couples' intimacy and sexuality, and spirits of adventure and things like that. But also, when problems begin and when the focus starts to turn on what's not working and what's missing and the impact that it has, and on that mental load and fatigue of the non-ADHD person is experiencing, that a lot of the focus can then turn away from the upside and turn entirely negative. Turn more towards fighting and expressions of loneliness and of pain and of inadequacy on the part of the ADHD person.

**Alexine:**

Yeah, absolutely. That can get lost pretty quickly, or at least when the kids come and more responsibilities get added to the household, what tends to happen is that the non-ADD partner will carry the brunt of that and most of the load and will get resentful. They will get resentful. And so the ADHD partner, they have learned, their whole life, being called lazy and stupid and whatever. They are being made to feel that way. They have learned to avoid difficult topics to cover up the mistakes, to lie if they need to, to pretend and distract with more pleasant topics and activities and numb the pain of criticism.

**Sam:**

Do they tend to be more conflict-avoidant, more withdrawer type people, do you think in general?

**Alexine:**

I don't know. I mean, I think in my own experience, I've seen more of that pattern. Absolutely, it could be they have a partner that is very anxious and pursuing, impulsive.

**Sam:**

Got it, got it. Let's talk a little bit about what couples can do to rebuild their connection. What couples, where one partner has ADHD. I can't even imagine what it would be like if both people have ADHD. I don't know if you've ever had a couple like this or whether that is more rare, but I can imagine the chaos that would ensue. But what couples who are dealing with this, what do you typically recommend that they do? I mean, many couples and many people who may be listening to this podcast may start to wonder, "Well, do I have it or does my partner have it?" What should we do once we ask ourselves that question?

**Alexine:**

Yeah. So I think the trap that we don't want to fall into is to play doctor with our partners and start diagnosing and using that as a weapon and saying, "See, you're the problem, you have the problem." I

think the first thing to do is to, and it's not easy, but it's to be able to talk about there's something that's affecting us, let's tackle this together. And one book I really love and always recommend to couples is Melissa Orlov's, ADHD Effect on Marriage. I think it's a great book because it's very easy to read. It's full of examples where people recognize themselves and they can identify. And I think it does a great job at addressing what it's like for the ADHD partner and what it's like for the non-ADHD partner. So that both feel understood and validated, both get the glimpse of what it's like for their partner. And so I think it also helps to externalize the problem. We are both victims of this thing that is nobody's fault.

**Sam:**

I love that idea. I love the idea of framing it as that this external thing, it's like the enemy of the relationship. It's like we both have to work on that. We both have to kind of fight it together, combat it.

**Alexine:**

We both have to work on the effects of it, on our relationship.

**Sam:**

On the effects of it. Right, right. So I hear you, I hear you, to not pathologize it, to not think of it as an entirely negative thing. And also not their fault. Can you speak a little bit about that?

**Alexine:**

Yeah. ADHD, it's like the brain being wired differently and functioning differently. Basically it's the executive functioning of the brain, which is located in the prefrontal cortex, which is what allows you to plan ahead, to organize and execute actions. That part of the brain doesn't function very well. And it's like you have an orchestra with all sorts of instruments and some instruments help you memorize stuff, other instruments help you think forward, plan ahead. Imagine what's going to happen. If you go camping, what do you need to take with you? And what if it rains and da da da da? So you have all these instruments that allow you to do all these things and they're all there. But then if there's no conductor and every instrument is playing all at the same time, it's a big mess.

**Alexine:**

There's noise. And it doesn't sound like anything that makes sense. And it's chaotic. And that's sort of how the ADHD brain works. It's like there's a problem with the executive functioning, it's not working properly. I love also the image that Gabor Maté uses in his book, Scattered. He says, "It's like you're at a crossroad. And normally when there's a traffic light, it's red on one side, it's green on the other. And then there's order."

**Sam:**

That creates order, right.

**Alexine:**

But if the traffic lights are broken and there's no cop to direct traffic, very quickly, you're going to have a lot of activity, but it's going to be very chaotic.

**Sam:**

Chaotic, and you're going to end up with a lot of accidents. And in fact, that's probably what happens a lot in couples where couples will then crash, will cut each other off, will be caught up in so much disorganization. And I can imagine all the pain that ensues from that. But I hear you when you say this is just the result of the lack of that conductor. And so just like at any symphony, without a conductor, everything would just kind of sound like a huge cacophony of sounds. But if we can order it, we can bring those instruments together, then you end up with a beautiful melody. And in relationships, you can end up with a beautiful, loving, joyful, sexual relationship, if only we can help put things in some kind of order.

**Alexine:**

Right. So that's why medication is important to consider because medication will help bring order. I don't want to get too technical here, but there's something about the neurotransmission of dopamine and noradrenaline in that prefrontal cortex that doesn't quite work as it should. And that's why you have those problems with executive functioning. So the medication that you take for ADHD will help with that, and will keep a person focused and it will help the person complete a task and not get all scattered and all of that. So that's really important. That's one aspect.

**Alexine:**

And then there's the importance of developing strategies on a day-to-day basis too, organization strategies. And I think for the couple it's really important, and that's the hard thing, right? It's so easy for the non-ADHD partner to say, "Well, you're the one with the bad executive functioning. You're the one that has the messed up brain." But it's important to remember that brain comes with all these beautiful things we talked about earlier.

**Sam:**

Absolutely.

**Alexine:**

All these gifts, all these riches, and it's just a different way of thinking. And we have to, I think as a couple, it's most helpful when you can go, "Okay, it's not normal, not normal or right or wrong, it's different."

**Sam:**

Just different. I love that. And I hear you really highlighting the importance of empathy, compassion, understanding, and knowledge. I think this is a very important message too, for everyone. It's like get informed, read about it, learn about it and appreciate the upsides and then work on the downsides.

**Alexine:**

Right. Exactly. Together.

**Sam:**

Together, exactly. So come up with plans together. You've mentioned possible medication, which they can be evaluated for and prescribed by psychiatrists or psychologists.

**Alexine:**

Yeah. I would say psychiatrists.

**Sam:**

You would recommend a psychiatrist. And then of course, psychotherapists or coaches to help with resources and plans and ways of dealing with daily reminders lists, list-making. There are strategies.

**Alexine:**

Yeah. If I can take an analogy, like if you have a child that has food allergies, gluten and dairy or nuts, and then they can die if they eat nuts, you're going to set up a whole system in your kitchen to make sure that nothing bad happens. Or if you have a partner that has diabetes, you're going to set up a whole system of a way of eating and grocery shopping. Right. Exactly. Yeah.

**Alexine:**

So it's almost like you also have to do that, when ADHD is in your marriage, is what's the system we're going to develop so that we can both be on board? Because what might be obvious for me is not going to be obvious for you. You function differently and I can pull my hair out it's until the cows come home, that you again, forgot what I said. But obviously if you, again, forgot what I said, something's not working and we need to set a different system in place. So I think just bullet journals, which I won't go into, but you can Google it. Bullet journal is a really good tool to organize and to keep track of what needs to be done everyday, making lists together, attributing tasks, touching base regularly. And most of all, communicating without getting out of that dance of parent child and anger, shame, withdrawal.

**Sam:**

These are all things that are going to help both people a lot. But one thing that I want to ask is what else can the non-ADHD person also do for themselves to catch a break? Because it seems to me like this is like a nonstop, relentless, like you're in a constant race against, it's like you're outnumbered in a sense. Especially if you have little kids, it's like you have a lot of disorder happening at once. And if you're the only one with the executive function holding it all together, you're going to get exhausted. What else do you recommend for the non-ADHD?

**Alexine:**

Oh gosh. I think it's such a hard role and it's hard because you might be told by people that you need to let go and your partner may tell you, you need to let go of control, you're so controlling. And then of course the argument back is like, but if I don't.

**Sam:**

Everything will fall apart.

**Alexine:**

Everything falls apart. And that's true. That's often the case. So I think self-care is really important. Asking for help, reaching out to maybe others, friends, relatives. But also asking for help from your partner, not giving up on that, seeking help, seeking couples counseling and learning to communicate from a place of vulnerability that will get your partner's attention more so than anger. It feels for the non-ADD that unless they scream, they're not going to be heard, and that's also true. But I think if you

can do a therapeutic process with your partner and learn how to communicate from a more vulnerable place, you're also going to be heard. And then from that place, set up a system where you can say this before you get burnt out, before you reach that place of exhaustion, "This is not working for me. I'm about to crash or I'm about to yell. What are we going to do about this?"

**Sam:**

Right. And also I imagine that persons with ADHD can really compassionately connect to the pain, to the loneliness, to the sadness that their partners are feeling when they feel forgotten, when they don't feel like a priority, when they're not sure how important they are or how well they will be taken care of. And when their partner doesn't know, when they don't always feel that their partner is accessible, responsive, emotionally engaged, and there for them. Go ahead, yes.

**Alexine:**

They can have compassion for that if they're not being attacked.

**Sam:**

Right.

**Alexine:**

There's also compassion. Compassion needs to be mutual because nobody's doing this on purpose.

**Sam:**

Right. Right. I hear that.

**Alexine:**

Everyone's suffering.

**Sam:**

Yeah. I know that we could probably talk about this for several of our shows. And maybe we should, maybe we should have you back and have you talk about this some more, but I wonder if you could just speak briefly about hypersensitivity and how that plays an important role in relationships, and maybe its connection to ADHD? What is hypersensitivity?

**Alexine:**

So hypersensitivity per se, is the person, I prefer to say the highly sensitive person is someone that will have acute senses, just like senses, sights and hearing and touching and smell. They can see and feel and hear things that other people want. So it's almost like they have more antennas. But they also emotional, like they feel everything louder, right? So happy feelings can be really intense, but also sad, painful feelings can be really intense. And what I observed sometimes in my sessions is people that get so easily offended, everything hurts. Everything has meaning, everything is amplified. And as I was reading about ADHD instead of researching and trying to understand the dynamics there, I found out that Dodson's definition of ADHD is it's an interest-based nervous system. So that leads to inconsistent attention because the attention will be focused on whatever is interesting at the moment. There's emotional hyper-arousal and there's rejection sensitivity.

**Sam:**

Oh, wow.

**Alexine:**

And so what that is, with emotional hyper-arousal is that you experienced happiness and criticism more powerfully than your peers. You have passionate thoughts and emotions, higher highs, lower lows, which can lead to the lower lows can leads to low self esteem and shame. And that can be really strong in the ADHD partner. And so they really need encouragement. They need a cheerleader. There's a vulnerability there and a sensitivity and the rejection sensitivity is also, I think it's anchored in the patterns of lifelong dynamics where they have been criticized. And so they develop this intense vulnerability to the perception of rejection and criticism and feel extreme emotional pain that can be triggered by a sense of failure and can lead to depression when it's internalized. And when it's externalized, it can look like a flash of rage, like very touchy.

**Sam:**

Yes, yes. Touchy to criticism or touchy to moments of abandonment, and they feel rejected. They feel like their partner suddenly is pulling away from them. I imagine that as children, they often felt like people at some point give up on them, frustrated, fed up with them, like pull away.

**Alexine:**

Definitely.

**Sam:**

Right? Not always criticizing, but sometimes even just shutting them out, icing them out, cutting them off. So that's part of that rejection hypersensitive. It's not only hypersensitivity to criticism, but it's also a sensitivity to feeling kind of pushed away.

**Alexine:**

Yeah, yeah. And I would say the deepest, probably my sense is that the deepest longing of an ADHD person is to be accepted as they are, to be accepted with their imperfections and with their qualities, to be remembered for their qualities too.

**Sam:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Alexine:**

Often that sensitivity can be hidden, right? It's not always out there. It's not always obvious. You don't always have a partner that's super reactive, especially if it's a withdrawal, but it's there.

**Sam:**

I am so glad that we made time for this last piece, because so often we just focus on the inconsistent attention. But these other two components are so important because I think that sometimes we may actually, there may be people listening to this and say, "Wow there may not be that much, there's some inconsistent attention, but there's a lot of emotional hyperarousal in my partner, or there's a lot of rejection hypersensitivity in my partner. And now in combination with the piece on inconsistent

attention, I can really start to think of my partner in a much broader way and feel more empathy for what they're going through."

**Alexine:**

Right.

**Sam:**

And let's get some help. Let's go to therapy, let's get some coaching, let's read some books, let's build our resources, let's create a plan together. Metaphorically, let's set up our kitchen to make this a safe and healthy environment for us to be able to thrive and to connect.

**Alexine:**

Exactly. And what will help an ADHD partner thrive in terms of relationship is a supportive partner, which I know is hard to hear when you're burnt out and you feel like you can't rely on your ADHD partner, but that's half of the equation.

**Sam:**

Right. And that's why self-care is going to be so important for the non-ADHD partner.

**Alexine:**

Self-care and grieving for you being what could it have been, but what is not. That's also really important. That's a whole another chapter of that area.

**Sam:**

And maybe another topic for us for another day. Alexine, thank you so much for your time. Tell us if our listeners would like to learn more you and your work. I know that you're in Switzerland. So how would be the best and easiest way for them to find you online ad or to connect with you?

**Alexine:**

This way is to just Google my name, Alexine Thompson MFT and my website will come up. And the reason why it's the easiest way is because my website is in French and I would have to spell it right now.

**Sam:**

So that's Alexine with an E at the end. That's Alexine. And it's Thompson, Thompson.

**Alexine:**

Yeah.

**Sam:**

Well, Alexine. Thank you. Thank you for such a rich knowledge and the lovely way in which you presented it. I certainly have learned a lot. I'm sure our listeners have too. We look forward to having you back on the show. Thank you so much.

**Alexine:**

Thank you Sam. It was a pleasure.

**Sam:**

You've been listening to PeakConnection. My name is Dr. Sam Jinich. Until next time, have a great rest of your day.