



Mr. ADHD Marries Miss Anxiety

This is the tale of Shayna and Bentzi Cohen. Shayna and Bentzi are your perfect young couple, both bright, talented and successful. Both were brought up in good homes. Both are confident and goal-oriented. And both are a bit surprised with what marriage has brought them.

Here's Shayna's version: "Dating Bentzi was exhilarating. He was filled with energy, always moving. It gave me a sense of excitement and adventure. But after three years of marriage, his ADHD is driving me crazy. He's always late. He never puts things away. And he's constantly forgetting things – he'd forget the baby at the store if I didn't remind him. Why can't he just get it together?"

Bentzi has his own take: "When we were going out, I felt like her knight in shining armor. She would get nervous, and I would step in to smooth things over. If something happened between her and one of her friends, I would calm her down. I felt noble and gallant, rescuing the damsel in distress. But now I feel like her anxiety is over the top. Every *erev Shabbos* is high drama – and she's the queen. Why can't she just calm down?"

Shayna and Bentzi spend the next 20 years trying to change each other, but neither of them are successful. *Why not?* they each wonder. *If only he would change*, Shayna thinks, *our marriage would be so much better*. Bentzi feels the same way. *If only she would change*, *life would be much more peaceful*.

They nobly persevere. They try this and that and the other thing. They talk, they coach, they plead, they demand. Nothing helps.

Finally, after 20 years, they both give up. Suddenly, their relationship



improves. "Not sure why," Shayna says, "but he's just so much nicer to me these days."

"Not sure why," Bentzi says, "but she's just much easier to live with now."

And *then*, finally, they live happily ever after.

I call it a tale because everyone thinks *that would never happen to me*, and they're the perfect young couple, because it seems to happen to everyone – he and she each spend an inordinate amount of time and energy attempting to change the other. It never works. Time after time, couple after couple, it fails. The only thing they achieve is a lot of frustration and bad feelings on both sides.

The worst part is that often, the traits they are trying to change can't really be changed. ADHD is part of the makeup of an individual. Being high-strung is a disposition – not something a person chooses and not readily malleable. While there are certainly coping strategies and techniques that people can and should use to manage more effectively, the fact is there are many core tendencies that are

inborn and just aren't subject to change.

We all understand this – until we get married. When it comes to our spouse, we feel a moral imperative to correct them, straighten them out, and make them better. Not only doesn't it work, it creates friction between couples. He feels aggrieved because she just doesn't change, and she feels victimized because he demands that she become someone she's not. Each one feels frustrated that their spouse won't change and hurt that their partner doesn't accept them for who they are.

This particular tale has a happy ending, because while Shayna and Bentzi certainly made one of the 10 Really Dumb Mistakes that Very Smart Couples Make, eventually they got it right. But unfortunately, not every story ends as well.

Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier is a veteran educator and noted relationships expert who served as a high school rebbe for 15 years before creating TheShmuz.com. His book, *10 Really Dumb Mistakes that Very Smart Couples Make*, will be published in the fall of 2021.