Does ADHD affect your relationship?

Research has shown that a person with ADHD is more likely to have difficulties in relationships and may be almost twice as likely to get divorced (Biederman et al. 2006). The good news is that you are not powerless, and there are steps you can take to significantly improve your relationship. The key is to learn to work together as a team. A healthy relationship involves give and take, with both individuals participating fully in the partnership and looking for ways to support each other.

It is important to understand how the ADHD partner’s symptoms affect their non-ADHD partner, and in return that they understand how their reactions to the symptoms affect the ADHD partner. The symptoms may trigger an issue, but they are not to blame for the relationship’s problems. *The way you both communicate about the issue plays a major role.*

Does ADHD bring positives to your relationship?

**ADHD symptoms that cause problems**

- **Difficulties listening and sustaining attention** – The non-ADHD partner can feel ignored.
- **Memory problems** – The person with ADHD may forget what they have promised, so their partner does not feel they can be relied on.
- **Poor organisation** – The non-ADHD partner has to be the organiser and the task-finisher. They can feel stressed and over-burdened.
- **Hyperactivity** – The ADHD partner may talk a lot, and cannot sit still to do things with their partner.
- **Impulsivity** – The person with ADHD may upset their partner by saying or doing things without thinking.
- **Short temper or emotional outbursts** – The ADHD partner may be volatile and/or have trouble talking things through calmly. Their partner cannot relax around them.
Do any of the following statements sound familiar?

“Do you even hear what I’m saying?”
When a person has ADHD, their loved ones may have a hard time getting their full attention sometimes, which might make them feel frustrated, especially if they keep trying. From the perspective of the ADHD partner, this may feel like they are constantly being nagged.

“You never pull your weight around here.”
Household chores can be a challenge. The ADHD partner may need to take a step back and consider whether they are doing enough, compared to other family members. When was the last time they took out the rubbish? Is their clutter taking over the house? It is easy to get distracted and forget the small daily things.

“You never do what you say you’re going to do.”
David means it when he says he will get to his son’s play by 4:30 pm, but then he gets distracted at work, and then realises that he needs to pick up some milk. Before he knows it, the play is over – and he is in trouble.

People with ADHD very much intend to do something when they say it; they don’t intend to lie or be deceitful.

“How could you forget again?”
Helen feels like she is always getting blamed for forgetting things, but she is certain no one actually told her about them. ADHD often causes people to forget things they’re told, which can lead to major problems in relationships.

“I can’t believe you bought that – you know we can’t afford it!”
Fights over finances, reckless spending habits, and trouble with saving money tend to be other problems. A common ADHD symptom is doing things on impulse, and that includes buying things.
Unhelpful behaviours

Sometimes couples can get into a downwards spiral, as in our ‘Andrew and Sunika’ example, where two of Andrew’s ADHD symptoms have knock-on effects for his wife:

Andrew does not complete tasks/
Andrew does not appear to listen

Sunika feels she has to do all the work. She feels overburdened/un-cared for

Sunika criticises Andrew

Andrew withdraws, loses confidence
to try task again, fearing further criticism/nagging

Sunika feels even less supported and even more annoyed

Common feelings of the ADHD partner

Like no one understands – You feel different, because your brain functions unlike other people’s.

Stressed – Just managing everyday life is overwhelming in a way that it is not for others.

Criticised or nagged – You can’t seem to do anything right according to your partner, so you end up avoiding them or saying whatever they want to hear. You feel they try to control you.
**CLIENT HANDOUTS: COUPLES**

**One-down** – Your partner seems to run things and tells you what to do all the time. This can make you feel inadequate, and that you are being treated like a child.

**Uncared for** – You desperately want to feel accepted and loved despite your failings, but your partner seems to misunderstand you and want you to change.

**Anxious that you will mess things up again** – However hard you try, you feel as if your partner will be disappointed and critical of you yet again. So perhaps you won’t bother to try.

**Common feelings of the non-ADHD partner**

**Ignored** – Why didn’t they do what you asked them to do? Do they not realise it’s important to you?

**Unloved and uncared for** – They don’t seem to pay you attention anymore; they are distracted with other things or hyper-focussed on a project.

**Overwhelmed and exhausted** – You feel that you are taking care of everything on your own, and have to take responsibility for everything, as you don’t think you can rely on your ADHD partner.

**Angry and resentful** – This leads you to avoiding your partner and bottling it all up.

**You may both feel . . .**

**Hopeless** – Nothing you do seems to change things or improve the relationship.

With all this high emotion, it is difficult to see clearly, even though both partners may want to love and care for each other, and to work well as a couple. **But there is a way through.**

**Ways to improve your relationship**

1. Start by listening, reconnecting and gaining empathy for each other’s situation.
2. Understand that ADHD is a disorder, and the role that it plays.
3. Distinguish between ADHD symptoms and the person’s personality.
4. Take responsibility for your own part of the relationship.
5. Learn better ways of responding.
6. Set up better organisational systems in the home.
7. Equalise the power dynamics!
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Start by listening, reconnecting and gaining empathy for each other’s situation

It is vital to understand your partner’s perspective. Make a regular time slot when you ask how things are for them, and listen to everything they say. Do not do this when either of you is upset. Be careful not to get defensive, or interrupt your partner, just listen. Clarifying what has been said can be very useful to make sure that you have not misinterpreted. You may think that you already understand where your partner is coming from, but it is very easy to misinterpret. You may have spoken about a particular issue before, but that does not mean that you have truly acknowledged what your partner has told you, particularly if emotions were running high.

Make time for closeness. This might involve going on weekly dates or enjoying activities together. Remember the positives of your relationship and how great your partner is, and don’t forget the little, everyday things that are important to them. If your partner sees that you are making the effort, giving them time and caring about them, the frustrations and irritations of life will seem less important.

Exercise

Understand the other’s perspective (3-minute listening exercise)

Have your partner describe how he or she feels without interrupting to explain or defend yourself. When your partner is finished, repeat back the main points you’ve heard him or her say, and ask if you’ve understood correctly.

You may want to write the points down so you can reflect on them later. After 3 minutes, it’s your turn. Ask him or her to do the same for you and really listen with fresh ears and an open mind.
ADHD is a disorder – it has a role in your relationships

Understand that ADHD is a neurobiological disorder; the more you both learn about the condition and its symptoms, the better sense many of your issues with each other will make. The non-ADHD partner can start to appreciate how difficult it is to live every day with this range of symptoms, whilst the ADHD partner can try to understand how much the disorder affects the other person’s life.

This does not mean that ADHD can be used as an “excuse.” A common complaint from non-ADHD partners is that they feel that the ADHD partner has stopped trying since the diagnosis. ADHD genuinely does affects the relationship, but it should not be used as a reason or excuse not to try, or for behaving badly.

Distinguish between ADHD symptoms and the person’s personality

When untreated, ADHD might affect all areas of a person’s life. It’s sometimes hard to separate the symptoms from the person you love, but symptoms, such as forgetfulness or disorganisation, are not character traits, and should not be taken as such. Similarly, the ADHD partner can understand that their spouse’s reactions do not make them an ‘unfeeling nag’, but arise from the stress and frustration of the situation.

Take responsibility for your own part of the relationship

Both partners are responsible for working on the relationship. You cannot control your partner, but you can control your own behaviour and reactions. The ADHD partner needs to acknowledge the impact their behaviour has on others and act to mitigate it. The non-ADHD partner’s complaints may not be unreasonable, but you feel like disregarding them because they are presented critically or without understanding.

The non-ADHD partner should consider how nagging and criticism makes their partner feel. It does not work, whereas encouragement for effort and progress does.

The attitude needs to be that neither of you is to blame and both of you are responsible for creating change. Problems have to be addressed together, the strengths of each partner assessed, ideas generated together and expectations and goals coordinated.

CHOOSE YOUR ATTITUDE
and
CHANGE YOUR LIFE
Learn better ways of responding

The ADHD partner’s behaviour may be the initial trigger, but the way the other responds can lead to either cooperative discussion or angry shouting and arguments. The ADHD partner’s reaction to that could then either be to smooth things over or make them worse. It is so easy to get into attack/counter-attack mode.

Couples who try with all their might to improve their relationship can feel disheartened when nothing changes, or things get worse. But you may need to try differently rather than trying harder. Agree on tactics or signals that you think will work for you.

Set up better organisational systems in the home

Have a practical plan; structure and a routine are key. It is important to pick an organisational system that works for both of you and includes reminders. For instance, the ADHD partner can be helped to break down a project into several small steps on paper, setting up regular phone reminders. The ADHD partner might have a hard time getting and staying organised, but clutter and chaos adds to their feeling that life is out of control.

Equalise the power dynamics

Power dynamics of control and dominance/subordination are present at some level in every relationship. It often happens over time that the non-ADHD partner takes on a parent role if the ADHD adult does not complete tasks or generally manage their responsibilities. The relationship becomes uneven, with the ADHD partner feeling one-down, a child in the relationship. It could even go the other way, with the non-ADHD partner feeling like a slave to the ADHD partner. While the person with ADHD needs support and structure, and it will help if their partner provides this, ultimately this is a cooperative enterprise between equals to be communicated with respect.

Step back, see the bigger picture and retain a sense of humour.

Further tips for communication

Ensure that you are clear about your intent before you start communication (e.g. “I am not trying to upset you . . . ”):

- Think about what you are really arguing about.
- Work together to resolve issues.
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- Cool off before you talk and try not to be defensive.
- Be straightforward and honest about your feelings even if difficult.
- Don’t assume that you know how the other person feels or what they think.
- Be aware of what you say, not just your word but your tone of voice. Avoid critical comments and phrases like “you never” or “you always.”
- Listen and do not interrupt. Make an effort to maintain eye contact, mentally repeating the other person’s words to help you to remain focused.
- Ask questions. This allows the other person to know you are paying attention.
- If you do miss something, ask them to repeat.

**Tips to work as a team**

- If one person is doing too much, sit down and make a list of chores and responsibilities and share these out.
- Commit to your tasks and try to work to both of your strengths (e.g. your partner may sort out the bills and you do the cooking).
- Arrange a regular time to sit down together and address issues.
- You don’t have to do everything. If you have children, you may assign them some chores; you might get food deliveries to your home; set up direct debits to pay bills; or even get a cleaner in to help with the housework.