

ADHD & Couples

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder impacts all aspects of a person's life—including romantic partners and families. Often the partner is frustrated by the ADHD person's disorganization, time management difficulties, and forgetfulness. The partner may feel that too much of the responsibility for running the household shifts to her, that it isn't fair that she has to do so much of the work. She's right—it isn't fair, but fortunately both partners can work to restore balance in the relationship and unload the resentments on both sides.

The Downward Spiral

It's important to understand that when things go bad in a relationship, it's usually despite the fact that both partners want things to go well. No one sets out to be unhappy or to make his partner unhappy, but sometimes it turns out that way despite our best intentions. As they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. When one of the partners has ADHD, it can have a profound impact on the relationship. The confusing thing about ADHD is the inconsistency—sometimes the ADHD person does great, but she can't maintain it. For example, it's easy to send out the bills on time once, but it's really hard to send them out on time every time. Where ADHD adults most often fall down is all those boring things that need to be done on a regular basis to keep their lives and jobs running. When something is new and exciting, they do great. When something is old hat, it's torture to do it.

People have a strong need to make sense of their world, including the people around them. So the non-ADHD person comes up with reasons why the ADHD partner doesn't reliably pitch in. Unfortunately, these reasons are often negative and unhelpful—"you're just lazy, irresponsible, and self-centered." By contrast, once a diagnosis of ADHD is made, the couple can see the ADHD behaviors differently—"I still don't like that you do these things, but I understand it's because of a neurological condition rather than lack of motivation or caring." This shift in thinking is crucial if the couple is to drop the unproductive blame and guilt and learn to work together. Plus, having a diagnosis and learning about typical ADHD strengths and weaknesses helps the couple to pick strategies that are more likely to be successful than the same old strategies that don't really work.

Working Together

For real change to occur, where both people can be happy, both people need to do something different. Obviously the ADHD person should seek treatment to understand how ADHD has affected her life and to begin to do better. This may be a combination of medication, therapy, and/or coaching.

However, the couple can also work together on using new strategies that will enable the ADHD partner to be more effective so that the non-ADHD partner can shift some of those tasks back. Usually, by the time a diagnosis is made, the non-ADHD partner is frustrated and doesn't feel like he should have to do anything differently—the other person should do all the changing. Although this may be understandable, it doesn't really work. As members of a couple, we each have a big impact on our partners which means that if we want to get the best out of them, we need to give them our best. Sometimes this means getting creative about who does what or how those things are done. Sometimes it means just accepting that certain things will be the way that they will be. For example, in one couple I saw, the wife knew that her husband would almost never send in the insurance forms

to get reimbursed for psychiatrist visits, so she just did it herself. Yes, it was a little more work for her, but she was much better at these sorts of tasks and it made sure that they got paid, which is better than being powerless and resentful.

A diagnosis of ADHD is not a Get Out Of Jail Free card. The ADHD adult still needs to be a productive member of society and get certain things done. Ultimately, he needs to work at least as hard as the people around him to improve his functioning. ADHD isn't fair, but there are lots of ways that the universe isn't fair, so there's nothing to do but deal with it. Part of the ADHD person doing better involves identifying those patterns that don't work for him and then advocating for himself to make the necessary changes. For example, he may tell his wife, "I know you don't like having my keys and cell phone sitting on the table by the front door, but it's just too easy for me to lose them if I don't put them in the same place. So I waste too much time looking for them and not getting other things done." It's helpful to tie the request in to something that the other person gains so that both sides benefit from the accommodation. This way the request doesn't feel like yet another imbalance in the relationship.

As for the non-ADHD partner, she should think about what is most important to her—and what she can bear to let go of. For example, the partner's side of the bedroom may always have clothes thrown about and it's just not worth the constant fighting to get him to keep it neater. Or maybe it is—like everything in relationships, it involves picking your battles.

There's a great saying which goes, "would you rather be right or happy?" For the non-ADHD partner this means letting go of the expectations of what his partner should be able to do—if she can't do it, she can't do it, no matter how angry he gets. Instead of focusing on being right ("you should be able to do this!") it's better to be practical. For example, telling your partner at breakfast to pick up milk on the way home is extremely unlikely to lead to success. However, making the small effort to call her on the way home dramatically increases the odds of the milk showing up. Everybody's happy. Of course, the ADHD partner has to see these reminders as helpful rather than as intrusive, which may mean recognizing and accepting her memory difficulties.

Learn as Much as You Can

Knowledge is a major part of overcoming ADHD. The more you know, the better prepared you are to come up with solutions that really work. Of course everyone is different and ADHD is only one part of who someone is, but there are certain patterns that ADHD folks tend to have. Starting with this general information, you don't need to re-invent the wheel to figure out what will work for your own life. There are lots of great books on ADHD, plus two websites for the national ADHD advocacy organizations (chadd.org and add.org) that can provide accurate and reputable information. In addition, CHADD also provides local meetings through more than 150 chapters. As with anything, some sources are more reliable than others and some information applies more to your life.

When it comes to helping an ADHD person be more effective, it's important to remember that he has difficulty doing the right thing at the right time, every time. So up the odds of success by tipping them in their favor; set up the environment to help your partner be more likely to do the right thing. This may mean getting the environment organized and simplified first—if there are too many things pulling someone's attention, it's unlikely that the desired stimulus will win out. For example, a reminder note on a crowded desk disappears; a shopping list on a cluttered table is easily missed. Unfortunately, most ADHD people require some help straightening up, getting rid of unnecessary items, and setting up a workable system that they can maintain. Books, organizers, coaches, and therapists can provide necessary guidance.

Extra Assistance

Sometimes a couple will require some additional help to overcome their resentments and unproductive patterns and learn to work better together. A professional who really knows ADHD can be invaluable, so be sure to find someone with real expertise in this area because, as you have discovered, good intentions aren't enough. Medication can be very helpful, but pills don't teach skills, so the ADHD person and her partner will need to learn all those habits that weren't learned along the way or that just didn't sink in easily. A therapist can also help with understanding the impact of undiagnosed ADHD on the person's life (such as shaky self-esteem, social struggles, depression, and anxiety) and to overcome self-destructive patterns (such as procrastination, denial, avoidance, and rationalization).

At the end of the day, ADHD is just like any other challenge that couples face. They need to find a way to work together to create balance and happiness in the relationship.

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