

## Adult ADHD and Relationships

Dealing with Symptoms Together and Overcoming Relationship Challenges



Relationships where one or both members of the couple have ADHD can be troubled by misunderstandings, frustrations, and resentments. This is especially likely if the symptoms of ADHD have never been properly diagnosed or treated. The good news is that you can turn these problems around. You can build a healthier, happier partnership by learning about the role ADHD plays in your relationship and how both of you can choose more positive and productive ways to respond to challenges and communicate with each other.

### How does ADHD or ADD affect relationships?

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While the distractibility, disorganization, and impulsivity of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD or ADD) can cause problems in many areas of adult life, these symptoms can be particularly damaging when it comes to your closest relationships.

**If you're the person with ADHD**, you may feel like you're constantly being criticized, nagged, and micromanaged. No matter what you do, nothing seems to please your spouse or partner. You don't feel respected as an adult, so you find yourself avoiding your partner or saying whatever you have to in order to get them off your back. You wish your significant other could relax even a little bit and stop trying to control every aspect of your life. You wonder what happened to the person you fell in love with.

**If you're in a relationship with someone who has ADHD**, you may feel lonely, ignored, and unappreciated. You're tired of taking care of everything on your own and being the only responsible party in the relationship. You don't feel like you can rely on your partner.

They never seem to follow through on promises, and you're forced to constantly issue reminders and demands or else just do things yourself. Sometimes it feels as if your significant other just doesn't care.

It's easy to see how the feelings on both sides can contribute to a destructive cycle in the relationship. The non-ADHD partner complains, nags, and becomes increasingly resentful while the ADHD partner, feeling judged and misunderstood, gets defensive and pulls away. In the end, nobody is happy. But it doesn't have to be this way. You can find new ways to face the challenges of ADHD and improve how you communicate, adding greater understanding to your relationship and bringing you closer together.

## Understanding the role of ADHD in adult relationships

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Transforming your relationship starts with understanding the role that ADHD plays. Once you are able to identify how the symptoms are ADHD are influencing your interactions as a couple, you can learn better ways of responding. For the partner with ADHD, this means learning how to manage your symptoms. For the non-ADHD partner, this means learning how to react to frustrations in ways that encourage and motivate your partner.

### Symptoms of ADHD that can cause relationship problems

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**Trouble paying attention.** If you have ADHD, you may zone out during conversations, which can make your partner feel ignored and devalued. You may also miss important details or mindlessly agree to something you don't remember later, which can be frustrating to your loved one.

**Forgetfulness.** Even when someone with ADHD is paying attention, they may later forget what was promised or discussed. When it's your spouse's birthday or the formula you said you'd pick up, your partner may start to feel like you don't care or you're unreliable.

**Poor organizational skills.** This can lead to difficulty finishing tasks as well as general household chaos. Partners may feel like they're always cleaning up after the person with ADHD and shouldering a disproportionate amount of the family duties.

**Impulsivity.** If you have ADHD, you may blurt things out without thinking, which can cause hurt feelings. This impulsivity can also lead to irresponsible and even reckless behavior (for example, making a big purchase that isn't in the budget, leading to fights over finances).

**Emotional outbursts.** Many people with ADHD have trouble moderating their emotions. You may lose your temper easily and have trouble discussing issues calmly. Your partner may feel like they have to walk on eggshells to avoid blowups.

## Put yourself in your partner's shoes

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The first step in turning your relationship around is learning to see things from your partner's perspective. If you've been together a long time or you've had the same fights again and again, you might think that you already understand where your partner is coming from. But don't underestimate how easy it is to misinterpret your partner's actions and intentions. You and your partner are more different than you think—especially if only one of you has ADHD. And just because you've heard it all before doesn't mean you've truly taken in what your partner is saying. When emotions are running high, as they usually do around ADHD relationship issues, it's particularly difficult to maintain objectivity and perspective.

The best way to put yourself in your partner's shoes is to ask and then simply listen. Find a time to sit down and talk when you're not already upset. Let your partner describe how they feel without interruption from you to explain or defend yourself. When your partner is finished, repeat back the main points you've heard them say, and ask if you understood correctly. You may want to write the points down so you can reflect on them later. When your partner is finished, it's your turn. Ask them to do the same for you and really listen with fresh ears and an open mind.

### Tips for increasing empathy in your relationship

**Study up on ADHD.** The more both of you learn about ADHD and its symptoms, the easier it will be to see how it is influencing your relationship. You may find that a light bulb comes on. So many of your issues as a couple finally make sense! Remembering that an ADHD brain is hardwired differently to a brain without ADHD can help the non-ADHD partner take symptoms less personally. For the partner with ADHD, it can be a relief to understand what's behind some of your behaviors—and know that there are steps you can take to manage your symptoms.



(/articles/add-adhd/adhd-attention-deficit-disorder-in-adults.htm)

[ADHD in Adults: \(/articles/add-adhd/adhd-attention-deficit-disorder-in-adults.htm\)](/articles/add-adhd/adhd-attention-deficit-disorder-in-adults.htm)  
Recognizing the Signs and Taking Action

**Acknowledge the impact your behavior has on your partner.** If you're the one with ADHD, it's important to recognize how your untreated symptoms affect your partner. If you're the non-ADHD partner, consider how your nagging and criticism makes your spouse feel. Don't dismiss your partner's complaints or disregard them because you don't like the way they bring it up or react to you.

**Separate who your partner is from their symptoms or behaviors.** Instead of labeling your partner "irresponsible," recognize their forgetfulness and lack of follow-through as symptoms of ADHD. Remember, symptoms aren't character traits. The same goes for the non-ADHD partner too. Recognize that nagging usually arises from feelings of frustration and stress, not because your partner is an unsympathetic harpy.

### How the partner with ADHD often feels:

**Different.** The brain is often racing, and people with ADHD experience the world in a way that others don't easily understand or relate to.

**Overwhelmed,** secretly or overtly, by the constant stress caused by ADHD symptoms. Keeping daily life under control takes much more work than others realize. Even if it's not always apparent, ADHD can make someone feel like they're struggling to keep their head above water.

**Subordinate to their spouses.** Their partners spend a good deal of time correcting them or running the show. The corrections make them feel incompetent, and often contribute to a parent-child dynamic. Men can describe these interactions as making them feel emasculated.

**Shamed.** They often hide a large amount of shame, sometimes compensating with bluster or retreat.

**Unloved and unwanted.** Constant reminders from spouses, bosses, and others that they should "change" reinforce that they are unloved as they are.

**Afraid to fail again.** As their relationships worsen, the potential of punishment for failure increases. But ADHD inconsistency means this partner will fail at some point. Anticipating failure results in reluctance to try.

**Longing to be accepted.** One of the strongest emotional desires of those with ADHD is to be loved as they are, in spite of imperfections.

### How the non-ADHD partner often feels:

**Unwanted or unloved.** The lack of attention is interpreted as lack of interest rather than distraction. One of the most common dreams is to be "cherished," and to receive the attention from one's spouse that this implies.

**Angry and emotionally blocked.** Anger and resentment permeate many interactions with the ADHD spouse. Sometimes this anger is expressed as disconnection. In an effort to control angry interactions, some non-ADHD spouses try to block their feelings by bottling them up inside.

**Incredibly stressed out.** Non-ADHD spouses often carry the vast proportion of the family responsibilities and can never let their guard down. Life could fall apart at any time because of the ADHD spouse's inconsistency.

**Ignored and offended.** To a non-ADHD spouse, it doesn't make sense that the ADHD spouse doesn't act on the non-ADHD partner's experience and advice more often when it's "clear" what needs to be done.

**Exhausted and depleted.** The non-ADHD spouse carries too many responsibilities and no amount of effort seems to fix the relationship.

**Frustrated.** A non-ADHD spouse might feel as if the same issues keep coming back over and over again (a sort of boomerang effect).

Adapted from *The ADHD Effect on Marriage: Understand and Rebuild Your Relationship in Six Steps*, by Melissa C. Orlov

## Take responsibility for your role

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Once you've put yourself in your partner's shoes, it's time to accept responsibility for your role in the relationship. Progress starts once you become aware of your own contributions to the problems you have as a couple. This goes for the non-ADHD partner as well.

While the ADHD partner's symptoms may trigger an issue, the symptoms alone aren't to blame for the relationship problem. The way the non-ADHD partner responds to the bothersome symptom can either open the door for cooperation and compromise or provoke misunderstandings and hurt feelings. If you're the one with ADHD, you're also responsible for the way you react to your partner's concerns. Your reaction can either make your significant other feel validated and heard or disregarded and ignored.

### Break free of the parent-child dynamic

Many couples feel stuck in an unsatisfying parent-child type of relationship, with the non-ADHD partner in the role of the parent and the partner with ADHD in the role of the child. It often starts when the partner with ADHD fails to follow through on tasks, such as forgetting to pay the cable bill, leaving clean laundry in a pile on the bed, or leaving the kids stranded after promising to pick them up. The non-ADHD partner takes on more and more of the household responsibilities.

The more lopsided the partnership becomes, the more resentful they feel. It becomes harder to appreciate the ADHD spouse's positive qualities and contributions. Of course, the partner with ADHD senses this. They start to feel like there's no point to even trying and dismisses the non-ADHD spouse as controlling and impossible to please. So what can you do to break this pattern?

#### Tips for the non-ADHD partner:

- ▶ You can't control your spouse, but you can control your own actions. Put an immediate stop to verbal attacks and nagging. Neither gets results.
- ▶ Encourage your partner when they make progress and acknowledge achievements and efforts.
- ▶ When possible, try to focus on your partner's intentions, rather than what they actually do. They may lose concentration when listening to you, for example, but that doesn't mean they don't care about what you have to say.
- ▶ Stop trying to "parent" your partner. It is destructive to your relationship and demotivating to your spouse.

#### Tips for the partner with ADHD:

- ▶ Acknowledge the fact that your ADHD symptoms are interfering with your relationship. It's not just a case of your partner being unreasonable.
- ▶ Explore treatment options. As you learn to manage your symptoms and become more reliable, your partner will ease off.
- ▶ If strong emotions derail conversations with your partner, agree in advance that you need to take a time out to calm down and refocus before continuing.
- ▶ Find ways to spoil your spouse. If your partner feels cared for by you—even in small ways—they will feel less like your parent.

## Stop fighting and start communicating

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As you've already seen, communication often breaks down between partners when ADHD is in the mix. One partner feels overburdened. The other feels attacked. They end up fighting each other rather than tackling the issue.

To improve communication, do what you can to defuse emotional volatility. If need be, take time to cool off before discussing an issue. When you have the conversation, listen closely to your partner. Ask yourself what you're really arguing about. What's the deeper issue?

**Example:** A couple fights over dinner being an hour late. The husband, who doesn't have ADHD, is upset over more than his empty stomach. He feels frustrated with his wife's lack of reliability and attention (I work hard to provide for her! Why don't I ever get any TLC? If she cared for me, she'd make more of an effort.). The ADHD wife feels overwhelmed and unfairly judged (I have so much to take care of around the house. It's hard for me to keep on top of everything and I lost track of time. How does that make me a bad wife?).

Once you identify the real issue, it's much easier to resolve the problem. In this example, the husband would be less upset if he realized that his wife's chronic lateness and disorganization isn't personal. It's a symptom of untreated ADHD. For her part, once the wife understands that a timely dinner makes her husband feel loved and appreciated, she'll be more motivated to make it happen.



(/articles/relationships-communication/relationship-help.htm)

[Relationship Help](/articles/relationships-communication/relationship-help.htm): (/articles/relationships-communication/relationship-help.htm)

Building Relationships that Last

**Don't bottle up your emotions.** Fess up to your feelings, no matter how ugly. Get them out in the open where you can work through them as a couple.

**You're not a mind reader.** Don't make assumptions about your partner's motivations. Avoid the "if my spouse really loved me..." trap. If your partner does something that upsets you, address it directly rather than silently stewing.

**Watch what you say and how you say it.** Avoid critical words and questions that put your partner on the defensive ("Why can't you ever do what you said you would?" or "How many times do I have to tell you?").

**Find the humor in the situation.** Learn to laugh over the inevitable miscommunications and misunderstandings. Laughter relieves tension and brings you closer together.

### [Improving your communication skills when you have ADHD](#)

ADHD symptoms can interfere with communication. The following tips can help you have more satisfying conversations with your partner and other people.

**Communicate face to face whenever possible.** Nonverbal cues such as eye contact, tone of voice, and gestures communicate much more than words alone. To understand the emotion behind the words, you need to communicate with your partner in person, rather than via phone, text, or email.

**Listen actively and don't interrupt.** While the other person is talking, make an effort to maintain eye contact. If you find your mind wandering, mentally repeat their words so you follow the conversation. Make an effort to avoid interrupting.



**Ask questions.** Instead of launching into whatever is on your mind—or the many things on your mind—ask the other person a question. It will let them know you’re paying attention.

**Request a repeat.** If your attention wanders, tell the other person so as soon as you realize it and ask them to repeat what was just said. If you let the conversation go too long when your mind is elsewhere, it will only get tougher to re-connect.

**Manage your emotions.** If you’re unable to discuss certain subjects without flying off the handle or saying things you later regret, consider practicing mindfulness meditation. As well as helping to lower impulsivity and improve focus, regular mindfulness meditation can offer you greater control over your emotions and prevent the emotional outbursts that can be so damaging to a relationship. HelpGuide’s free [Emotional Skills Toolkit](/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) (/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) can show you how.

## Work together as a team

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Just because one partner has ADHD doesn’t mean you can’t have a balanced, mutually fulfilling 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.

Take some time on both sides to identify what you’re good at and which tasks are most challenging for you. If your spouse is strong in an area in which you’re weak, perhaps they can take over that responsibility, and vice versa. It should feel like an equal exchange. If you’re both weak in a certain area, brainstorm how to get outside help. For example, if neither of you are good with money, you could hire a bookkeeper or research money management apps that make budgeting easier.



(/articles/add-adhd/managing-adult-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder.htm)  
[Tips for Managing Adult ADHD: \(/articles/add-adhd/managing-adult-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder.htm\) Improve Symptoms, Enhance Focus and Organization](#)

**Divide tasks and stick to them.** The non-ADHD partner may be more suited to handling the bills and doing the errands, while you manage the children and cooking.

**Schedule weekly sit-downs.** Meet once a week to address issues and assess progress you've made as a couple.

**Evaluate the division of labor.** Make a list of chores and responsibilities and rebalance the workload if either one of you is shouldering the bulk of the load.

**Delegate, outsource, and automate.** You and your partner don't have to do everything yourselves. If you have children, assign them chores. You might also consider hiring a cleaning service, signing up for grocery delivery, or setting up automatic bill payments.

**Split up individual tasks, if necessary.** If the partner with ADHD has trouble completing tasks, the non-ADHD partner may need to step in as the "closer." Account for this in your arrangement to avoid resentments.

### Create a practical plan

If you have ADHD, you probably aren't very good at organizing or setting up systems. But that doesn't mean you aren't able to follow a plan once it's in place. This is an area where the non-ADHD partner can provide invaluable assistance. They can help you set up a system and routine you can rely on to help you stay on top of your responsibilities.

Start by analyzing the most frequent things you fight about, such as chores or chronic lateness. Then think about practical things you can do to solve them. For forgotten chores, it might be a big wall calendar with checkboxes next to each person's daily tasks. For chronic lateness, you might set up a calendar on your smartphone, complete with timers to remind you of upcoming events.

### Helping your partner with ADHD

**Develop a routine.** Your partner will benefit from the added structure. Schedule in the things you both need to accomplish and consider set times for meals, exercise, and sleep.

**Set up external reminders.** This can be in the form of a dry erase board, sticky notes, or a to-do list on your phone.

**Control clutter.** People with ADHD have a hard time getting and staying organized, but clutter adds to the feeling that their lives are out of control. Help your partner set up a system for dealing with clutter and staying organized.

**Ask the ADHD partner to repeat requests.** To avoid misunderstandings, have your partner repeat what you have agreed upon.

***Author: Melinda Smith, M.A. Last updated: October 2018.***

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