

# Understanding the Impact of ADHD in Romantic Relationships

## Objective

To increase understanding and reduce relationship problems when you or your partner has ADHD.

## You Should Know

Your romantic relationship can be negatively affected if you or your partner has ADHD because of distractibility, disorganization, and impulsivity.

If you have ADHD, you might feel like you are constantly criticized, nagged, or micromanaged. No matter what you do, your partner never seems happy with your efforts. You might not feel respected, so you say whatever is required to get him or her off your back. You might hope your partner will change – relax a little or stop their controlling behavior.

If your partner has ADHD, you might feel frustrated, lonely, ignored, or unappreciated. You are probably tired of taking care of everything on your own, or feel like you are the only responsible adult in the relationship. The cycle repeats itself: your partner is unreliable or fails to follow through, so you remind, badger, and eventually end up doing it yourself.

These feelings and experiences can contribute to destructive cycles in the relationship. One partner complains or becomes resentful, while the other partner feels defensive, judged, and misunderstood. Neither of you are happy. But there are ways to create a happier partnership, where both of you choose to respond to the challenges ADHD brings to your relationship, so you both can communicate in healthy and productive ways.

This worksheet presents strategies to increase understanding and reduce relationship problems when you or your partner has ADHD. Make a copy of this worksheet and give it to your partner so you both can complete the exercise.

## What to Do

First, identify the role ADHD plays in your relationship by reviewing the following list of symptoms that can cause relationship problems. Check off the ones that are affecting your relationship:

\_\_\_ **Inattention.** This includes zoning out during conversations, missing important details, or mindlessly agreeing to something.

\_\_\_ **Forgetfulness.** Forgetting important appointments, tasks, or dates is common in adults with ADHD.

\_\_\_ **Poor organizational skills.** This includes difficulty finishing tasks and contributing to household chaos.

\_\_\_ **Impulsivity.** This includes blurting things out without thinking, or even irresponsible and reckless behavior.

\_\_\_ **Emotional outbursts.** Problems regulating emotions, getting angry easily, and difficulty discussing issues calmly are all common traits in adults with ADHD.

If you or your partner has ADHD, here are some tips for increasing understanding:

1. **Learn about ADHD.** The more you learn about ADHD, the easier it will be to see how it is impacting your relationship. So many problems will make sense! Remembering that an ADHD brain is hardwired differently can help the non-ADHD partner take symptoms less personally. It can be a relief to understand what is behind some of the frustrating behaviors—and know there are steps to successfully manage symptoms.

2. **Acknowledge the impact your behavior has on your partner.** If you have ADHD, recognize how your untreated symptoms affect your partner. If you are the non-ADHD partner, consider how nagging and criticism makes your partner feel.

3. **Separate who your partner is from the behaviors.** Rather than labeling your partner as lazy or irresponsible, recognize forgetfulness and unreliability as symptoms of ADHD. If you have ADHD, understand that nagging usually arises from frustration and stress – not because your partner is unsympathetic.

If you have ADHD, check off the following feelings you experience. Then, share with your partner.

\_\_\_ **Different.** Your thoughts might race, and others might not understand you experience life much differently than people who do not have ADHD.

\_\_\_ **Overwhelmed.** Keeping your life under control might feel very stressful. You might feel drained or struggle to keep your head above water.

\_\_\_ **Subordinate.** Your partner might spend a lot of time correcting you, leading you to feel incompetent. Men describe these interactions as making them feel emasculated.

\_\_\_ **Shamed.** You might react with anger or withdrawal.

\_\_\_ **Unloved and unwanted.** Constant reminders you need to “change” might reinforce you are unloved as you are.

\_\_\_ **Fear of failure.** Inconsistencies resulting from ADHD mean you will fail sometimes. Anticipating failure results in reluctance to try.

\_\_\_ **Longing for acceptance.** You might wish to be loved as you are, despite imperfections.

If you are the non-ADHD partner, check off the following feelings you experience. Then, share with your partner.

\_\_\_ **Unwanted or unloved.** You might interpret inattention as lack of interest

\_\_\_ **Angry.** Resentment might permeate interactions with your partner. In an effort to control your anger, you might try to block your feelings by bottling them up inside.

\_\_\_ **Stressed out.** You might carry most of the family responsibilities. You might believe life will fall apart because of your partner's inconsistency and unreliability.

\_\_\_ **Ignored and offended.** You might not understand why your partner fails to act on your advice when it is "clear" what needs to be done.

\_\_\_ **Exhausted and depleted.** You may feel you carry too many responsibilities and no amount of effort seems to fix things.

\_\_\_ **Frustrated.** You might feel as if the same issues keep coming back repeatedly.

Now that you have identified how you feel, review the following suggestions.

Suggestions for the non-ADHD partner:

1. **You can only control your own actions and reactions.** Discontinue the verbal attacks and nagging.
2. **Encourage your partner's progress and acknowledge achievements and efforts.** Focus on your partner's intentions rather than what they actually do.
3. **Stop trying to "parent" your partner.** It is destructive to your relationship.
4. **Avoid bottling up your emotions.** Discuss how you feel, no matter how unpleasant or difficult.

Suggestions for the partner with ADHD:

1. **Acknowledge your ADHD-related symptoms are negatively impacting your relationship.** Your partner is not always being unreasonable!
2. **Explore treatment options.** As you learn to manage your symptoms, your relationship will improve.
3. **Take a time out as needed.** If conversations become emotionally-charged, agree in advance that you need to take a break to calm down and refocus.
4. **Find ways to care for your partner.**

**5. Stop fighting and start communicating.** While you feel attacked, your partner might feel overburdened. Then, you end up fighting rather than finding solutions and problem-solving as a team.

For both partners:

1. **Avoid assumptions.** If your partner does something that upsets you, address it directly.
2. **Watch what you say and how you say it.** Avoid critical words that lead to defensiveness.
3. **Find the humor.** Learn to laugh over inevitable miscommunications and misunderstandings. Laughter relieves tension and increases intimacy.
4. **Listen actively without interrupting.** While your partner is talking, make an effort to maintain eye contact. If your mind wanders, mentally repeat his or her words so you follow the conversation.
5. **Ask questions.** Instead of launching into whatever is on your mind, ask your partner a question.
6. **Work together as a team.** Healthy relationships involve give and take, with both partners participating fully and identifying ways to support each other.
7. **Identify what you are good at and which tasks are most challenging for you.** If your partner is stronger in an area, perhaps he or she can take over that responsibility. Make it an equal exchange. Divide tasks and stick to them. If necessary, brainstorm how to get outside help. For example, if neither of you are great housekeepers, hire someone to clean your home.
8. **Schedule weekly chats.** Meet once a week to discuss things and assess the progress you have made.

Now, answer the following question. Share your answers with your partner.

What can you do to take responsibility for your role in the relationship? Are you aware of your own contributions to the problems you have as a couple? Explain.

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What is the most frequent thing you fight about? Think about practical things you can do to solve them.

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**Learn to see things from your partner's perspective.** Even if you think you have a clear understanding, ask and then simply listen. Find a time to sit down and talk when neither of you are upset. Let your partner describe how they feel without interruption from you to explain or defend yourself.

Schedule a date and time you and your partner will sit and talk: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe what happened.

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When your partner is finished, repeat back the main points and ask if you understood correctly. Take notes so you can reflect on them later. When your partner is finished, it is your turn. Ask them to do the same for you and listen with an open mind.

Describe what happened.

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Moving forward, plan on meeting once/week, scheduling the weekly chat for a day and time you and your partner can meet uninterrupted.

Check the box when you have completed this step.

## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise increase your understanding of your partner's point of view? Why or why not?

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Did any of your partner's responses surprise you? Explain.

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Do you have a better understanding of how ADHD impacts your relationship? Describe.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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