

# How To Know If Your ADHD Treatment is Optimized

By Melissa Orlov

Some people equate “treatment for ADHD” with “medication,” yet research clearly shows that even though medication can help many with their ADHD symptoms (not all), medication alone is not “as good as it gets.” As treatment for ADHD is somewhat personal – i.e. the same things don’t work for everyone – it’s helpful to use the conceptual framework below to understand whether you can further improve your treatment. And, before I begin, let me say that I view “treatment” broadly as anything you do intentionally that improves your symptoms and your life with your symptoms.

## **What’s the Big Idea?**

Managing ADHD is about both the symptoms themselves, such as distractibility or impulsivity, and about how those symptoms impact your life and the lives of those around you. This means there are multiple approaches to managing ADHD – and understanding how you are doing against each of those approaches will help you. I like to describe treatment as having three legs, like a stool. You need strength in all three legs in order to function well. (You can imagine that two-legged stool, right?!) Compare what you are currently doing to the treatment options in each leg and you’ll know whether or not you’re optimizing your treatment.

## **Picking Target Symptoms**

First, you need to know which symptoms are the most intrusive in your life – i.e. which you wish to “target” for improvement. Family members can sometimes help you figure this out. Their outside perspective can get you thinking about issues of which you might not be so aware. Choose between 1-3 of the most important issues and identify the corresponding ADHD symptom. Try to be as specific as possible. So, for example, if one issue is that you are always late, then this might be due to “distractibility” or “having trouble staying on task” or “getting hyper-focused and becoming unable to disconnect.” Which seems most appropriate to you? The more specific you can be, the better you are

able to choose tactics to address the issue. As you assess your symptoms and treatment you will measure your progress against how well your target symptoms are being managed.

## **Leg 1 – Changing the Physiology of Your Brain**

ADHD starts with neurochemistry – so treatment does, too. The current thinking is that when you have ADHD you don't have enough dopamine (as well as some other chemicals) in your brain. In addition, the chemistry of your brain impacts anxiety, depression and your ability to remember. So things that improve the chemistry “upstairs” make a very real impact on the severity of your symptoms. Here are some of the things shown to help ADHD symptoms physiologically:

- ADHD medications
- Aerobic and multi-modal exercise (the latter are exercises that call on coordination, skill and aerobic capacity simultaneously)
- Adequate sleep (7.5 hours or more. Many with ADHD have sleep disorders – check with your doctor or a sleep specialist if you're not sure)
- Fish oil (Omega 3s)
- Dietary changes (food is a form of medication – eliminating sugars and carbs and eating primarily protein, vegetables and fruits may improve your ability to focus and limit hyperactivity, though the research on this is mixed)
- Some brain training techniques, such as CogMed (for memory, primarily)
- Perhaps estrogen replacement therapy for post-menopausal women

I want you look at this list – it turns out that you can do almost ALL of these things simultaneously. How many are you doing? If not many of them, then you have just discovered ways you might be able to improve your treatment.

## **Leg 2 – Improving Your Behaviors**

With good treatment in Leg 1, most people with ADHD find symptom improvement – they might be more focused, able to think before acting (i.e. less impulsive), and feel less overwhelmed because they are getting adequate sleep. But being able to focus better is not the same thing as applying that focus in a way that helps them. So Leg 2 is all about taking symptom improvements and translating them in meaningful ways into your life. In other words, it's about changing your behaviors.

For many with ADHD, this means putting external structures in place that help them stay more organized, remember more easily, manage their time, and plan better. Some examples might include:

- Using your cell phone to record ideas as you think of them, then putting them into a reminder system such as a calendar each evening so you don't forget
- Putting your alarm clock on the other side of the bedroom so you don't hit "snooze" for an hour and get to work late
- Creating an organizational and filing system for your office so you don't lose your bills (and putting a reminder in your calendar so you don't forget to pay them!)

There are a large number of books that suggest specific tactics for improving how people with ADHD function in their daily lives. Two of my favorites include:

- More Attention, Less Deficit by Ari Tuckman
- ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize your Life by Judith Kolberg and Kathleen Nadeau

If you find you are still struggling with feeling overwhelmed by the everyday activities of life, chances are good that there are ADHD-friendly tactics out there that can help you, thus providing another way to improve your treatment. Chances are you'll have the best luck with the tactics in Leg 2 if you are already including a wide variety of Leg 1 treatments in your regimen because Leg 1 treatments allow you to focus more consistently on implementing Leg 2 treatments.

### **Leg 3 – Improving Your Interactions with Others**

I work to help couples improve their relationships, so I have a bias, but to me you don't improve your symptoms just to be more organized, even though that's nice! You manage ADHD symptoms so that you can choose to spend happy time with those people (and projects) you care most about. So the third leg of the stool is about learning ADHD-friendly ways to interact with those around you that are healthy and productive so you (and those you love) can be happy. In this leg, treatment includes you and the others with whom you interact.

This is the leg that many with ADHD miss completely because traditional treatment plans typically focus just on the person with ADHD. However, learning how you and those you care about can interact better can make a huge difference in your life! There is much upside for optimizing your treatment

here...but understand, too, that your ability to do so depends heavily upon your success with legs 1 and 2 because some of the problems you are having interacting are directly related to how much focus you have, and your ability to be consistent and follow through on what you intend.

Treatments in Leg 3 include:

- Ways to communicate more clearly with partners of all types
- Balancing out the “power” and “status” in your primary partner relationship (i.e. making sure you are an equal to your partner and not in a parent/child dynamic)
- Ways to stop conversations that are escalating into an argument
- Coordinating better around everyday tasks in ways that relieve anxiety and stress
- Learning how to validate and support others, and be validated by your partner
- And, ultimately, clarifying your dreams and priorities and bringing your life into line with them

Let me give you some examples so you can see that though this leg might sound “heady” or nebulous, it’s actually pretty practical. Here are some tactics in Leg 3:

- Setting a verbal cue that either you or your partner use when you start to feel yourselves moving into an argument. The cue gives you permission to take a time out, and to come back to the topic when you can constructively discuss the issue.
- Learning how to give a really good apology and acknowledge your partner’s point of view
- Using Leg 2 improvements to create a “new norm” in the relationship – one in which a non-ADHD partner knows he or she can depend upon the ADHD partner to complete what was promised – then celebrating that norm
- Instituting a once a week coordination meeting in which both partners talk about what they are doing that week, which helps you stay coordinated and helps couples move away from patterns in which one spouse “dictates” to another what they must do, and when
- Creating specific times of the day to review homework with children when you aren’t too tired, lessening the chances you’ll lose your patience with them (or they with you!)

There are many more of these tactics, and a good place to find them is in my book, *The ADHD Effect on Marriage*, or my couples seminar (which you can find at my website [www.adhdmarrriage.com](http://www.adhdmarrriage.com)). If you haven’t been thinking about your interactions as part of your treatment, then Leg 3 is another place where you can optimize your results.

## **Make a List**

You can make a simple 3-column chart to help you understand how to improve your treatment. Put one leg per column, and then write in each column what you are doing in each leg. If you aren't aware of many tactics in Legs 2 and 3, do some research in the book I've recommended. Over time, the more activities you do that are ADHD-friendly and targeted to allaying your symptoms, the better you will do. Start in Leg 1, take one item at a time, make a plan for how to improve your skills against that item, then implement your plan.

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