



The only Canadian charity focusing solely on ADHD,
providing leadership in education, awareness and
advocacy to improve the lives of families and
individuals with ADHD across Canada



Understanding and Successfully Navigating an ADHD Relationship When You Don't Have ADHD

Heidi Bernhardt RN
**CADDAC Founder & Director of Education and
Government Relations**



Disclaimer

Married for 46 years
to spouse with ADHD
and still learning



Steps to Improving Your Relationship

1. Understanding ADHD
2. Understanding the Dynamics of an ADHD Relationship
3. How to begin to Improve Your Relationship
4. Tackling Road Blocks
5. Applying Strategies



STEP ONE

Understanding ADHD Symptoms and Presentations



Learning About ADHD

ADHD can present very differently in different people

- While you learn about ADHD try to remove your emotions and take an academic approach

Try to

- understand your partner's specific ADHD symptoms and
- identify how specific impairments trip them up in their daily functioning

Tips:

- Involvement in filling out diagnostic forms may assist
- Join physician or psychological appointments if possible
- CADDAC webinars, YouTube filmed educational presentations (Barkley and Brown) webinars and web site can help



ADHD Symptoms That Effect a Relationship

ADHD Impairments

- Attention Dysregulation – losing focus – over focusing – tuning out – inability to switch or prioritize focus – easily bored
- Distraction – external and internal – causes poor follow-through on responsibilities
- Hyperactivity – Restless body and mind
- Impulsivity in speech, actions, spending – missinterpreted as being uncaring and irresponsible
- Executive functioning
 - Lack of organizational skills – house hold duties, paying bills, losing things, messiness, hoarding
 - Inability to follow instructions – difficulty sequencing and remembering lists
 - Forgetful of routines, appointments, promises – interpreted as unreliable
 - Following rules – inconsistency in parenting
 - Time management – always late, missed deadlines, lack of schedule
 - Social skills – difficulty picking up subtle signals



Emotional Dysregulation

- Emotional dysregulation is a core symptom of ADHD – self-regulation impairment – but adults often unaware
- Adults with ADHD can become easily frustrated and are unable to deal with frustration in appropriate or constructive ways
- They can be easy to anger and can become unintentionally aggressive – loud voice, looming presence, overly persistent
- They may be totally unaware that they are speaking loudly or being scary
- Meltdowns can occur
- Having to walk on eggshells can be emotionally and physically exhausting for the N-A partner
- This can be the most destructive thing to a relationship



Self-Medicating with Argument

- The ADHD brain craves stimulation
- Some people with ADHD provoke arguments or drama (usually unconsciously) to increase adrenaline
- Anger, upset, negativity or opposition causes an immediate adrenalin surge which has a stimulating effect on the brain
- Adrenaline helps to provide a feeling of focus and calm
- Because this dysfunctional pattern is rewarding, it gets reinforced over time
- These conflict seeking behaviours can happen anywhere or with anyone – but most often with loved ones
- If those around the ADHD partner try and ignore the behavior and the ADHD partner is not aware of their behaviour the drama may become amplified

Dr. Amen <https://www.additudemag.com/too-much-drama-relationships/>

G Pera <https://adhdrollercoaster.org/adhd-and-relationships/arguments-conflict-as-self-medication/>



Worry /Anxiety / Perfectionism

Worry/ Anxiety

- 25 to 40% of adults with ADHD have anxiety
- Worry is targeted, anxiety is more generalized
- The ADHD brain seeks focus
- Worry and Anxiety provides a riveting focus for the brain like pain (Hallowell)
- Calmness or a “good day” does not offer a place to focus the brain, but you can worry about something all day

Perfectionism

- Some get stuck on details when trying to obtain their view of the perfect finished product (perfectionism)
- Or they may become stuck when thinking about how to do things over and over and become paralyzed
- Emotional regulation impairment makes this worse

Dr. Hallowell <https://www.additudemag.com/signs-of-anxiety-in-adults-with-adhd/>

B. Main <https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-and-obsessive-thoughts-too-clingy-insecure/>



Step Two

Understanding the Dynamics of an ADHD Relationship



Are ADHD Symptoms Destructive?

“ADHD symptoms alone aren’t destructive to a relationship; a partner’s response to the symptoms, and the reaction that it evokes, is.” Melissa Orloff

- The interpretation of the what has occurred – by both parties
- The communication patterns that occur afterward

Cycle Develops When ADHD is not Understood

- Non-ADHD partner
 - Blame, frustration, anger, withdrawal
- ADHD Partner
 - Downplaying severity, excuses, denial, withdrawal



The 3 Stages of ADHD Relationship

1. New Relationship

- The novel new relationship results in hyper focus during courtship making the new partner feel very special

2. Relationship Evolves and Cycle Develops

- Hyper-focus stops – causes feeling of confusion and hurt
- Impairments become evident and are misinterpreted as uncaring and unreliable behaviour – parenting begins?
- ADHD partner confused becomes defensive and angry

3. Relationship Breakdown

- When neither changes what they are doing both distance themselves and the relationship breaks down



Feelings of Non-ADHD Partner

- Feelings of being ignored, lonely, unloved, unappreciated
- Cannot rely on or trust their partner
- Feels that their partner just does not care enough
- Not being heard or discounted since areas of concern are downplayed and nothing changes – same issues keep resurfacing
- Feelings of being unfairly saddled with being the responsible one – taking on the load of household and parental duties
- Feelings of resentment and anger
- Increased stress, exhaustion – carrying the entire load
- Feel that they have to walk on eggshells to avoid emotional outbursts – can be exhausting



Feelings of Partner with ADHD

- Feels that their partner is constantly trying to micromanage their life, has become a control freak, consistently nagging
- Leads to avoiding partner or saying what they want to hear
- Probably more hypersensitive to criticism due to the excess of criticism in earlier years
- Feels continually and unfairly judged and misunderstood
- May become resentful and deaf to criticism
- They feel overwhelmed – anticipate failure – incapable of meeting partner's expectations so stop trying
- Feel shame, less than partner, unloved and unwanted
- But longs to be accepted and appreciated



Step Three

How to Begin to Improve Your Relationship



Requirements

1. Assessment for ADHD and all other potential co-existing disorders – 80%
2. Implement treatments including psychosocial
3. Education about ADHD in general and how it impacts this person specifically
4. Both partners must be committed to change
5. The partner with ADHD must work on improving functioning and take responsibility for their treatment
6. The non-ADHD partner is responsible for correcting their misconceptions and changing their own behaviour



First Steps to Improving the Relationship

1. Accept that ADHD does impact your relationship
2. Don't wait until things are irreparable
3. ADHD is a medical disorder with impairments – change the lens of how you view actions and issues
4. ADHD symptoms and impairments are not an intentional act – forgive and forget past transgressions – just trying harder will not work!
5. Stop the blame game – who is right is not as important as getting along – use the team approach
6. Nagging and shaming does not work
7. Continual criticism is just demoralizing



ADHD Treatment

Medication:

May assist with attention, forgetfulness, hyperactivity and impulsivity and emotional regulation however,

- This is not a substitute for ADHD education
- Additional strategies must be put in place

Therapies that can also be helpful:

- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) – challenges negative thought process
- ADHD Coaching for organization and strategies
- Anger management and marriage therapy by ADHD expert

Lifestyle changes:

- Better diet, sleep habits and more aerobic exercise can be helpful



Step Four

Tackling Road Blocks



Your past Emotional Rollercoaster Ride

- You may need to introduce some self-care before you can start working on the relationship
- You have probably felt confused and questioned your sanity at times
- You have most likely been under huge amounts of stress
- You are exhausted from carrying the load
- You have spend a great deal of time arguing and being angry
- You have questioned if things will ever change
- You have been on an emotional Rollercoaster Ride — fluctuating between frustration, anger, self blame, doubt, hopelessness, and hope



What to do if Your Partner is in Denial?

- Accept that you can't force them out of their denial
- Those with ADHD have very poor awareness, are over sensitive to what they perceive as criticism, and can be argumentative
- If they deny the label and they perceive it as criticism start with tackling the problems first
- Choose an issue and ask if you can start to use a strategy or tool to help solve that particular issue – don't introduce it as an ADHD strategy – a professional may be required
- Start on changing yourself first and how you react – it always takes two to develop a dysfunctional relationship
- If your partner's reasoning is that you are a control freak and causing all the issues relinquish your control – some hard lessons may result, but watch and be prepared to step in
- Sometimes setting up an urgent situation may be required story of depression



Step Five

Applying Strategies



General Strategies

- DO NOT take ADHD symptoms personally!
- You cannot control your spouse, but you can change the dynamics of the relationship by stopping, verbal attacks, blame, nagging, excuses, ignoring the situation
- Positive feedback as encouragement when there is even a bit of progress
- Make time for doing enjoyable things together
- Remember the “fun” ADHD traits that you fell in love with
- Rule: there can only be one “crazy” person at a time
- Analyze the things you frequently fight about and find solutions to the problem rather than assigning blame
- Decide how to deal with embarrassing social situations and missing social cues as a team



More General Tips

- Be supportive without taking over – do not parent
- Recognize your partner's limitations but do not take on all tasks – you will just end up being resentful – swap tasks
- Strive for an equal balance of labour, but be sensitive to assign tasks to people's strengths
- You may wish to take on time sensitive duties
- Be open to your partner's unorthodox approaches if they work – your way will most likely not work for them
- Put issues into perspective – which are the most important and what can be put on hold for a while
- Tell your partner how they can take care of you – breakfast story



Communication Strategies

- Not being heard is the most common complaint in these relationships – once the person feels heard their stress level decreases
- Each person needs to increase their own listening skills
- Ask for repetition if your mind wanders – both parties
- Make time to sit down to talk face to face
- Some find e-mail or texts helpful to communicate when issues are charged but care needs to be taken so messages are not misinterpreted
- Reiterate what you heard your partner say to check your understanding – movie story



Communication Strategies for You

- Your ADHD partner may need to ask questions to help them stay focused or jot things down to hold an idea for later – don't take this personally
- Use eye contact to make sure your partner is engaged
- Try and use more direct and shorter sentences
- Listen openly without judgment – helps to walk in their shoes
- Allow for breaks if they are tiring and unable to stay focused
- Don't make assumptions as to your partner's motivation
- Be aware of not just what you say but also how you say it – tone matters



Organizational Tips

- Identify both of your areas of strength and weakness
- Use individual and joint organizational methods – family laminated calendar on the fridge
- Remember that one partner's organization strategies may feel very strange and not work for the other partner
- Designate specific areas for things that get lost frequently – keys, electronic devices, papers
- Develop routines and schedules – use visual reminders
- Decrease clutter – may need to use a professional
- Use organizational tools for bills, papers etc.
- Weekly family meeting to organize upcoming week's events and responsibilities



Fighting About Chores

- Address workload imbalances
- Divide chores along strengths
- Trade and/or divide chores – partners must feel the balance is equal
- Agree on a mutually acceptable way to use reminders – lists, post-its, verbal reminders (use humour) – wife versus coach
- Some tasks may need to be split with one person being the closer
- If neither partner is good with a specific task find ways to outsource them – bookkeeping, cleaning, yard work
- Some tasks can now be automated – grocery shopping
- If one partner has had a heavier load due to unforeseen circumstances find ways to show your appreciation



Parenting

- The untreated adults with ADHD will find it impossible to parent patiently and consistently – they need to get diagnosed and treated
- Parent as a team – do not allow kids to divide and conquer
- Arguing over parenting can be hugely detrimental to your relationship and parent/child relationships
- Adults with ADHD who take responsibility for their treatment and use strategies make great role models for their children with ADHD – who could relate better
- Divide parenting chores by strengths
- Remember to divide the fun duties and the onerous ones equally – no one wants to be the “bad guy” all the time



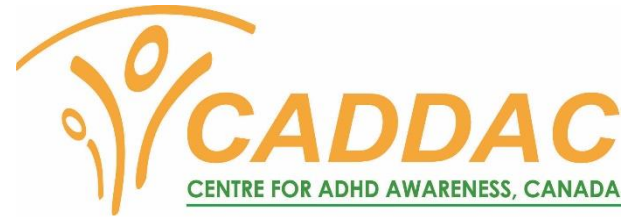
Emotional Outburst Strategies

- Medication can help significantly with emotional dysregulation
- An honest open discussion is required
- Both partners need to become aware of the other partner's triggers and signals
- You should not expect subtle cues to be picked up by your partner
- Call for time outs – code word that stops interaction immediately – use cool down periods
- Professional help may be required



References

- Orlofv M, 9 ways ADHD Ruins marriages, <https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-divorce-rate-marriage-help/>
- 9 Ways ADHD Affects Relationships *Excerpted from [The ADHD Effect on Marriage](#), by Melissa Orlov. Copyright 2010. Reprinted by permission of Specialty Press, Plantation, Florida. All rights reserved.*
- [Jonathan Halverstadt](#) *10 Ways to Save Your Relationship*, <https://www.additudemag.com/save-your-adhd-relationship-marriage/>
- Attitude Editors, What is the Key to Good Relationship Between ADHD and Non-ADHD Partners, <https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-relationships-partners-reader-advice-healthy-marriage-help/>
- HelpGuide.org, Adult ADHD and Relationships, <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/add-adhd/adult-adhd-attention-deficit-disorder-and-relationships.htm>
- Larry Maucieri Ph.D., ABPP-CN, ADHD and Relationships, The Other partner, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-distracted-couple/201407/adhd-and-relationships-the-other-partner>



Resource

www.caddac.ca

Thank you for Listening
Questions?

© CADDAC 2020

