



Your Keys to a Happier

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IN UNHAPPY RELATIONSHIPS, both partners blame the other person for why things are so bad. And they're half right—their partner is indeed responsible for the problems, but so are they. This is actually good news—if you aren't part of the problem, you can't be part of the solution. Otherwise, you need to hope that your partner finally gets it and makes all the necessary changes. As good as it might feel to see ourselves as blameless, it's much better to focus on the ways that we can make the relationship better.

Undiagnosed, untreated, or undertreated ADHD in one partner can make both partners feel powerless. Neither partner is happy, but they both feel stuck.

The partner who doesn't have ADHD feels overburdened, like they carry an unfair share of responsibilities. If the guy in a heterosexual couple is the one with ADHD, it can exacerbate the common workload imbalance between husbands and wives. The partner without ADHD

feels like they need to be the boss who does all the directing and coordinating (and a lot of the doing).

Meanwhile, the partner with ADHD feels like it doesn't matter what they do because it will never be enough, at the right time, or in the right way. As much as they feel unfairly criticized, they may also recognize that there is some guilty truth to the accusations. Complaints from their partner are met with heartfelt promises that set up a bigger disappointment later when (*again!*) the follow-through falls through. Both partners feel angry and resentful toward their partner, their situation, and probably themselves, too.

This shift from a relationship of equals to one of boss and employee (or parent and child) makes sense as a way to manage the demands of adult life, but it sucks the joy out of the relationship. This depleted goodwill then makes it even harder to weather the normal bumps and bruises of daily life. Collaboration gives way to power plays. Surely there has to be a better way, doesn't there?



ADHD Relationship

There's me, you, and us

When we're unhappy with our partner, it's easy to see their bad behavior as inherent to who they are—and therefore always will be. Of course, we all tend to cut ourselves more slack and justify our bad behavior based on the bad situation. But nothing in a relationship happens in a vacuum. Whatever happens today is colored by everything that came before it.

We know what to expect from our partner so we take that into account when deciding what to do. For example, if you “know” that your partner will blow up about something, you may choose to quickly go on the offense to protect yourself. While this ability to predict someone else's actions is usually helpful, it can also get us into trouble when we make self-fulfilling prophecies—if you jump quickly to anger because you expect your partner to get angry, you will probably be right.

Just like your partner can bring out the worst in you, it's worth remembering that you also bring out the worst in

them. Don't blame yourself and don't blame them; blame the relationship dynamic. You're both doing the best you can in a bad situation where neither of you has figured out a better way. Even when you feel like you're on totally different teams, you are probably on the same team of wanting a better way. To get there, you need to break those patterns where you each hook into the other's less effective problem-solving skills.

Get serious about treatment

ADHD often makes itself the obvious scapegoat when a couple is struggling. So take away some of those easy landmines (or targets) by really getting on top of it. This means both partners educate themselves about how ADHD affects individuals and relationships and therefore how to work better together.

Don't waste your time figuring everything out the hard way when other smart people have done the work for you. If you're taking medication or seeing a therapist or

coach but things aren't getting better, then maybe you need to see someone else. And if one or both of you isn't actively working at managing ADHD, then maybe you need to ask yourself how much improvement you can reasonably expect. Equally, if one or both of you is struggling with anxiety, depression, sleep problems or anything else, that deserves some good effort, too.

Insufficiently managed ADHD cranks up the stress on the relationship and asks too much from both partners to manage that stress effectively. Reducing the frequency and intensity of those ADHD moments makes it easier for both partners to bring their better self to the relationship. It isn't the solution to all of life's problems, but it definitely helps. It takes you out of the red zone so you actually have a fighting chance of getting along well and enjoying each other. Sure, all the other challenges of life and relationships still exist, but at least you're not starting in hole when you addressing those.

Working with or working for?

It's often the partner without ADHD who has more of the various demands on their mental radar—sign up the kids for summer camps, take out the trash tonight, get the car inspected, etc. They are better at remembering all those moving parts and they tend to activate earlier, whereas folks with ADHD tend to be more driven by the deadline.

This difference in task awareness and timing of motivation drives a lot of the stress in these couples. The partner who doesn't have ADHD feels like they have to be responsible for “everything” because when they feel the pressure to act, their partner isn't there yet, so they feel alone in the responsibility. Meanwhile, the partner with ADHD is “always” being told what to do before they have had a chance to think of it themselves. Admittedly, they sometimes totally space out on something, but there are also times when they would have gotten around to it if their partner hadn't gotten there first.

Awareness and activation differences can create a situation where the partner who doesn't have ADHD is the boss giving orders. It makes sense to some degree, but neither partner actually likes it—one resents the burden and the other feels infantilized. The non-ADHD partner's resentment leaks out as criticism and even insults, which evoke oppositionality, passive aggressiveness, or lying from the partner with ADHD. Although neither partner feels good about their behavior, it's easy to feel justified based on the other person's bad behavior. This is what I call *working for*, whereas most of us aspire to a relationship of *working with* our partner.

To get to *working with*, the partners need to approach these situations as equals. Sure, the partner without ADHD may be better at remembering what needs to be done, but the partner with ADHD needs to be an equal negotiator. This means that they have an equal vote on what gets done, when, and how. Employees don't get equal votes, which is why they *work for* the boss. Kids also don't get equal votes.

The partner with ADHD should have the ability to agree to make a genuine choice about what will be done, when, or how—and also what they aren't interested in being a part of. Of course, sometimes you need to take one for the team and do something that you don't care about or even understand the point of. The key is that it is a free-will decision, rather than a mandate. We all have to do things that we don't want to do, but it's important to feel you had some say in it. Being a good spouse involves consideration and generosity and giving as much as you get.

Sometimes giving is telling your partner up front that you don't want to do something, rather than making an overoptimistic but ill-fated promise. If you just don't want to do the task, then say so. If you think that you might forget or run out of time, then hedge your bets by making it clear that the task may not happen. As unhappy as your partner will be in that moment, they will be twice as unhappy later because you didn't do the task and also you let them down, or even lied to them.

Forgetting to make the bed is an ADHD thing; not caring about made beds is not. Given this, it's important for the partner who doesn't have ADHD to take the time to get clear on what is most important to them—and therefore what is less.





It's important to make a point of investing some energy into having fun as a couple, in big and small ways. Sometimes this actually means putting some work into finding fun things to do together and pushing yourself to bring a good attitude and be open to the experience of enjoying each other.

Declining your partner's request may be uncomfortable and they may react badly to it. This is the crucial moment, where you need to keep your head on and resist the urge to respond in kind. Remind yourself of the better partner that you aspire to be and all the benefits of a better relationship. Acknowledge your partner's disappointment, but also explain that you don't want to make promises that you won't keep. Perhaps give them a chance to make their case for why the requested task is worthwhile, but you still get to vote on whether you want to do it.

It's easy for the partner who does not have ADHD to fall into a situation where, because they are the one who usually thinks about what needs to be done, they become the one who decides what gets done. This is the secret little benefit of all that additional stress—things get done their way, sort of. If we want all the benefits of living with someone else, we need to accept the price of not always getting our way. The partner with ADHD may sometimes fall short of their partner's expectations, but they may also have different preferences.

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You may also need to accept that if you want things done on your timeline, you may need to be more of the coordinator and reminder. Just remember to be respectful in your requests and give your partner room to say no or offer an alternative. If it's really important to you, then ask for a "gimme"—as in, "honey, just gimme this one, please." If your partner makes a promise that just seems too good to be true, then resist the urge to believe them and instead jump straight to a plan B that is actually more likely to work out. If something is your partner's job and they miss the mark, then let them fix it, without angrily bailing them out. You will both be better off for it.

Make fun a priority

Hey, remember when you used to have fun? Busy couples can fall into a rut where too much energy is spent on keeping their lives afloat and the little that is left is spent on solitary pursuits because they are less emotionally complicated.

It's important to make a point of investing some energy into having fun as a couple, in big and small ways. Sometimes this actually means putting some work into finding fun things to do together and pushing yourself to bring a good attitude and be open to the experience of enjoying each other. This also means resisting the temptation to talk business—make other times for those discussions. Having fun together will give you both a longer fuse when the inevitable annoyances crop up.

In order to have fun together, you need to manage all those adult responsibilities well. But in order to be a good team on the responsible stuff, you need to enjoy each other. Happy romantic partners do a good job as both coworkers and friends. Sure, your partner needs to do their part, but what can you do to be a better teammate? 🗣️



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