

Couples Living



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Manage Intense
Emotions and Build
Deeper Connections
.....

with
ADHD

WHETHER YOU HAVE ADHD OR YOUR PARTNER DOES, there's one thing for certain: the tasks of living—whether fun or tedious—can often seem overwhelming and unmanageable. Executive functioning skill challenges, anxiety, or depression will add to the complexity of any relationship. Sometimes these challenges are met with humor, empathy, and compassion. Other times, they produce resentment, frustration, and blame. How can you and your partner live with ADHD more successfully by arguing less while nurturing positive connections?

Every couple struggles with those moments when a switch has flipped and suddenly there's a bubbling volcano of angry, negative emotions inside of both of you waiting to erupt. Before you know what's happening, you each say or do things that you'll surely regret later, but you can't stop. In a relationship where one or both partners have ADHD, these escalations (amygdala takeovers) can happen extremely quickly due to challenges with emotional regulation, verbal impulse control, metacognition, and weaker working memory.

One minute you're okay, and the next it's as if a match has been thrown on a pile of old painting rags and putrid fumes are polluting the health of your couple. Significant emotional damage can ensue for both parties, transforming tender love into toxic rage.

What fuels disagreements?

One of the biggest issues that fuels disagreements is fairness. Partners with and without ADHD can overfocus on being right and then shift into justification, self-righteousness, or derision. But living successfully in a relationship means forgetting about fairness. Focusing on equality leads a couple down a rocky path. It may seem that one person does more of the heavy lifting. Whether or not this is true, we all have roles to play in our partnerships and in our families. You need to learn how to negotiate what these are so that there's flexibility and compromise instead of rigidity and contempt.

Most couples have the same arguments over and over again. Whether it's about money, who's doing or not doing things, or how to parent the kids, people get caught up in (and sweat) the small stuff. When couples struggle like this and anger emerges too often, it's natural to focus on what the other person could do differently or better. Yet, this is a trap: you can't control what anyone else does except yourself. So, learning effective tools for dealing with your own emotional dysregulation is what's called for. And yes, this can be tougher for ADHD brains.



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When the amygdala becomes activated, the thinking brain (your prefrontal cortex) goes temporarily offline and feelings rule the day. In neurotypical brains, executive functioning skills help the amygdala calm down by engaging language to name the feelings instead of experiencing them, by accessing the capacity to step back and assess the situation, and by using rational thinking to find alternative solutions. In ADHD brains, your executive functioning skills, already working so hard to accomplish and maintain daily life tasks, struggle with the extra burden of effectively dealing with a rush of strong emotions. You'll tend to react quickly with volatility instead of responding with consideration.

So, what happens in healthy relationships?

Healthy relationships are all about give and take, effective communication, and acceptance of the other person's strengths and limitations. In partnerships, people have different skill sets: One person may be the organizer and the motivator, the other may be better at following lists, coming up with fun ideas, or recalling specific memories from five years ago.

Instead of concentrating on fairness, shift your attention to what will help nurture your relationship, foster closeness, and be useful in getting things done. How do you and your partner divide tasks? What skills do you and your partner each have? If the division of labor seems imbalanced, how are you addressing that? Do you make joint lists and assign the tasks so one person isn't doing it all? Zoom out and think about the big picture.

For example, after lots of negotiations—and even though this seems conventionally gendered—my husband and I have arrived at this breakdown of tasks. I'm better at social planning, cooking, dealing with medical issues, planning vacations, organizing family gatherings, and remembering holidays and birthdays. My husband takes care of the garden, goes to the dump, and manages structural house problems. Together we take turns with the laundry, grocery shopping, and walking the dog.

When you make collaborative agreements with accountability plans and lean into each other's strengths, you can create practical and reliable routines for living and being with each other. Break down tasks into manageable parts or delegate chores based on interest and capability. Let go of fairness being your goal and aim for effectiveness and equanimity.

Instead of reacting and falling prey to an amygdala takeover, consider responding in a non-automatic way. What would this look like when you are triggered? Rather than blaming your partner, focus on soothing and centering yourself. In my experience, telling somebody to "calm down" usually results in them speeding up and getting defensive. Then, anger, unkind words, and intense emotions emerge and you are both ugly versions of your ten-year-old selves. In these moments, the four horsemen of the apocalypse, aptly named by psychologists John and Julie Gottman as

problematic patterns in couples, appear on the scene. They wreak significant damage in the form of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. It's difficult for couples to recover from these incidents.

Create a collaborative plan of action

Rebalancing is what's called for and preparation will help you make that happen. This means creating a couples' coping strategy *in advance* so you can rely on it in difficult moments. Identify what will assist each of you from steering into a tailspin. Examine your respective patterns when you have big feelings and work *together* to create a collaborative plan of action.

My "Take a few STEPS Back" method will help you with this process. Here's how the STEPS method works:

Self-control. When the intensity in a conversation rises, pay attention to your body's signals that you are becoming activated. Maybe your heart starts beating faster or you begin perspiring. Perhaps you are speaking louder and getting out of breath. If you can catch your dysregulation early, you can avoid a massive eruption. Practicing self-awareness and paying attention to your body sensations when you are not activated will help you notice what is happening and give you important information about slowing things down when you are. Try saying, "*I'm feeling agitated and I'm getting upset. I need things to slow down*" instead of "*Why won't you leave me alone? I just want you to stop talking to me.*"

Time apart. Instead of pretending that your conflicts won't re-occur or being so relieved that they are over you want to forget them, be honest with each other and acknowledge that, yes, you will probably disagree again in the future. So, plan for those tricky moments and set up a time-apart structure. Decide, in advance, the amount of time you will each need to restabilize, how you are going to call for a break in the action, what each of you will do, and where and when you will come back together.

Evaluate. During your time apart, reflect on what just occurred. Think about what you really want at this moment, in this conversation, or regarding this issue. If you're feeling angry and need to vent, grab a pen or your computer and start writing, planning to throw it out later. Create a voice memo if that's useful. Perhaps draw something, go for a run, or break out the yoga mat. Then, ask yourself what you could have done or said differently and how you could express your thoughts and desires in a more effective way. Consider what you can be accountable for. We are looking for *evenness* here—getting back to baseline.

Practice reflective listening. Reflective listening is a key tool to improving respectful communication in couples. In order to use it effectively during a disagreement, it's best to practice this technique a few times a week. This will not only improve your ability to do it



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during or after an argument but also increase your connection to your partner in the midst of your busy lives. Initially, set the timer for ten minutes and build up to twenty. Each person gets half of that time. One person is the speaker, and the other is the listener. The speaker starts to talk about what's on their mind and pauses after a sentence or two or the listener can use a hand signal when their memory capacity is full. Then the listener says: "What I heard you say is X. Did I get that right? Is there anything else?" This back-and-forth sharing continues until the timer rings. Then you switch roles. When you are practicing this tool, feel free to talk about anything: work, friends, kids, emotions. When you are using this tool for an argument, talk about how you feel using "I" statements rather than blaming ones.

Strategize. Once you've shared how you feel with each other and you both feel heard, it's time to strategize the next right action. Where do you go from here? What's something you can both do to move forward? Collaborate on this but know that it's okay if you need different things. This is a judgment-free zone. The goal is to proceed with clear minds and open hearts.

MANY COUPLES LIVING WITH ADHD are so busy dealing with the pressures and responsibilities of daily life that they've lost track of what drew them together in the first place. Nurturing your positive connection is essential for growing your love. Find some time to remember what you like about one another. Take turns choosing an activity and mix things up by trying something

new. Instead of going out to dinner again, try a day hike, be a tourist in your own town, or visit a new museum. Develop a shared interest such as yoga, cards, salsa dancing, or baking bread. Make time for intimacy.

If you are not connecting positively, you will come together negatively. Anger and hostility also reflect a deep connection, just not a productive or pleasant one. If you are struggling with each other more than getting along, I encourage you to seek counseling for more support. **A**



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With decades of experience as a clinical psychologist and educator/clinician consultant, she guides families and adults toward effective communication, closer connections and greater understanding. She lectures and facilitates workshops internationally on topics such as ADHD and neurodivergence, executive functioning, the anxiety spectrum, motivation, perfectionism and working with different kinds of learners. She contributes regularly to ADDitudemag.com, blogs for PsychologyToday.com, is a featured expert on MASS Appeal on WWLP-TV, and is a part-time lecturer at the Smith School for Social Work. Her writing has been featured in numerous publications, including *MSN*, *The Psychotherapy Networker*, *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, *Attention* magazine, *PsychCentral*, and *Inquirer.com*. Learn more at drsharonsaline.com.