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## When ADHD Adult Symptoms Get in the Way: Relationship Problems and Solutions

ADHD marriage expert Melissa Orlov explains the 9 ways symptoms can cause marriage or dating issues -- and offers advice on how couples can cope with adult ADD symptoms and treatments.

by *Melissa Orlov*

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Relationships in which one or both partners have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) range from successful to disastrous. Partnerships affected -- or should I say, distorted -- by ADD/ADHD symptoms can bring "the worst of times." Pain and anger abound. You can barely talk to each other about problems affecting the relationship. When you do, you rarely agree. You're frustrated that you've gotten to this point, and you're disappointed that you haven't made things better.

If your partner has ADD/ADHD, you may feel ignored and lonely. Your partner can focus on things that interest him, but not on you. He never seems to follow through on what he agrees to do. He may seem to act like a child instead of an adult. You nag him, and you've started to dislike the person you've become. The two of you either fight or clam up. Worst of all, you are stressed about being saddled with the household responsibilities while your partner gets to have all the fun.

If you have ADD/ADHD, you may feel your partner has become a nagging monster. The person you loved has become a control freak, trying to manage the details of your life. No matter how hard you try, you can't meet your partner's expectations. The easiest way to deal with her is to leave her alone.

If these descriptions sound familiar, your relationship suffers from what I call the ADD/ADHD effect. ADD/ADHD symptoms -- and the responses both of you have to them -- have damaged your partnership. The good news is that understanding the role that ADD/ADHD plays in your relationship can turn it around. When you learn to identify the challenges ADD/ADHD brings to relationships, and the steps you can take to meet them, you can rebuild your lives. That's exactly what my partner and I did.

**Next:** [Signs Undiagnosed ADD/ADHD Is Causing Relationship Problems](#)

Learning to Treat and Cope With ADD/ADHD to Avoid Relationship Problems

9 Ways ADD/ADHD Causes Relationships Problems...And How Each Partner Can Work to Resolve Them

From sparkling personalities to unique perspectives, there's plenty to love about ADD. Download your free digital copy of 25 Things to Love About ADD for a (partial) list. Plus, get updates on ADHD treatments delivered straight to your inbox.

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**Signs Undiagnosed ADD/ADHD Is Causing Relationship Problems**

We didn't know that my partner had ADD/ADHD. I had fallen in love with his brilliance, sharp wit, and his appetite for adventure. His intense focus on me was surprising and flattering. He was warm and attentive. When I got sick on our first date, he tucked me under a blanket on the sofa and made me hot tea. I was touched.

Not long after we got married, our relationship began to fall apart. I couldn't understand how someone who had been so attentive could ignore my needs, or be so "consistently inconsistent" helping out around the house. He was equally confused and annoyed. How could the woman he had married, who had seemed so endearing and optimistic, change into a fire-breathing dragon who wouldn't give him a break and wouldn't leave him alone?

By our tenth anniversary, we had considered divorce. We were angry, frustrated, disconnected, and unhappy. I was clinically depressed. We stayed glued together only by our desire to raise our children well and by a feeling, deep inside, that we ought to be able to do better. Around that time, our daughter, who was nine, was diagnosed as having a learning disability and ADD/ADHD. In time, my husband was also diagnosed with ADD/ADHD.

Habitually disorganized? Always running late? Sure, it might be stress--or it might be adult ADHD. Download Is It Adult ADHD? for an indication. Plus, get more news and tips for ADHD adults delivered straight to your inbox.

**Learning to Treat and Cope With ADD/ADHD to Avoid Relationship Problems**

Discovering that one or both partners have ADD/ADHD is just the beginning. Medication is an efficient way to jump-start treatment, but behavioral changes need to be made. What you do once you've started treatment is crucial to your relationship.

If inability to follow through on tasks makes you unreliable in your partner's eyes, use a smartphone reminder system or another organizational plan to get the task done. Coaching and cognitive behavioral therapy can also help.



Understand that such changes must be voluntary. No matter how much a non-ADHD partner may want to, she can't force her significant other to get organized or become more attentive. Both partners must change. Often, an ADD/ADHD partner sets up a system that works well for him yet seems inefficient or strange to his non-ADHD partner. Her criticism or suggestions about how to do it better demoralize him. My husband and I learned this the hard way, mostly at his expense, as I kept trying to force him to do things differently. The harder I pushed, the more he resisted, and the worse our relationship became. Sound familiar?

Rediscovering romance and joy in your relationship again after years of hurt is a journey. Each partner works at reframing the challenges that ADD/ADHD introduces into his or her life. They work on systems and treatments for managing ADD/ADHD symptoms. And, one day, each finds that the good things about their partner are what he notices most.

The rewards are worth it. My husband and I moved from dysfunctional to happy. We thrive in our careers, and our relationship is stronger now than before. My husband's ADD/ADHD symptoms are under control, and I understand and appreciate the effort that it takes. We recognize and accept -- and laugh about -- each other's faults, and rejoice in each other's strengths.

You can do this, too. You can move past unhappiness and create something better, if you recognize how ADD/ADHD affects your relationship and make adjustments in your attitude and behaviors.

Having trouble staying focused? Download your free digital download of 6 Ways to Stay Focused with Adult ADHD, and get expert strategies to help you pay attention, even during the dullest of activities. Plus, receive more e-mail tips for ADHD adults.

## **9 Ways ADD/ADHD Affects Relationships**

Many ADD/ADHD relationships are affected by similar patterns, especially when the disorder is undermanaged. When you recognize these patterns, you can change them.

### *Areas for the ADD/ADHD Partner to Work On*

**1. Hyperfocus Dating.** The biggest shock to ADD/ADHD relationships comes with the transition from courtship to marriage. Typically, a person with ADD/ADHD hyperfocuses on his partner in the early stages of a relationship. He makes her feel she is the center of his world. When the hyperfocus stops, the relationship changes dramatically. The non-ADHD partner takes it personally. My husband stopped hyperfocusing on me the day we got home from our honeymoon. Suddenly, he was gone -- back to work, back to his regular life. I was left behind. After six months of marriage, I wondered if I had married the right man. The non-ADHD partner should remember that inattentiveness is not intentional, and find a way to forgive her partner. Feeling ignored is painful. Address the issue head-on by establishing ways to improve your

connections and intimacy, and allowing yourself to mourn the pain that hyperfocus shock has caused you both.

**2. Walking On Eggshells.** Tantrums, anger, and rude behavior often accompany untreated ADD/ADHD symptoms. One man with ADD/ADHD described it to me as “having to anticipate my partner’s response to every single thing I do. I live my life trying to second-guess her, because I want to please her, but most of the time she’s just mad.” Changing behavior in both partners is critical to turning around a relationship. Don’t assume that anger or frustration in either partner is part of ADD/ADHD. Chances are good that you can get these things under control.

**3. Believing ADD/ADHD Doesn't Matter.** Some ADD/ADHD partners don’t believe that ADD/ADHD is a factor in their relationship. They say, “I don’t need treatment! I like myself just the way I am. You’re the one who doesn’t like me, and has problems with this relationship.” My husband was in denial. The good news for us was that, about a month or so after diagnosis, he decided he didn’t have much to lose by considering treatment. He discovered it made a world of difference.

So here’s my plea to all ADD/ADHD partners who are skeptical: If you don’t believe the disorder affects your relationship, assume that it does, and get an evaluation and effective treatment. It could save your relationship.

What can you do to help people understand ADHD? A lot, actually. Download your free digital copy of Step Up! and learn how to become a crazy-effective ADHD advocate. Plus, get tips about ADHD treatment sent straight to your inbox.

## 9 Ways ADD/ADHD Affects Relationships (Cont.)

### *Areas for the Non-ADD/ADHD Partner to Work On*

**4. Misinterpreting Symptoms.** You and your partner probably misinterpret each other’s motives and actions because you think you understand each other. For example, a partner with undiagnosed ADD/ADHD may be distracted, paying little attention to those he loves. This can be interpreted as “he doesn’t care” rather than “he’s distracted.” The response to the former is to feel hurt. The response to the latter is “to make time for each other.” Getting to know your differences, in the context of ADD/ADHD, can clear up misinterpretations.

**5. Chore Wars.** Having a partner with untreated ADD/ADHD often results in a non-ADHD partner taking on more housework. If workload imbalances aren’t addressed, the non-ADHD partner will feel resentment. Trying harder isn’t the answer. ADD/ADHD partners must try “differently,” if they are going to succeed -- and the non-ADHD partners must accept their partner’s unorthodox approaches. Leaving clean clothes in the dryer, so they can be easily found the next morning, may seem odd, but it may work for the ADD/ADHD partner. Both partners



benefit when the non-ADHD partner admits that his way of doing things doesn't work for his partner.

**6. Impulsive Responses.** ADD/ADHD symptoms alone aren't destructive to a relationship; a partner's response to the symptoms, and the reaction that it evokes, is. You can respond to a partner's habit of impulsively blurting out things by feeling disrespected and fighting back. This will cause your ADD/ADHD partner to take up the fight. Or you can respond by changing your conversational patterns to make it easier for the ADD/ADHD partner to participate. Some ways to do this include speaking in shorter sentences and having your partner take notes to "hold" an idea for later. Couples who are aware of this pattern can choose productive responses.

**7. Nag Now, Pay Later.** If you have an ADD/ADHD partner, you probably nag your partner. The best reason not to do it is that it doesn't work. Since the problem is the ADD/ADHD partner's distractibility and untreated symptoms, not his motivation, nagging won't help him get things done. It causes the ADD/ADHD partner to retreat, increasing feelings of loneliness and separation, and reinforces the shame that he feels after years of not meeting people's expectations. Having a partner treat the ADD/ADHD symptoms, and stopping when you find yourself nagging, will break this pattern.

Have you been late to one too many important dates? Download your free digital Better Time Management with Adult ADHD, and learn how to get things done *before* the deadline. Plus, receive more e-mail tips for ADHD adults.

## 9 Ways ADD/ADHD Affects Relationships (Cont.)

### *It Takes the Two of You*

**8. The Blame Game.** The Blame Game sounds like the name of a TV show. "For 40 points: Who didn't take out the garbage this week?" It's not a game at all. The Blame Game is corrosive to a relationship. It is happening when the non-ADHD partner blames the ADD/ADHD partner's unreliability for the relationship problems, and the ADD/ADHD partner blames the non-ADHD partner's anger -- "If she would just calm down, everything would be fine!" Accepting the validity of the other partner's complaints quickly relieves some of the pressure. Differentiating your partner from her behavior allows a couple to attack the problem, not the individual, head-on.

**9. The Parent-Child Dynamic.** The most destructive pattern in an ADD/ADHD relationship is when one partner becomes the responsible "parent" figure and the other the irresponsible "child." This is caused by the inconsistency inherent in untreated ADD/ADHD. Since the ADD/ADHD partner can't be relied upon, the non-ADHD partner takes over, resulting in anger and frustration in both partners. Parenting a partner is never good. You can change this pattern by using ADD/ADHD support strategies, such as reminder systems and treatment. These help the ADD/ADHD partner become more reliable and regain his or her status as "partner."

*Excerpted from The ADHD Effect on Marriage, by Melissa Orlov. Copyright 2010. Reprinted by permission of Specialty Press, Plantation, Florida. All rights reserved.*

### **More Adult ADD/ADHD Relationship Advice**

[Cope With an ADD/ADHD Diagnosis...Together](#)

[The Right Way to Fight: ADD/ADHD Relationship Advice](#)

[Married to ADD/ADHD: Relationship Advice for You and Your Spouse](#)

[How to Build Better Relationships: Advice for ADD/ADHD Adults](#)

[10+ ADD/ADHD Relationship Tools for Lasting Love](#)