

FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

A New Model for Adult



ADHD Couple Therapy

by Arthur L. Robin, PhD, and Gina Pera



Adult ADHD comes as a “good news” diagnosis to many couples. Finally! They have an explanation for their inexplicable challenges. The miscommunications. The confusing conflicts about money, driving, chore sharing. And more.

After diagnosis, they eagerly consider the next step—therapy, more often than not. But what *type* of therapy? And that is precisely where the good-news diagnosis turns down a more complicated path, one frequently fraught with pitfalls. Improving outcomes for these couples is a growing concern.

First, let's briefly consider two couples that represent extremely common issues.



1. Victoria and Mike

Victoria enjoys her new job, working as a nurse in a fast-paced hospital setting. She's never managed to drum up such enthusiasm, however, for tackling mundane tasks at home—grocery shopping, cleaning, laundry, and organizing “stuff.”

Her software-engineer husband of five years, Mike, complains he is constantly over-burdened, a servant more than a husband. Yet, it's not just his wife's disinterest in sharing the domestic load. “It's also her disregard for my needs and welfare,” he says. Such criticisms leave Victoria hurt and angry, so she counters: “You just want to control me.”

They seek marital therapy. The therapist zeroes in on Mike's need to control Victoria and Victoria's passive-aggressiveness, insisting that both problems are deeply rooted in their childhoods. Week after week, the couple grows more hopeless about salvaging their marriage.

Recently, though, Victoria's trusted colleague, based on observations of her work-related challenges keeping up with paperwork, suggested that she look into ADHD. Worried about losing a job she loved, Victoria sought an evaluation; the diagnosis was positive. Now she's read about ADHD's potential impact on relationships and is excited to share this breakthrough in therapy. Their couple therapist, however, is skeptical, and Mike agrees: Victoria needs to stop making excuses for her behavior. She feels like giving up. So does Mike.

2. Andrew and Priscilla

Let's call them the Bickersons. Married for twenty years, Andrew and Priscilla squabble daily—mostly over her nagging and his failure to guide their adolescent sons

through homework each afternoon. (Instead, he yells, “Do your homework!” and dives into a video game.)

Because she performs most household tasks, she feels this is a fair arrangement. After all, Andrew's work-day ends just as the boys get home from school, while Priscilla arrives home later. She views Andrew as self-centered—“another child instead of a parent and partner.” He counters that, “My perfectionist wife *lives* to tear me down.” Priscilla finally issued an ultimatum: “Go into therapy or I'm filing for divorce.” Because he truly loves Priscilla and their boys, he does.

After a few sessions, the therapist refers Andrew for an ADHD evaluation, which confirms the diagnosis. Andrew continues therapy weekly for months, mostly examining his life through the “ADHD lens” and practicing self-forgiveness. He feels fortunate to have found a therapist who understands him.

Priscilla, however, is not impressed: Andrew's costly therapy has changed nothing at home. Andrew suggests a joint session. But that backfired: The therapist largely advised Priscilla to be more supportive of her husband. “I do nothing but pick up the slack at home,” she says. “Where's *my* support?” She never went back, Andrew still can't understand; he'd gotten therapy, just as Priscilla has demanded. The couple separated shortly after.



The bottom line: Both couples set out with the best of intentions, only to be let down by a lack of clinical expertise in meeting their ADHD-specific needs.

Pitfalls with the two current therapy options

Currently, couples in which one or both partners are diagnosed with ADHD commonly face two choices, standard couple therapy or individual therapy.

Standard Couple Therapy:

Pitfall: It overlooks ADHD neurobiology and therefore does not guide couples in implementing lasting ADHD-friendly cooperative strategies—for example, around communication, chore-sharing, co-parenting, and intimacy.

Individual Therapy:

Pitfall: Even when informed by ADHD expertise, it overlooks the needs of the other partner and the relationship itself—especially guiding the couple in ADHD-friendly cooperative strategies.

Obviously, neither approach takes most ADHD-challenged couples to the finish line and, in fact, can exacerbate conflicts, as we saw with the two couples in the examples above.

Needed: A more effective option for couple therapy

Adult ADHD diagnosis rates continue to skyrocket. The demand for effective couple therapy will only increase. For many of these couples, ADHD (in one or both partners) will not be the only challenge, but it is certainly a core challenge that must be acknowledged and addressed. That is why we see the need for the **Adult ADHD-Focused Couple Therapy Model**, as briefly outlined below. Importantly, this flexible approach combines therapeutic interventions proven effective for both individual adult ADHD therapy and general marital therapy.

Here are a few highlights of the model.

1. Educating About ADHD

The therapist slowly explains how the diagnosis is made, using lay terms to describe scientific highlights and pausing frequently to answer questions, and then details the various treatment strategies available to the couple.

2. Clarifying Partners' Perspectives

When ADHD has long gone unrecognized or misunderstood, couples tend to “fill in the blanks” with distorted explanations. Couples now learn to reframe their long-running challenges—and potential solutions—through the “ADHD lens.”

Example: Mike mistakes Victoria's typical ADHD-related challenges around domestic cooperation as her “being lazy.” Victoria misinterprets Mike's criticisms as “controlling.” The therapist works with the couple to identify and correct engrained dysfunctional patterns into more productive interactions.

3. Helping Couples to Monitor Medication

Many prescribing physicians offer only short appointments. Therapists are not pharmacologists, but they can guide the couple to work as a team in getting best results from medication. This includes identifying “treatment targets” (behaviors that likely respond to medication) and monitoring progress over time.

4. Guiding Couples in Creating New, Practical Habits

ADHD-Focused Couple Therapy strongly focuses on the practical; that is, developing cooperative strategies around time management, organization, problem solving, and “getting things done.” The therapist also helps each partner break through each point of resistance in establishing these new habits.

5. Teaching Couples to Communicate Effectively and Empathically

The therapist coaches the couple through a structured, turn-taking dialogue in which both partners can be heard and understood—without criticism or interruption. Couples practice this dialogue, with several variations, between sessions until it becomes second nature.

6. Developing Pragmatic Strategies for Co-Parenting.

Much has been written on parenting children with ADHD, with little-to-no emphasis on helping the parent with ADHD to parent effectively. Yet, these parents often forget rules and routines, and children (with or without ADHD) need parents to be “on the same page.” With the therapist's help, the couple implements ADHD-friendly supports to guide routines and eliminate arguments with—and about—the children.

7. Addressing the Couple's Other Particular Challenges

Challenges not to be overlooked include various ADHD-specific issues around sexual intimacy, financial management, cyberaddictions, and even “denial” of the ADHD diagnosis, along with other issues stemming from other aspects of either partner's personality or the couple's circumstances.

Using the types of approaches described here, many ADHD-challenged couples can improve their relationship satisfaction and regain the intimacy they once enjoyed. They can also learn the skills to continue problem-solving and working together long after therapy ends. 📌

Arthur L. Robin, PhD, and Gina Pera are the coauthors of *Adult ADHD-Focused Couple Therapy: Clinical Interventions* (Routledge, 2016). Visit www.ADHDfocusedcoupletherapy.com for more information about the book, including CE hours for therapists.