



ADHD Between

by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA, and Linda Ruggli, PCC

THERE IS A LOT OF GOOD INFORMATION available on how to improve your relationship if you or your partner has ADHD. Unfortunately, most of that good advice goes silent when you reach the bedroom door. Every couple does better when they have a satisfying sex life, but couples who struggle more outside of bed need that positive energy all the more. Therefore, when one or both partners have ADHD, the protective effects of a good sex life are too important to neglect. Sex isn't just fun; it protects your relationship—and, as we will discuss here, the process of creating a better sex life will strengthen your relationship in many other ways.

ADHD affects sex, too

ADHD doesn't disappear when the two of you get into bed together. Although everyone gets distracted sometimes, even during sex, people with ADHD tend to get distracted more often. It can be difficult to turn off your brain and ignore unrelated thoughts about the day or outside sounds, which makes it hard to give physical and emotional intimacy your full attention. This can impact both your ability to be responsive to your partner and also to focus on your own enjoyment.

At the other end of the spectrum, some partners with ADHD may hyperfocus during sex, which can make for a very intense experience, potentially for both partners. The ADHD partner may have a higher desire for variety and novelty in his or her sexual experiences, which stimulate the release of dopamine. When channeled in ways that a partner enjoys, this can make for a very rewarding sex life. If not, it can lead to disagreements over what is acceptable

sexual behavior within the relationship (for example, pornography, sharing fantasies, extramarital activities, and so forth).

High sensitivity to touch, sound, smell, and light can make the ADHD sexual experience even trickier. The partner who has ADHD may sometimes not be able to tolerate being touched even in a caring, loving manner. Intermittent or changing sensitivities are confusing and frustrating for the partner who does not have ADHD. A stroke or touch that was welcome one night may be irritating or even painful the next, which baffles the couple and interferes with sexual satisfaction. Worse, it may postpone sex until the couple can work through their differences.

Probably the biggest effect that ADHD has on a couple's sex life happens long before the couple even gets into bed. Conflicts from earlier in the day can interfere with feeling sexually generous toward your partner or with the vulnerability involved in making sexual requests. It's an unfortunate irony that the more a couple struggles,



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the less able they are to enjoy the restorative benefits of great sexual experiences.

In addition to the emotional factors, ADHD also creates logistical barriers to sex. Lost efficiencies during the day often translate into getting into bed later, thereby squeezing out the time that most couples have for sex. This is further exacerbated when the two partners have different bedtimes, so they lose built-in opportunities for time together to turn sexual.

Women with ADHD are at the mercy of hormonal swings, which alternately amplify or diminish their ADHD symptoms; low estrogen means high ADHD symptoms. Estrogen virtually disappears just before menses begins, so women still having monthly cycles are likely to feel the effects of the ADHD brain then. Menopausal or post-menopausal women have a double whammy in that both their circulating estrogen levels and their sexual desires are low. Recognizing and understanding female ADHD hormonal influences will smooth conflicts in the bedroom as well as out of it.

Some practical pointers

Despite their best efforts, time management is a stubborn problem for almost all adults with ADHD, so the idea of impromptu sex sounds like a good idea. In practice, it can feel almost impossible to find a spontaneous moment in a couple's busy schedule that is private and appropriate. Therefore, sex appointments are often a good solution. Setting aside scheduled time for physical intimacy brings the relationship front and center in importance. Though they may seem routine or even boring—the nemesis for adults with ADHD—sex appointments have the benefit of pre-planning: special lingerie, candles or other favorites, as well as building anticipation. If the partner with ADHD misses the ap-

pointment, simply reschedule without rancor or blame. ADHD isn't a personal affront and a missed sex appointment doesn't mean your partner doesn't love you or is avoiding sex.

ADHD treatment may include stimulant medications, which serve a dual purpose in your relationship. Stimulants increase focus, which can bring about improved efficiency during the day and more free time at night. Just as some physicians recommend timing ADHD medication to coincide with bedtime to calm the ADHD mind, stimulants can also help the ADHD brain focus on sex, often improving sexual satisfaction for both partners. Your doctor can adjust the dose and/or timing to your unique situation.

When distractions intrude on an otherwise delightful sexual interlude, there are several techniques that have been effective for couples affected by ADHD. One is to take a few minutes alone before jumping into bed with your partner. Sitting quietly and breathing deeply will calm and center your racing ADHD mind and prepare you for the transition to a different energy. The point is to get back into your body before you share it with someone else. If distractions arise during sex, the partner who doesn't have ADHD may insert a gentle and playful reminder of the act in progress. The two of you might decide on a "focus word" that is a verbal signal to both partners to bring attention back to the current activities. A good sense of humor goes a long way toward keeping intimacy on track; anger or resentment does exactly the opposite.

The good news is that getting on top of your or your partner's ADHD will probably have a positive effect on your sex life. Don't buy into the myth that taming the ADHD is enough or that all the work has to come from the partner who has ADHD. After all, couples without ADHD also need to work at creating a good relationship, in and out of bed.

Addressing the ADHD issues is important for a satisfying sex life, but dealing with the relationship issues is equally and perhaps even more important.

Relationships drive personal growth

Intimate, committed relationships bring out the best in us, but also the worst. The people that we are closest to (family and romantic partners) have the biggest impact on us because what they do, say, and feel has a direct effect. They can impact practical matters (spending money, doing chores) as well as our feelings of security within the relationship and even how we feel about ourselves. When the relationship is going well, we feel generous, supportive, and compassionate. The challenge is to maintain our best behavior when things are not going well—like when we are feeling stressed or angry with our romantic partner (which happens more often for couples with ADHD).

It's tempting to let it rip with raw emotions, but we try to behave better than that (with varying degrees of success). Some of our restraint comes from a sense of personal integrity—we like to think of ourselves as someone who treats other people well. But there are practical reasons to treat your partner well: It's messy and expensive for one of you to walk away. The more intertwined you are with someone (mortgage, kids, etc.), the harder it is to leave the relationship. Although there are times we are quite unhappy about being trapped like this, it pushes us to work harder to make things better. This is how relationships drive growth—we find a way to make things work with our partner because the costs for leaving are so high.

This involves going beyond the simple, obvious solutions that don't really work or aren't sustainable, whether this involves ADHD stuff or not. The difference between happy and unhappy couples is that happy couples argue better. They handle disagreements respectfully, resolve disagreements productively, and move on. They're not perfect and not every moment goes as planned, but overall they are able to make the

relationship more important than being right or winning the argument.

Since you can't expect your partner to behave better than you do, sometimes the solutions involve working on your own issues, so you can bring your best self to your relationship. Because a romantic partner's actions, thoughts, and feelings have such a big impact on us, it's hard to ignore bad behavior, so sometimes the solutions involve pushing our partner to work on his or her issues. In a nutshell, this is how relationships drive personal growth. An unhappy relationship is too hard to sustain so we have to try to make things better. Understanding and addressing the ADHD is an important part of this, but it's not the only part.

Sex drives relationship growth

Just as it's too hard to tolerate an unhappy relationship, so too can it be difficult to tolerate an unfulfilling sex life. We can survive without it, but most people want a good sex life and are willing to work to create one. This begins with handling all the daily practical demands of life, such as earning a living, handling housework, raising children, and so forth. If the couple can't get these done in a mutually acceptable manner, that disagreement is likely to color how they feel about each other when they get into bed. For couples with ADHD, this is often where the big trouble begins. Their ongoing daily battles drain away positive sexual feelings early in the day. A diagnosis of ADHD, and the treatment and education that follow, can have a tremendous effect on a couple's ability to cooperate and compromise and preserve those good feelings.

Once a couple does get into bed, they need to negotiate the sexual experience so that both people enjoy it, feel good about themselves, and feel good about their partner. After all, it's hard to convince someone to try





or keep doing something that they don't enjoy or feel comfortable with. This negotiation needs to be respectful yet honest—if you strong-arm an agreement, your partner will ultimately bail out on it; if you sell yourself short, you will ultimately undermine it. The only sustainable agreements are the ones about which you both feel okay. The reward for this good behavior during the negotiation is a much more satisfying and interesting sex life. The positive feelings from connecting sexually and emotionally also flavor how couples handle other daily demands. If you can respectfully and productively negotiate sensitive topics like turn-ons, desires, and fantasies and thereby have a great time together, then it's much easier to resolve practical problems like overflowing dishwashers. For couples with more than their fair share of dirty dishes, this is crucial.

So addressing the ADHD issues is important for a satisfying sex life, but dealing with the relationship is-

sues is equally and perhaps even more important. With commitment, conversation, humor, and love, couples with ADHD can be happy in bed and out. **A**

Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA is the author of *Understand Your Brain, Get More Done: The ADHD Executive Functions Workbook* (2012), *More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD* (2009) and *Integrative Treatment for Adult ADHD: A Practical, Easy-to-Use Guide for Clinicians* (2007). He is a psychologist in private practice in West Chester, Pennsylvania, specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD, as well as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and school/work difficulties. **Linda Roggli**, award-winning author and ADHD expert, founded the ADDiva Network to support women 40+ who suspect they may have ADHD. She is a professional certified coach (PCC) and the creator of GardenSpirit Guesthouse, a women's retreat center in the Piedmont of North Carolina. She is the author of *Confessions of an ADDiva: midlife in the non-linear lane* (Passionate Possibility Press, 2011).

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