

IT'S EASY TO THINK WE "KNOW" ADHD since its diagnosis is related to specific symptoms such as distractibility or hyperactivity. Yet we are not always savvy about how the *symptoms* of ADHD are expressed in *behaviors* (called "symptomatic behaviors"). Learning more about this can dramatically improve your life. As an example, the *symptom* might be "distractibility." A corresponding *behavior* that results from being distractible might be "losing track of a task" or "not paying attention to a partner or parent."

My specialty is working with couples in which one or both partners has ADHD. Couples often get caught up in what I call symptom/response/response (S/R/R) patterns that hurt their relationship because they don't correctly identify ADHD symptomatic behaviors. Instead, they interpret a given behavior in the same way they would if the person didn't have ADHD. This misinterpretation encourages responses that make the situation worse, not better.

Shifting the logic

Let me give you an example, again using the symptom of "distraction." A chronically distracted ADHD husband might not pay much attention to his non-ADHD (or other ADHD) partner because there are so many other things grabbing his attention. It's not meant to be hurtful. He's just distracted. But the experience that the non-ADHD partner has is that of feeling unloved. The logic is, "My partner isn't paying any attention to me. Perhaps he doesn't love me anymore." It's an understandable conclusion—if someone without ADHD often ignores you, it usually means they aren't interested in you. But a partner with ADHD can love you very much, but still be so distracted that it feels like he or she isn't interested in you. The ADHD partner seems to have time for millions of other things, so it's easy for a non-ADHD partner to end up feeling angry, hurt, resentful, and unloved.

Here is why this is so important. In this example, the *symptom* is "distraction," the *symptomatic behavior* is "doesn't pay much attention to the non-ADHD partner" and the *response* to that symptom is that the non-ADHD partner gets angry and starts to push back in order to get more attention.

At this point, the ADHD partner experiences that anger and responds to it, probably with confusion, defensiveness, or anger in return (it's easy to get angry or defensive when someone is angry at you!). Soon they are fighting all the time because of their mutual anger. The original symptom becomes almost secondary. That's symptom/response/response, and it's a pretty negative experience for both partners.

But it doesn't have to play out this way. Think what would happen if the logic flow changed to more correctly interpret the ADHD symptomatic behavior. Instead of thinking, "My partner doesn't pay any attention to me, therefore doesn't

Do You A D

Correctly interpreting ADHD behaviors
can change your family's life

by Melissa Orlov



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ADHD



really love me,” the non-ADHD partner could think, “My partner isn’t paying attention to me—the ADHD distraction is getting out of hand. We need to go out on a date so we can focus on each other.” What a difference that would make in the relationship!

In essence, the more accurate interpretation of the symptomatic behavior changes that first “response” in S/R/R to take the relationship in a positive and supportive direction. Further, that positive response will encourage the ADHD partner to more quickly recognize the negative impacts of the distraction, and motivate that partner to want to do something to better manage the symptom.

Avoid misinterpretation

There are many examples of occasions when correctly interpreting ADHD behaviors can change your life, and it’s not just with adults:

- An ADHD pre-teen throws a book against a wall in frustration (symptoms—impulsivity and quickly becoming overwhelmed). Instead of responding by punishing him, recognize that he felt flooded and needed an outlet. Remind him that throwing things isn’t as good an outlet for feeling overwhelmed as going outside to run around and get an emotional “reset.” Then let him go play for a bit. Over time he learns to manage his emotional overwhelm with a healthy reset rather than a tantrum.
- A partner with ADHD is late—again—for church services. Rather than yell at her for being irresponsible or accusing her of not caring, ask her to consider getting a coach to work on timeliness. Or, perhaps, decide to travel separately to church so that each person gets there when he or she is ready.
- A child with ADHD regularly forgets to write down his homework assignments. Rather than think of him as lazy and try to “teach him a lesson” by letting him fail on his paper, remember he’s distracted. Create a contact list of classroom friends from whom to get the homework assignment. Consider purchasing a second set of books for home so leaving a book at school doesn’t get in his way.

In all of these examples, the ADHD creates a problem, but neither the person with the ADHD nor the person responding to ADHD compounds that problem through misinterpretation. Instead, they create a respectful, positive environment in which all members of the family can work together to keep the impact of ADHD symptoms in check. 🧠

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