



Becoming Partners

The Problem: Unequal Status That No One Likes

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON ISSUES THAT COUPLES FACE when struggling with how to respond to ADHD in their relationship is an increasingly unequal distribution of responsibility between the partners. This happens over time, as the partner who has ADHD inconsistency encourages the non-ADHD partner to pick up too much responsibility for family and home. The partner who does not have ADHD, who just wants to get on with things, thinks, “It’s easier just to do it myself!” But that much work is stressful, exhausting, and leads to a great deal of resentment.

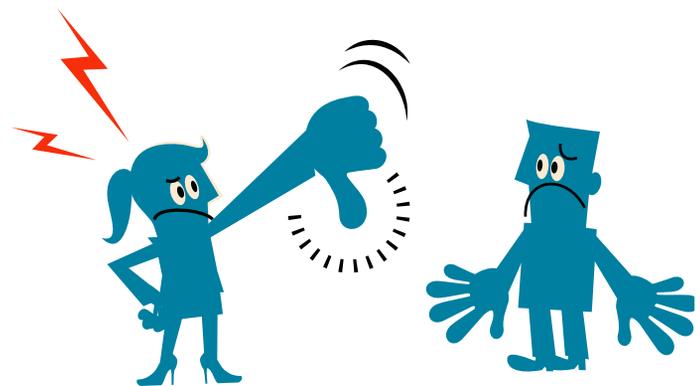
What is even more destructive than that building resentment is the *shift in status* for the partner with ADHD that accompanies the problem. They move from “cherished, competent adult partner” to “resented, unreliable, and hard to trust.”

I call this change of status “parent/child dynamics” in that one person is often pushing, overseeing, and in charge, while the other is often following and trying to stay out of trouble. It doesn’t feel at all like you are partners at this point, and neither partner likes their new role.

If this is going on in your relationship, it’s time to start improving things! The long-term solution comes only with addressing the issues leading to both over-performing (non-ADHD partners) and under-performing (partners with ADHD). Building better skills and healing the pain of past interactions takes time. But in the near-term there is a way to improve the balance between you right away. I call it “Power Sharing Navigation.”

The six rules of Power Sharing Navigation

When struggling with parent/child dynamics, many of your fights are—underneath it all—power struggles. Will you do it my way or yours? Will you do it in your timeframe or mine? Is this even important? Who gets to set the family priorities? Did you respect my wishes or do it a different way? Why do you have to be so defensive all the time?



So, let’s say you’re fighting over how to do something and you both think your way is best. What do you do? In the “old” way, the dominant partner sets the agenda, and the partner who has ADHD either gives in or rebels, leading to a stalemate and many hard feelings for both.

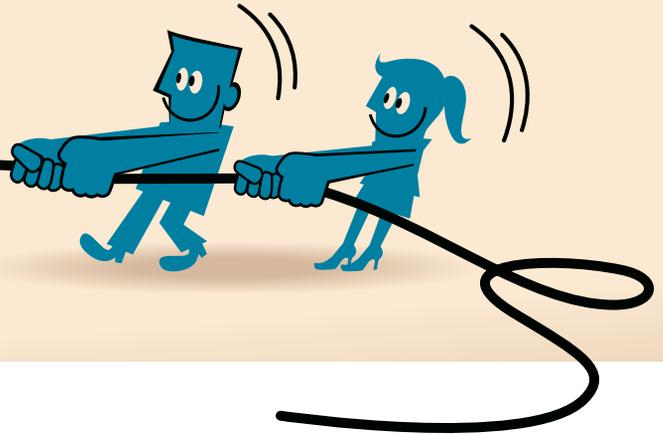
In this, both partners agree to use these rules as a litmus test to get out of the over-function/under-function “dance.” They are designed to fairly and objectively distribute decision-making power and provide space for each partner to do it their way at least some of the time.

With these rules, most disagreements can be negotiated:

1. The person who is doing the action is in charge. In an unbalanced relationship, the in-charge partner often “oversees” things to make sure they are done “correctly.” In a more balanced relationship, once someone has

Again

by Melissa Orlov



been designated as being in control, they truly are in control. That means they choose how it gets done.

2. The person who owns the property (or body) is in charge. If it's your bike, for example, then it is your choice how to maintain it. If it belongs to both of you—for example you are arguing over how neat to keep the living room—then see numbers 4 & 5.

3. If it could kill, maim, or physically injure someone, don't do it. This includes a very bright line around the safety of your children. If it might harm them, it's not okay. Science trumps opinion here. Just because you don't like car seats doesn't mean it's okay not to use them. Your kids deserve your best protection. Handing over the keys when you're drunk also fits under this rule.

4. If you don't care a lot, and your partner does care a lot... cede ground. Because you want to be partners, not adversaries and... you don't *really* care.

5. If you both care a lot, take turns—no consistent “winner.” This includes going back and forth about “how” to do things—a common point of conflict in ADHD/non-ADHD mixed households. It's okay to do things differently—and even inefficiently! See numbers 1 & 2.

6. Put people ahead of stuff. Struggling couples often get caught up in “what's getting done” because it's a huge area of conflict when ADHD is on board. In doing so they forget that in the bigger picture, being five minutes late to church is less important than whether you can smile at each other in the evening. Try to keep the “stuff” in perspective and choose loving interactions whenever you can.

How this works in real life

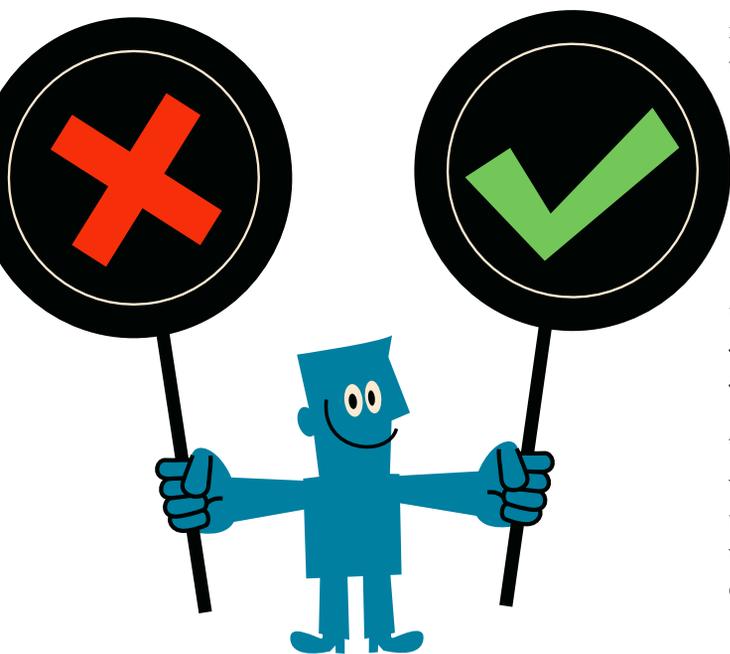
These are all examples from my consulting practice, in which I help couples affected by ADHD to rebalance their relationships. The issue with power and status struggles is they are often not that easy to see when you are in them.

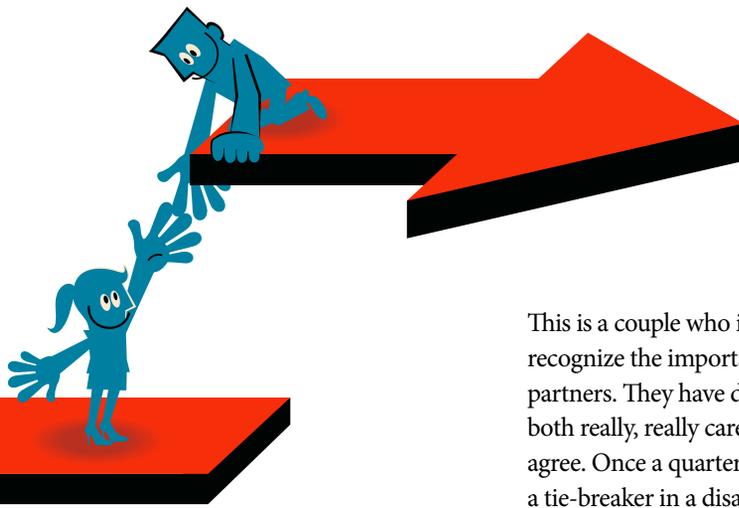
CASE STUDY 1

The Morning Routine

It's Dad's turn to help Lizzie get dressed for school. Mom has put an underwear shirt out on the bed the night before because she fears Lizzie will get cold. Dad, noting it will be above 50 degrees today, opts for a long shirt and a sweater, instead. Mom is angry and accuses Dad of “disrespecting her feelings.”

When she was putting the sweater out, Mom felt that she was “being helpful.” But what she was really doing was undercutting Dad's authority, because her real motivation was that she didn't trust Dad to dress Lizzie warmly enough. Rather than accept that Dad was in charge that





morning and could decide the undershirt was unnecessary, Mom then “punished” Dad with her anger for not following her suggestion—demonstrating that following her instructions wasn’t really optional. Thought about this way, it’s easy to see how the mother’s intrusion wasn’t helpful, at all. There is no real danger to Lizzie here, but significant harm to the relationship. The couple would have been better off if she had never interfered. Rule #1 applies; Mom owed Dad an apology and should stay out of the way the next time.

CASE STUDY 2

Sometimes “Fixing” Is Not the Right Solution

The Ankaras have three young children, one of whom has autism spectrum disorder, and another has ADHD. The father has ADHD. They had a repetitive problem where the father, who oversaw giving medication to the kids, kept forgetting to put the lids back on and put the medication away. One of the children had already landed in the hospital to have his stomach pumped. They asked if I would provide Dad with a routine for doing better.

In this case, Rule #3 applies. The father’s ADHD means that it is possible that even with a good system he will slip and forget to put away medication at least once in the future. But since they already know their kids might help themselves, even one possible mishap is one too many. In this case, the “fix” for the problem is to make sure the mother oversees all medication distribution—and putting it away.

CASE STUDY 3

Using Your Chit

A busy two-doctor couple with three kids is faced with a disagreement they cannot seem to resolve. The husband would like to go off for a weekend with ten college buddies as he had done in the past. His wife knew that there would be young women there to “entertain” the men, and that past weekends had gotten rowdy. This made her both unhappy and nervous. She trusted her husband, but still...

This is a couple who is good at power sharing, and who recognize the importance of a give and take between equal partners. They have developed a system to break a tie when both really, really care about something and they can’t agree. Once a quarter each person gets two “chits” to use as a tie-breaker in a disagreement. This is their version of rule #5—take turns. They only get the two chits, and so they use them judiciously for things they simply cannot seem to otherwise negotiate. After much discussion, the wife used a chit to make the decision and the husband respected that and did not go. Instead, he invited some of the same friends out to dinners in smaller groups at a different time. He still got to see his friends, and his wife could rest easy.

CASE STUDY 4

Keeping the Car Up

Mandy, who has ADHD, doesn’t really notice a mess. Her husband has complained for years that her car is disgusting—she even had a lollipop stuck to the dashboard for a while. He has forced her to clean it out at least three times a year, suggesting that she is ruining the resale value of the car. She posits that when she gets ready to sell the car, she will get it detailed if needed. Cleaning the car is a task she hates, and she views his insistence as an overbearing intrusion, resenting him for weeks afterwards—which, ironically, coincides with the only time he’s not complaining about how her car looks. The bottom line is that one or the other is always unhappy with the situation.

This fight about Mandy’s car clearly falls under rules #2 and #5. She bought it, and she should be able to leave whatever she wants in the car as long as it is safe—it’s not hurting anyone. The couple would do better if he remembered that stuff is less important than she is and let her be.

DO ANY OF THOSE CASE STUDIES sound familiar? If so, I urge you to think more carefully about whether your fights could be related to power sharing, and use these rules to clarify how to proceed. And, yes, for long-term effectiveness they do rest upon your contributing your “best self” to your relationship. So, you also need to learn how to stop over- and under-performing. Soon, you will find you feel much more like partners again. 🗨️

Melissa Orlov is the founder of www.ADHDmarriage.com and author of two award-winning books—*The Couple’s Guide to Thriving with ADHD* and *The ADHD Effect on Marriage*.