

How Can Couples with ADHD Keep a Strong Relationship?

ALICENSED CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD across the lifespan, Carol Ann Robbins, PhD, is the clinical director of the Annapolis ADHD Center. She also works at the Chesapeake ADHD Center of Maryland. Dr. Robbins has served as coordinator of the Anne Arundel County Maryland Chapter of CHADD since 2002. She wrote the chapter on using imago relationship therapy for couples with ADHD in *Adult ADHD-Focused Couple Therapy: Clinical Interventions*, edited by Gina Pera and Arthur Robin (Routledge, 2016).



Carol Ann Robbins, PhD

Dr. Robbins recently served as the guest expert for a recent Ask the Expert webinar, “Couples with ADHD: Creating Caring Connection Amid the Chaos,” hosted by CHADD’s National Resource Center on ADHD. This article is adapted from the webinar; you can find the entire recording in the Ask the Expert archives (<https://youtu.be/DiuT23NwcWQ>).

Although ADHD can negatively impact life, especially romantic relationships, Dr. Robbins says poor communication is the underlying cause of relationship challenges. The symptoms of impulsivity, distractibility, and disorganization affect day-to-day operations, leaving excessive expenses, forgotten requests, and missed events to be managed by one partner without a shoulder to lean on. The partner who does not have ADHD often feels overburdened and unimportant to their significant other, while the partner with ADHD feels they are constantly being criticized. These problems can cause feelings of distrust and low self-esteem.

All hope is not gone when ADHD symptoms cause havoc, however. The chaos in your relationship doesn’t have to be that way. Focusing on finding new ways to handle challenges and better communication can help you reconnect with your partner. Dr. Robbins says that understanding three communication strategies can enhance relationships and help you and your partner work together effectively. Try using the following techniques to set the stage for change and create compassion:

- **Mirror.** Restate what you heard in the conversation. Summarizing the point your partner is making gives them a chance to clarify and fill in what you’ve missed.
- **Validate.** Connect with your partner’s thoughts and feelings. Showing you are engaged and present can boost self-confidence.

- **Empathize.** Using statements such as “I see how you feel...” or “I understand that you are...” reflects that you understand and removes barriers of distrust.

In order to successfully restore a connection with your partner, communication is essential. Using dialogue allows us to slow down, be present in the moment, and feel fully understood, says Dr. Robbins.

What advice can you give a family when both husband and wife have ADHD?

Not all people with ADHD are alike. There is a high degree of variability in symptoms of ADHD. Therefore, the key is to optimize your treatment plan. First, each member of the couple should focus on treating his or her own ADHD. Proper self-care, taking medications, getting enough rest, and eating healthy are important. Then you’ll be able to manage the relationship and family needs better.

How can you persuade a frustrated partner to attend therapy?

Present to them the hopefulness of attending therapy. The goal of therapy is to help you manage your frustrations and get your needs met. Being willing to engage in therapy will help your partner feel heard and understood. Encourage your partner to attend at least one session.

Can couples successfully work through dialogue to resolve conflict without support of a therapist?

Depending on the needs of your relationship, couples can make progress on their own. If you are not over-reactive, you can practice several of the dialogue models provided, such as “mirroring.” Using simple techniques such as mirroring can be very powerful.

What questions should couples ask to identify whether a prospective therapist will be a good match?

It’s important to work with a therapist who is knowledgeable about ADHD. To find professionals who have experience with ADHD, speak with friends and family to obtain recommendations. Reach out to reputable organizations in the community, such as CHADD, that can be beneficial to identifying a therapist who can meet your needs and provide quality services. 🗣️

Carlita Godsey, MS, is the manager of education programs at CHADD’s National Resource Center on ADHD. Watch or listen to recordings of these webinars in the Ask the Expert archives at www.help4adhd.org.

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