

# Finding More Happiness for Both Partners When One Person Has ADHD

Ari Tuckman, PsyD, CST

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## An Individual Condition with Relationship Dynamics

- ADHD impacts one's ability to be the partner one wants to be
  - And the other partner's, too
- ADHD-based mistakes can be easy to personalize
  - And get defensive about
- We want partners to be reliable, consistent, and supportive. . . but also fun and interesting
  - Partners can polarize each other

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2

## Relationships Drive Personal Growth

- Practical skills are important. . .
  - So we want to reduce symptoms
- . . . But ultimately the goal is a meaningful life
  - Do the (remaining) symptoms interfere with that?
- A big part of a meaningful life is satisfying relationships
  - To keep them satisfying, we need to work on ourselves

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3

A good relationship pushes you to become a better person.

And so does sex.

4

## ADHD Inconsistency Impacts Security

- We look for reliable actions from our partner in order to trust what they say
  - And from ourselves (self-mistrust)
- ADHD inconsistency makes it harder for:
  - ADHD partner to feel effective
  - Non-ADHD partner to feel secure
  - And vice versa. . .
- Escalating (ineffective) battles reduce security for both

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5

ADHD doesn't invent new problems; it just exacerbates the universal ones.

For individuals and couples.

6

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## But It's Still Universal

- Every couple needs to negotiate different desires and ways of doing things
- ADHD exacerbates these universal struggles
- ADHD shortcomings can become a scapegoat—but the universal work still needs to be done
- What is ADHD symptoms to be treated/managed?
- What is just personality differences to be accepted?
- Treating ADHD may then foster these universal discussions

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7

## The Classic Dynamic

- It's easy to fall into the stereotypical dynamic of the under- and over-functioner
- With all the accompanying anger, nagging, avoidance, and general frustration—all of which make sense
- Casualties mount on the battlefield of daily demands
- Death by a thousand cuts
- ADHD is an obvious contributor, but the other partner is still half of the relationship

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8

Whoever wants something the least or last, has the power

And gets the nagging

9

## It's a Trap

- The non-ADHD partner too often activates first
- Exacerbates gender imbalances when the man has ADHD
- Nobody enjoys this chase dynamic
- Nobody is bringing their best to the relationship
- And we can't expect our partner to behave better than we do
- Medication and good systems can help a lot
- But won't resolve the deeper dynamics that all couples must address
- ADHD puts more pressure on partners to be good teammates

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10

## Preferences vs. Limits

- We all have preferences based on our personality and experience
- These are not factual, no matter how moralistic we get about them
- We can choose to be flexible about both the means and the ends
- Limits are preferences that we cannot flex on without selling out our integrity
- Which would inevitably spill out somewhere else
- We choose to hold these lines
- But you only get a few

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11

## Right or Happy?

- Two parallel truths
- You can't have something done by someone else and also done your way
- You can't have too much done by someone else and also have them be happy about it
- What's more important to you—and what price are you willing to pay for it?
- No, seriously?

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12

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### Give Away Your Dilemma

- Romantic partners get stuck between two bad options and an unavailable third option
- "I don't want to keep nagging you, but I also can't be OK with that bill not getting paid. What do you want me to do?"
- "I don't want you to feel anxious, but I also can't guarantee that I will remember to do that tomorrow. What do you want me to do?"
- Expresses needs more directly, avoids blame, supports agency, and shifts to problem-solving

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13

### With Knowledge Comes Responsibility

- Understanding ADHD's many impacts on daily functioning can help couples create better systems and expectations
- This carries the responsibility to use that information well
  - For both partners
  - Challenge the "yeah, buts"
- Drop the shoulds, morality, and comparisons and focus on what will meet your needs

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14

### A Friendly Reminder

- Given ADHD's executive function challenges and partners' different preferences, reminders/structure may be necessary to maintain agreements
  - But need to be both given and taken respectfully
- Don't let resentment build so reminders are given angrily
  - And then don't forget to show some appreciation
- Don't cop out so you feel defensive
  - Make an active choice to do it because you agreed to—or fix it after

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15

### The Superficial Goes Deeper

- Addressing practical matters of daily life reduces stress and improves emotional regulation—for both partners
- Medication creates better symptom control and emotion regulation
- Coaching and organizing create better systems
- Therapy creates a stronger mindset, addresses comorbidities, and helps partners work better together
- Better sleep, diet, and exercise lengthen the fuse (and increase sexual desire)
- This makes it easier to do the deeper work

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16

### We Are Responsible for Our Own Happiness

- ADHD can create feelings of powerlessness
- If a partner is unhappy about the situation, what can they do to shift it?
  - What choices are they making that contribute to that unhappiness?
  - Where are they stubbornly persisting? Or avoiding?
- Perhaps revisit the decision to change or accept
  - And what each would take

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17

### Between the Hammer and the Anvil

- High barriers to exit drive growth by creating a dilemma
  - Ending the relationship is too difficult
  - Staying in the status quo is also too difficult
- Therefore, happiness requires one of two possible third options:
  - Find a way to tolerate leaving
  - Find a way to make it worth staying
- This is how relationships push us to become a better person

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18

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## It's OK to Not Be OK

- Sometimes we have to tolerate our partner not being OK
  - ADHD partner's self-inflicted problems
  - Non-ADHD partner's anxiety-driven need for certainty
- Sometimes being caring means holding steady while our partner figures out what they need to do
  - Without volunteering to solve it for them
  - Without volunteering to be a scapegoat

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19

## If I Knew Then. . .

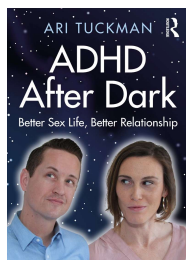
- Diagnosing and (effectively) treating ADHD can be a game changer
  - And a huge relief
- Recognize that there is a couples dynamic here
  - And therefore neither partner is powerless
- Mourn the past, but focus on the present
  - Use good actions in the present as a justification to let go of the past

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20

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21