

MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS

Social Guidance for Adults with ADHD

Cynthia Hammer, MSW

MAINAINING FRIENDSHIPS can be a struggle for those with ADHD, but positive relationships are important. Without them, we can feel isolated and alone. With them, we feel connected and valued.

How can ADHD negatively affect social relationships?

Recently, the headline on a news site listed the five best ways to be happy in life. The first thing listed was to highly consider the needs of friends. Adults who have ADHD might consistently receive a low score in this area. We get caught up in our own lives and its challenges, so we fail to think about others and what we can do for them.

When we are overwhelmed, even thinking about doing one more thing is one thing too many. If this “one more thing” is for someone else, it may never make it onto our radar

screens. We tell ourselves, “It is not that important.” “They won’t notice that I don’t send a thank you note... send a birthday card... get them a small gift of appreciation... call them to congratulate them on their recent success... whatever.” The opportunity to show a friend that we care about them and they are important to us comes... and goes... and we have done it again—or should I say “not done it again.” Friends who don’t feel acknowledged and appreciated on a regular basis may fall to the wayside, asking “What is there for me in this relationship?”

A friend who has ADHD told me that although he enjoys his friends, “I get bored with them and need a break. It is hard to consistently enjoy their company.” On other occasions, something else takes precedence.



He chooses to work on his novel instead of going to a movie with a friend. His erratic behavior (“I want to be with you today, but might not want to see you again for several months”) is the wrong way to handle friendships. The friend being put on the back burner feels used and thinks, “He only contacts me when he has nothing better to do.”

Other issues that affect relationships

Additionally, there are the usual complaints about people with ADHD. We don’t listen. We interrupt. We introduce totally unrelated topics. In other words, we miss the beats of social interactions.

Our poor memories are another challenge. What are the names of your best friend’s three children? What schools do they attend? Where did their family go on their last vacation? Who is having a baby? And when? Being told personal details and not referring to them in future conversations is a stumbling block to creating long-term relationships.

People want to feel important, that their activities, successes, and failures are shared and valued by their friends. If you constantly say, “I don’t remember that” or “I forgot you told me that,” it gives the impression that you didn’t care enough to remember. You feel awkward when you don’t remember key information and have to avoid certain topics, such as where their youngest son goes to college. When we are unable to contribute to shared memories, friends can wrongly believe we are not interested in them and don’t value their friendship.

People with ADHD may have low self-esteem, which makes it challenging to meet new people and make friends. We often lack the confidence to reach out to others, believing no one would want to be our friend.

If you have social anxiety in addition to your ADHD, you avoid social gatherings. Going where you are expected to meet and talk with people makes you anxious. You worry people will reject you. Depression is a common comorbid condition for people with ADHD. With depression, you aren’t in the mood to talk to people or even leave your house.

Improving friendships

Here are steps you can take to improve your friendships. I hope you will try some of these tips and be on your way to more fulfilling and lasting relationships.

- **Be aware.**

The first step to improved social interactions is to be aware of what you do that’s harmful or counterproductive. Monitor yourself. Are you actively listening or are you only waiting until you can put in your own two cents? If so, make this commitment for the next thirty days. “I will focus completely on being a good listener. I will hyperfocus on being a good listener. If I say anything at all, it will only be to ask a simple, short question to clarify or expand on what the other person says.”

- **Repeat it back.**

If you’re listening to just one other person, occasionally ask them if you can repeat back what you heard them say, and then do it, simply and concisely. Don’t add anything. Pause to give them time to tell you if you’ve correctly understood what they said. Then return to your role as a good listener. Practice this skill.



• **Don't interrupt.**

Are you interrupting others? Again, awareness is the key. Become aware of your behavior in your interactions. If you're interrupting, stop it. When you feel the urge, take a sip of water, write a note, take a deep breath and hold it for a second, or think, "relax." Don't interrupt, and if you do, immediately recognize that you did, apologize, and encourage the person to continue what she was saying.

• **Stick to the topic at hand.**

If you change the subject and go off on an unrelated tangent, stop yourself. People don't appreciate having the conversation whipped in another direction, especially if they are telling you something that is important.

• **Recognize what friendships mean to you.**

For the bigger problems—not paying enough attention to your friends—reflect on how much you want to improve your relationships. How much do you value friendships and what are you willing to do to have them?

Good friendships don't just happen. They take nurturing and care. Are you willing to do what is necessary? Will you make good friendships a priority?

When you have the choice between learning about your new computer and going to a movie with a friend, will you put a higher value on going to the movie because of the long-term payoff? The choice is yours.

• **Nurture your relationships.**

When you're talking with a friend, make plans for your next get-together, commit to it, and put it on your calendar. Use a computer-based program to remind you of important dates, such as birthdays and anniversaries.

Get the contact information for each of your friends. Buy assorted cards and stamps to have on hand so you can let your friends know you're thinking of them on birthdays and anniversaries, or sign up for an online service that sends out greeting cards for you. When shopping, pick up some items you can use as unexpected gifts for your friends. Or buy tickets to some activity and ask them to go with you.

• **Tell your friends you care.**

Purposely tell them how much you appreciate their friendship, how much you enjoy the time you spend together, and how much you look forward to getting together in the future. Don't let too much time go by without being in touch with those you value the most.

• **Use helpful strategies for a poor memory.**

Unfortunately, a poor memory is not likely to go away—in fact, it will probably worsen as you age. Learn strategies to minimize the impact. Make notes on your friends—their likes and dislikes, their interests, their important relationships and activities—and review them before your next get-together. When you learn the names of new neighbors, write them down and review occasionally. Prepare before meeting with someone you haven't seen for a while. Ask about what you know is important to them and what is happening in their lives. Demonstrate that you remember important details of things they have told you.

I was told about a child who frequently interrupted family meetings with unrelated ideas. When the inappropriateness of this was explained to him, he said he interrupted because he was afraid he would forget. The fear of forgetting is common in adults and children with ADHD. One solution is to make a short note to yourself about what you want to say. You may even need to write things down during conversations to remember what you were talking about. There is no shame in managing memory challenges this way. You might want to be upfront about it and explain that you might write something down because you want to remember it.

• **Learn and practice meditation and mindfulness.**

Learning meditation or practicing another form of mindfulness is one of the best things you can do to lessen ADHD challenges. Mindfulness calms down your brain. An emotionally charged brain functions less well than a regulated brain. Mindfulness training helps you have a more regulated brain. It helps you be more aware of yourself and what you are thinking and saying. **A**



Cynthia Hammer, MSW, is executive director of the Inattentive ADHD Coalition, a nonprofit with a mission that children with inattentive ADHD are diagnosed by age eight and adults with inattentive ADHD are readily and correctly diagnosed when they seek help. The website is www.iadhd.org.

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