

ADHD in Love: Treating Couples When One Partner Has ADHD

Ari Tuckman, PsyD, CST

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Ari Tuckman, PsyD, CST
West Chester, PA
Ari@TuckmanPsych.com
adultADHDbook.com

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Goals of Couples Therapy with ADHD

- Awareness of cognitive impacts of ADHD (depersonalize)
- Awareness of secondary coping mechanisms for individual and then partner and then relationship
- Agency, integrity and fairness in managing responsibilities
- Respectful negotiation of differences
- Improvements in comorbidities
- Have fun together

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The Weight of History

- Unhappy, semi-hopeless couples:
 - Lack sufficient goodwill to give the benefit of the doubt
 - Assume intentionality in their partner's disappointing actions
 - Quickly escalate small disagreements and normal life events
 - Aren't able to let go of a conflict and come to a better resolution
- A diagnosis of ADHD can be a game changer
 - But partners still need to be willing to leave the past in the past and work towards a better future—what is holding them back?

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ADHD as Game Changer

- A new diagnosis of ADHD opens up new possibilities
 - But no panaceas
 - May need to address sadness, anger and guilt, and mourn the past
- An old diagnosis of ADHD may not be well managed
 - What have they done and how has it worked?
 - Why wasn't it better managed?
- How does each partner respond to the diagnosis?

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Feeling the Future Is Hard

- People with ADHD have a shorter time horizon for their age
 - Planning into the future is difficult because future events don't hit their radar until the deadline comes closer into the now
 - Apathetic procrastination, then frantic scrambling
- Temporal discounting: the further out a reward/punishment is, the less we feel it now
 - Those with ADHD really feel the present more than the future

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By the time you feel it, it's too late.

The slogan of ADHD time management

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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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ADHD is not a disorder of knowing
what to do. It's a disorder of doing what
you know.

—Russell Barkley, PhD

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In fact, people with ADHD know far
better what to do, because they have
been told far more often what to do.

—Ari Tuckman, PsyD, CST

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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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The Easy Slide into Under-/Over-Functioner

- Non-ADHD partners often have more responsibilities on their mental radar
 - This mental/emotional work can feel as burdensome as the physical
- Non-ADHD partners often activate earlier
 - And therefore are "always" the one who has to plan, do, coordinate, and/or track the work
- ADHD partners often feel like whatever they do is too late and probably not good enough

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ADHD Exacerbates the Gender Imbalance

- In straight couples, women still bear a disproportionate share of caretaking and coordinating
- A non-ADHD woman fulfills her gender role by taking up the slack for the under-functioning ADHD guy
- A non-ADHD man may take up some of the slack for the under-functioning ADHD woman, but she will still suffer more to meet her gender role

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

For individuals and couples.

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It's 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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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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A good relationship pushes you to
become a better person.

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First, Some Basic ADHD Treatment

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Actively Manage Your ADHD

- The partner with ADHD has some responsibility to actively manage their ADHD
 - Seek out and follow through with treatment (meds, therapy)
 - Implement better strategies and systems (coaching?)
 - Seek out better providers, if necessary
- They need to be working harder than their partner on it
 - Free passes are earned—what kinds of accommodation are reasonable to expect from their partner?

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Stimulant Medications Work Well

- Medication closes the gap between intentions and actions
- Need to balance the benefits with the risks and side effects
 - But there are risks and side effects of untreated ADHD, too
- Extended release stimulants (Concerta, Adderall XR, Vyvanse) are the first choice by far
 - Is the romantic partner seeing benefits on evenings and weekends?

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Actively Manage Your Expectations

- The non-ADHD partner has some responsibility to understand the impact of ADHD on their partner's performance
 - What gets done, when and how
- Happiness is a function of expectations vs experience
 - In this situation, which is the better way to go?
- And is this difference even about ADHD?

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Treatment Effort is Unbalanced (Maybe)

- Most survey respondents rated themselves as working harder at treatment than their partner
- Those who felt ADHD has the most negative effect on sex put in the most treatment effort—but their partners don't
- Those who felt their partner worked hard also worked hard
 - Direction? Perception? Attitude?
- *So put in that effort, look for effort, and ask for effort*

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Effectiveness is Subjective

- ADHD partners feel treatment is more effective than Non
 - Different priorities? Different perceptions? Meds worn off?
- Those who feel ADHD has the most negative effect on sex feel that treatment is less effective
 - Direction? Negative momentum—effort and relationship?
- *So discuss treatment goals and effects*

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Treatment Helps

- Make the most of the treatment options that are available—and more is better
 - Don't settle for marginal results
 - Apply good effort and monitor the results
 - Seek experts, if necessary
- Remember, this isn't about ADHD—it's about relationship and sexual happiness
 - *Managing life better is foreplay*

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Get Serious About Sleep, Diet, & Exercise

- Cognitive functioning and mood are better with good self-care
 - Unfortunately, ADHD makes consistent self-care harder—perhaps for both partners
- Make a point of checking in on this and explicitly problem-solving it
 - Especially when a client is stalling or back-sliding
- Better self-care is a means and an end

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Re-Balance the Relationship

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What Should We Expect of Each Other?

- How hard should ADHD partner work on their ADHD?
 - And the non-ADHD partner?
- How much should the non-ADHD partner flex their standards?
 - And the ADHD partner accommodate those standards?
- How much is one partner's happiness dependent on the other?
 - And how are they communicating those requests?

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ADHD Partner Needs to Step Up

- If they aren't actively managing their ADHD and being a better partner, explore why
 - Don't understand ADHD's many impacts or how treatment can help
 - Overwhelmed by guilt/shame
 - Feels hopeless because they will still be the problem
 - Don't accurately see their part in the relationship cycles
 - Feel entitled to get more than they give
- Motto: "Take away your partner's easy targets."

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Non-ADHD Partner Needs to Step Down

- If the non-ADHD partner isn't able to let go and be more flexible, explore why
 - Refuses to really understand or accept the impact of ADHD
 - Anxiety, perfectionism, rigid standards, fear of judgment
 - Over-relies on reducing uncertainty, rather than tolerating it
 - Can't tolerate being wrong and therefore needs a partner who is
 - Unwilling to compromise as part of a team
- Motto: "Give your partner room to step up."

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Get Clear on 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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Overt & Covert Oppositionality

- Adults with ADHD have received a lifetime supply of commands and corrections
- Oppositionality preserves a sense of self as a free agent
 - Especially when the request feels externally imposed
 - But oppositionality evokes authoritarianism—and vice versa
- How can partners negotiate as equals?
 - And follow through on what was agreed?

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Emotional Regulation x2

- ADHD can involve emotional impulsivity—by both partners
- Non-ADHD partner needs to take responsibility by speaking before the emotions are overwhelming
 - And not taking ADHD personally
- ADHD partner needs to manage emotions and respond well
 - Positive interactions now can vindicate past failures
- Slow it down to cool it off
 - Talk when meds are working?

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Make Time to Talk Business

- Lack of planning adds a lot of stress and bad feelings
- Meet weekly (at least) to talk through what is happening
 - Bring your to do list and calendar
 - Add items to a shared online calendar in between
 - Agree on what will be done—or won't be
 - Check in through the week
- Show respect (do the task) and appreciation (for the doing)

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When External Executive Functions Go Bad

- Some couples can't break out of the over-/under-functioner dynamic
 - ADHD partner feels over-burdened by "getting it right" in order to manage their partner's emotions and becomes oppositional/avoidant
 - Non-ADHD partner feels chronically let down and becomes authoritarian to right the ship
- Explain how each partner's behavior sort of makes sense but also evokes the other's undesirable part of the cycle

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Discuss Where Reminders Fit

- Non-ADHD partners can serve as external executive functions
 - But do they want to? And does their partner want them to?
- Partners should discuss how, when, and where these reminders should be given
 - Non-ADHD partner needs to balance security and effort
 - ADHD partner needs to balance success and autonomy

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Working With, Not For

- Partners need to be able to negotiate as equals (working *with*)
 - Kids work *for* parent; employees work *for* boss
 - Equals can say no to a request or counter-offer
- Division of labor based on skills is wise
 - Some decisions are 50/50 but some are 51/49
- Giving a reminder is (relatively easy) self-care
 - Parenting is given for the kid's benefit

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Anxiety Management

- **External anxiety management:** do something to address it
- **Internal anxiety management:** recognize this isn't the time to act and focus instead on calming oneself
- Folks with ADHD tend to feel the anxiety closer to the deadline and evoke their partner's external management
 - Help partners understand how this difference in timing evokes this dynamic

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How to Get Something Done

- Three ways to get something done:
 - Do it yourself (good if have specific requirements)
 - Ask partner to do it (possibly repeatedly) and accept it may be done differently
 - Accept it won't get done (at least for now)
- Relationships involve a million possible requests
 - How does this one rank relative to the rest?
 - How do you want to be as a partner?

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How to Respond to a Request

- Three ways to respond to a request:
 - Just do it, as asked (even if you don't care)
 - Just do it, but explain it will be done differently somehow
 - Express empathy but explain why you won't/can't do it (but maybe be open to convincing)
- Relationships involve a million requests and activities
 - How does this one rank for your partner (even if you don't care)?
 - How do you want to be as a partner?

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Should I Believe You?

- Trust is a big factor in these relationships
 - ADHD partner's inconsistencies and occasional lies and omissions
 - Non-ADHD partner's reactivity
- Make words and actions line up more
 - Manage ADHD to close the gap between intentions and actions
 - Manage expectations—should you believe your partner?
 - Disappoint earlier and handle disappointment better
 - More check-ins along the way

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False Agreements Guarantee Trouble

- Agreeing to something without thinking it through
 - What do you need to do/know to come to a sustainable solution?
- Agreeing to something you know you won't/can't maintain or be happy with
 - Speak honestly and accept discomfort in the moment
- Forcing an agreement
 - Calm your frustration, perhaps explore more, and wait for a sustainable solution

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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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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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Felony Behavior

- Some partners continue to behave in ways that disrespect the fundamental expectations for relationships
 - Don't engage fully in treatment, so not much changes
 - Chronic dishonesty with partner, clinicians, and/or self
 - May reflect deeper personality issues, trauma, addiction, etc.
 - May reflect too much history, low motivation, and an empty hail Mary
- Each partner needs to make their own decision about staying and continuing to work on the relationship
 - A therapist may inform the other partner's expectations for change

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Sex and Other Fun Stuff

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Make Time to Have Fun

- Busy partners stop enjoying each other
 - Chores and solo activities take over—especially with under- and over-functioning
 - Lose goodwill to weather the inevitable bumps and bruises
- Occasional date nights (or whatever) are important
 - No shop talk!
- Sometimes it's work to find something fun
 - What's the resistance?

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Good Sex is Good for Your Relationship

- Relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are highly correlated
 - Good sex requires good behavior. . .
 - And also brings out good behavior
- So working on one will tend to improve the other
 - And improving one will require working on the other
 - What gets in the way of a more satisfying sex life?
 - What gets in the way of more frequent encounters?

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The ADHD Sexual Eagerness Cluster

- Those with ADHD rate higher on:
 - Desired sexual frequency (women)
 - Masturbation frequency
 - Porn frequency and feelings about partner's porn use
 - Kinkiness (women)
 - History of infidelity (both physical and emotional)
 - Desire for and history of consensually nonmonogamous activities
- But men rated higher than women on most

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Tap that Potential

- Most people want more sex than they are getting
 - Most people want sex around 2-4x/week
 - Actual frequency = 1.1 – 1.4x/week
- How much happier would most couples be if they were having sex 4x/week?
 - *What are you willing to do to get there? Seriously?*

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The Good News about Sexual Barriers

- Out of 25 potential barriers to a better sex life:
 - The 5 smallest related to sexual enjoyment
 - The 9 biggest related to too little time/energy or too many bad feelings
 - So they will probably enjoy it if they can start
- What gets in the way?
 - Not just immediately—also before that and before that?
 - Address the relevant points of intervention

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ADHD Squeezes Out Time for Sex

- ADHD exacerbates the universal time crunch for busy couples
 - Time isn't used efficiently or tasks get pushed later into the night
 - Unbalanced workloads lead to fatigue or lack of time
 - Makes it harder to mentally transition to sex—more so for women
- Sex can be a powerful motivator to use earlier time well
 - Scheduling, flirting, anticipation, and simmering keep it top of mind
 - With missed opportunities, start by examining time management

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ADHD Squeezes Out Good Feelings for Sex

- The inconsistency of ADHD and different expectations can set up anger, resentment, nagging, and avoidance
 - "Parent/child dynamics are a sex killer"
- Need to get more on the same team
 - Need to address ADHD—and everything else
- Perhaps some things change for the better, perhaps some things are accepted better

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Help Out Anyway

- The happiest couples can be sexually generous even when not in the mood
 - Especially important for couples with big desire discrepancies
- Negotiate out the level of involvement
 - Ask respectfully, answer respectfully—and give a second chance
 - Lend a hand, give permission, or give a raincheck
 - Good deeds tend to be rewarded—in bed and out
- What would it take to earn/give this generosity?

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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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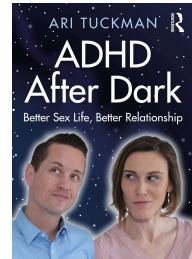
What kind of person do you want your relationship to push you to become?

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