

## Here We Go Again: Why Do Couples Keep Having the Same Fights?

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## So Much Doubt

- Most couples enter therapy stuck—again
  - And have been for a while—on the same damn problems
  - They're discouraged, resentful, and frustrated
- They worry about what it means about their relationship
  - And about its future
  - And about their partner
  - And about themselves

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## And Also So Much Hope

- They want hope that:
  - It will get better
  - It's mostly their partner's fault
  - Their partner needs to do most of the (hard) work
  - Perhaps this time therapy will be different
- Discouraged couples need to be hooked quickly:
  - That it can get better
  - That it's worth the effort

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## Good News!

- Most couples aren't that different:
  - From other couples
  - From their past—or their future
- No re-inventing the wheel is needed
  - Or subsequent inventions
- We will figure this out
  - And learn how to deal with what life brings next

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## The Trifecta of Marital Discord

- Parenting, sex, and money present the thorniest disagreements
  - Reflect deep values that can't be easily flexed
  - Feel intimate and personal (i.e., vulnerability to be protected)
  - Generally zero sum (so fight for yours)
- Therefore, require strong relationship skills to resolve
  - Self- and other-differentiation, emotional regulation, integrity, fair play

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## Hard Topics, Hard Lessons

- Couples therapy teaches the necessary skills (process) to tackle challenging topics (content)
- Every topic is a learning opportunity
  - And often a similar(-ish) process
  - This instills hope when it feels like there are too many topics
  - And makes smaller/simpler topics easier lessons
- Teach a couple to fish. . .

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Maybe the same topics, but better  
discussions/disagreements

Less bad is still progress

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Beware the tyranny of “just”.

Is this really too much to ask?

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### All You Need Is Love

- “If you loved me enough then you would just do this.”
  - Maybe, if the partner has the ability and can be convinced to do it
  - Is based on the premise that the person has the ability and it’s therefore just about choosing to do it
  - Therefore, if the partner chooses otherwise, it indicates insufficient love
- “But if you loved *me*, then you wouldn’t ask me to do this.”
  - Touche!

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### Give Me Something Real

- We can tell when our partner is faking it
  - Resentful, grudging, or apathetic compliance doesn’t count for much
- “I want you to *want* to do it.”
  - Sure, to a point
  - And to feel the same way about it—well. . .
  - But maybe doing it generously is good enough—or even means more

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### From Understanding to Action

- Our plan for today:
  - Why strong leadership is extra important to shift repetitious arguments
  - Clarity for each partner about themselves
  - How create a better agreement
  - How to stick to that agreement
- Psst, it’s more about skills than solutions

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Strong Leadership is a Must

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### Break the Pattern in Session

- Partners can already script out their standard argument
- They can argue for free at home
  - It undermines faith in you, therapy, and the relationship
- Do it in session first
  - Then practice at home—give right-sized homework with the right expectations

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### Lower the Temperature

- Interrupt firmly before first partner gets rolling
  - And partner can't not respond
- Use pauses and slower speech—or fill the space fully
- Round down what the partner said
- Have partners talk to you, not each other

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### Increase Awareness & Insight

- Help them see their patterns—and how each contributes
  - And therefore how to get more of what they want from the other
  - The sales pitch is having active influence
- Talk to be over-heard by the other partner
  - Shows the first partner that you get it so they can move forward
  - Is a less direct or provocative confrontation of the other partner

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### Foster Motivation

- Tie suggested changes to each partner's goals/motivations
- Talk about the long view to reduce discouragement with slow progress
  - Set the expectation—old patterns don't change quickly
  - But the more they apply themselves, the faster it changes
- Highlight changes/progress (however small)
  - And ask for appreciation

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### Clarity

For the self

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### It's Circular, Not Linear

- Partners often don't fully see their contribution to:
  - The problematic dynamic
  - Their partner's behavior
  - Their dissatisfaction
- Fortunately, relationships are always a two-person job
  - Unlike the weather, with yesterday's blame comes tomorrow's influence
  - Where can each partner shift the old dynamic?

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## Do You Even Know Me?

- Projections can snatch defeat from the jaws of victory
  - Partner is guilty until proven innocent
  - Projections are a narrative in search of evidence
  - They keep the partner stuck in the past and blind to the present
  - Or perhaps round down their partner's intentions
- Also, can intentions, thoughts or feelings even be proven?
  - Is a lack of evidence convincing?
  - Should it be?

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## Premature Education

- Couples (and therapists) can jump too quickly to solutions before really understanding the problem
  - These off-target or incomplete solutions are dissatisfying and unsustainable
  - But certainty and self-righteousness make them very sticky
- These same fights often get stuck at the surface level of behavior and logistics
  - And nobody is listening anyway

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A problem well defined is a problem half-solved.

What's really going on here?

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## What Do You Really Want Here? And Why?

- Get the couple out of the well worn debate and explore:
  - Why the situation bothers each of them? (the problem)
  - What do their proposed solutions aim to do? (the aspiration)
  - Why don't the proposed solutions work? (the barriers)
  - What do they really want here? (the deeper desire)
  - Why do they want it? (self-awareness)
- Now we have a target!
  - And hopefully a bunch of time—and vulnerable honesty

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## Whose Problem is it Anyway?

- The problem-owner is the person who feels bad about it, not the person who suffers the direct tangible consequences
  - Until the other partner feels/recognizes the pain
- Is this about changing:
  - External situation
  - Internal anxiety, discomfort, unhappiness
  - Real or perceived responsibility for what happens

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## Stay Out of the Ditch

- How well do they understand why they get activated?
  - Beyond the obvious?
  - And that they aren't a passive receptacle of their partner's actions (i.e., if A then B)?
- Can they see themselves getting activated in real time?
  - Before they act?
  - Do they know how to talk themselves down?
  - And what they can (reasonably) ask from their partner?

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## Self-Regulation is Hard (obviously)

- Everyone has some effective coping skills
  - But they would probably benefit from using them more often
  - Or in more challenging situations
- What's left is what doesn't come naturally
  - Feels uncomfortable, artificial or awkward
  - Relies on a too-perfect set-up from their partner
  - Feels impossible to do in that crucial moment

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## Life is Inconvenient

- Self-regulation is most needed when it's hardest
  - When generally stressed out or depleted
  - When specifically activated by partner
- It's an unfair fight
  - Old responses are reflexive: fast and require no thought
  - New responses require inhibition then maybe action: slow and require intentional thought

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## Progress is Progressive

- One good response is nice, but. . .
  - Those new responses need to be repeated again and again as the same situations keep coming up
  - Not perfect, but a better batting average
  - Free passes are earned by showing effort and good intentions
- Maybe progress means being able to have a better conversation afterwards
  - And maybe some amends

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## Do Your Part

- By definition, self-regulation comes from within
  - Especially when the outside is more activating
  - Which is why it's so hard
- Help clients identify autonomous goals
  - Doing the right thing regardless of partner's actions
  - What do they need to do differently to not have the same fight or outcome?
  - And why should they work so hard at it?

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## Negotiation

It takes two to tango

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## Asking to Understand vs to Prove a Point

- How well do they *really* understand their partner's experience?
  - What's important to them
  - Why they get activated
  - What would help them respond better
- Partner probably doesn't express it well
  - And they can't hear it without getting activated or debating

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### Change is Hard

- They're probably not fully aware of why the requested action is so hard for their partner
  - Maybe feel entitled that partner should just do it
  - The tyranny of "just"
- Maybe has unrealistic expectations for:
  - Partner's abilities to make the change
  - The opportunity cost on other desired activities
  - Their own required contribution

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### Don't Ask, Don't Tell

- Conflict avoidant partners will avoid discomfort in the moment
  - What's happening here?
  - Why doesn't this add up?
  - What's the hold-up between sessions?
- Go towards their discomfort—and encourage them to as well
  - Probably slowly, but definitely inexorably
  - Slow down other partner's response and encourage empathy for both the first partner's experience and their hesitation

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### I Didn't Have Time. . .

- Lack of time is a great get out of jail free card (hopefully!)
  - However, our priorities are what we do, not what we say
- If words and actions don't align, then which one is it?
  - Is this actually a priority?
  - Or do they feel like it should be?
  - Or is there some unspoken agenda?
  - Or is avoidance skewing the math?

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### Nothing Grows on Scorched Earth

- Hostile, aggressive, domineering partners short-circuit productive discussions
  - And encourage avoidance
- It can feel safer to be hostile rather than vulnerable
  - But rarely evokes the desired response—including from therapists
  - A real disclosure and request risks disappointment
- Empathy and empowerment (all around) is crucial

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### Tell Me the Truth (Maybe)

- Lying (including lies of omission) keeps couples stuck
  - For obvious self-serving benefit
  - But also minimizing own priorities or impact of partner's behavior
- Lie inviting behavior may be the other half of the dynamic
  - And a misguided response to eroded trust
- We need to address both sides to promote honesty
  - But it probably isn't quick or easy

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### False Agreements Court Trouble

- False Agreement making an agreement that one *knows* one won't abide
- What's preventing that harder initial discussion?
  - Lack of awareness—self or other?
  - Lack of acceptance—self or other?
  - Secret agenda?
  - Passive aggression, punishment?
  - Impatience?

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## Working With, Not For

- Are partners working collaboratively for two separate but overlapping goods?
- Good teammates:
  - Speak respectfully
  - Have equal decision-making power—including vetoes
  - Are willing to be convinced
  - Balance assertiveness (anti-resentment) with generosity

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## Relationships Aren't Court Rooms

- Couples get stuck debating the merits of their position
  - Sometimes this is helpful. . .
  - Or does it reflect a need for their partner to feel the same way?
- Make a request, not a case
  - Doesn't require feeling the same, just an agreement to do what is asked
  - You win some, you lose some

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## Execution

Turn agreements into action

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## Hard Gets Harder

- Following an agreement may be the hardest part yet
  - Situational factors—predictable and random
  - Problematic agreement is revealed—incomplete, vague, off-target
  - Not able to hold themselves to agreements in the moment
  - Entitled (choose not to hold themselves to it)
  - Poor distress tolerance—avoidant or angry
  - Overwhelmed (depleted, over-committed, anxious, depressed)
  - Passive aggressive (based on something else)

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## Set Up Success

- How can we grease the rails and smooth the bumps?
  - Trying hard is great, but sustained success is more likely when we make something easier
- What else is happening before and during the relevant moments?
  - Does it make the better (harder) response more or less likely?
  - How can we prompt the desired action?
  - The details sometimes really matter, so get specific

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## Every Intervention is Diagnostic

- What have we learned here?
  - Complex dynamics will take multiple iterations to untangle
- If you learned something, it's a success
  - And part of the process—so let's expect that
- Sometimes progress means less of the bad, if not yet more of the good
  - Look for and point out that success to maintain hope and good will

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### You Started It!

- Tit for tat always undermines any agreement
  - One partner diverts from agreement and other partner gets hurt/angry, retreats, reverts to old ways, silent treatment, etc.
  - Is partner looking for successes or failures?
- Autonomous goals and personal accountability are key
  - Rescues a backslide by the other
  - Integrity has its own rewards
  - And is more likely to evoke desired behavior (generally)

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### Not Going According to Plan. . .

- Discuss in session how to respond when the agreement isn't followed
  - Don't wait to speak until you're too angry
  - Start by stating an observation
  - Ask a (real) question
  - Make a request
  - With repeated breaches, address the lack of following the agreement (not the agreed behavior)—and why it's important

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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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"I'm not telling you what to do, I'm  
telling you what I'm going to do."

Act from well differentiated integrity.

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What can you change?  
What do you need to accept?

Which one will bring you greater happiness?

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"I don't want to be irritated by anyone  
else."

Anybody have Hallmark's number?

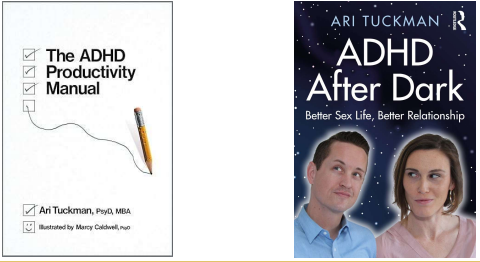
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The image displays two book covers. The left cover is for 'The ADHD Productivity Manual', featuring a checklist with three checked items and a pen. The right cover is for 'ADHD After Dark', featuring a couple's portrait against a starry night sky.

The ADHD Productivity Manual

Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA  
 Illustrated by Merry Caldwell, PhD

ARI TUCKMAN, R  
**ADHD After Dark**  
Better Sex Life, Better Relationship

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