

Partners with ADHD face the same marital challenges as their non-ADHD counterparts. Despite the condition's threats to their marriages, they are fiercely committed to their relationships.

Married with ADHD:

Making It

By Linda Roggli, PCC

WHEN WE READ ABOUT A "MIXED MARRIAGE"—SOMEONE pairing up with someone who has been diagnosed with ADHD—we usually hear about the problems that the non-ADHD spouse confronts: not being able to rely on their spouse to get things done, the forgetfulness, the impulsivity, the powerful emotions and anger that threaten the relationship.

What is the other side of the story? How about love and marriage from the ADHD partners' perspective? What are their challenges, hopes, hurts, and expectations?

ADDitude decided to find out. More than 700 adults with ADHD opened up about their relationships—what they would like to change, what they would like to fix, what they hope for in the future. The results were surprising, sometimes funny, and often reassuring.

Partners diagnosed with ADHD share many of the same frustrations as their non-ADHD counterparts. They feel

misunderstood and unloved. They get angry when their partners criticize them a lot. They worry when their relationship breaks down because of their disorganization and distractibility.

But most ADHD partners are fiercely committed to their spouses, their families, and their relationships. They bounce back when things go awry. They

take time to learn about their ADHD and treatment options. Many of those we interviewed reported that, after a few hard years, they managed to cobble together relationship strategies that work [see "Marital Medicine"].

Understanding ADHD, Finally

Erica and her husband have been married for three-and-a-half years. She was diagnosed with ADHD as a child, but never received treatment. Last year, she started therapy and began taking stimulant medication.



Work

"I had never talked about ADHD with my husband, who is an engineer," she said. "He is all facts and figures. He used to continually remind me that I had forgotten to do something, and it hurt my feelings. But now he'll say: 'Oh, you forgot, so let me help you.'"

Though he is "a really nice guy," Erica's husband was baffled by her emotions. "He thought I was just being hard on myself. When I was emotional or overwhelmed, he'd tell me: 'It's fine; you're OK.' But I was the one who messed up all the time. It bothered me," she said.

"My ADHD is still annoying, but now my husband understands that it's not that I don't care about anything. He understands that my brain is all over the place," she said.

Communication Difficulties

Many of the 700-plus adults with ADHD who completed the "Marriage, Love, and ADHD" survey said that communication breakdowns were the Number One challenge in their relationship.

"I get distracted when my husband and I talk. He says that I interrupt and that he can't tell if I'm paying attention to him," said one respondent.

Said another woman with ADHD: "I have a problem processing what he says if there is a lot of noise going on and he is in another room. Sometimes I don't hear him at all, because I have drifted off into a daze and don't realize it."

Other common problems reported were anger and outbursts, to the point of screaming and shouting.

Several respondents reported unintentional miscommunication with their partners. "Especially in the evenings, my thoughts are random, and I'll impulsively say things out loud. My partner is caught off-guard, and she gets hurt by my remarks," wrote Steve.

Get Things Done—or Not

Household tasks and parenting responsibilities fall disproportionately on the female partner, whether or not she has been diagnosed with ADHD, and even if she is the breadwinner. Nearly 70 percent of adults with ADHD surveyed said they handle more than half of all household tasks; 11 percent do it all. Men diagnosed with ADHD participate in parenting, but their time is limited by work and school, or they channel their energy to other areas of their life.

Sarah and her husband have been married for 16 years and have two children, both with special needs. "Until we had kids, I was able to keep it together," said Sarah. "But now I can't accomplish anything! [My husband] will say, 'Why can't you fold the laundry?' It's like he's my parent."

According to Sarah, her husband is very focused and uses checklists constantly, which makes her feel even more scattered. She was so distraught over her inability to stay on top of household and parenting duties that she turned to alcohol to numb the pain. "I needed it to get through a day, to cope," she said. "I drank every day for almost eight years, hiding bottles, making sure that, wherever I went, there would always be a place I could get a drink."

A year ago, Sarah got sober through Alcoholics Anonymous. "I did a lot of crying and hurting, and I am still dealing with it, but I wanted my kids to have a sober mom."

Their marriage has weathered several serious storms. "A couple of years ago, I wasn't getting love from [my husband] and found myself seeking it from someone else," she

SURVEY SAYS?

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Married with ADHD



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said. “Then I stopped (before anything happened) and thought: ‘What am I doing? I have someone at home who adores me!’”

Sarah says her relationship with her husband is rock-solid these days. “When we got married, we decided that the ‘D’ word (divorce) would not be in our vocabulary,” she said. “You have to find ways to fall in love again. We’re going to make this work, no matter what.”

It Starts with Trust

David’s non-ADHD wife is well-organized. David flies by the seat of his pants. The contrast caused upheaval.

“Early on, I had a tendency to commit to a lot of things verbally, but I would get distracted and wouldn’t follow through,” David said. “My wife would say, ‘You aren’t a man of your word!’ It hurt me because I did want to do the things I said I would.”

Over time, David had many talks with his wife, reassuring her that he genuinely cares for her, and that he wants the best for their relationship. “She understands that I love her, but that I am easily distracted and take on too much,” he said. “Now she’ll say, ‘I know you want to keep your word, so can you make that a top priority?’ And I usually do.”

David has also done a “ton of research” about ADHD, a positive factor for many of the ADHD partners we interviewed. “It helps me understand myself when I read what other ADHD people experience,” he said.

Other ADHD Challenges

Forgetfulness, disorganization, poor time management, and roller coaster emotions were mentioned frequently by the adults with ADHD who took the survey. The feeling that the non-ADHD partner does not understand ADHD was a top complaint. “My husband chalks up my shortcomings to laziness, selfishness, craziness, or not wanting to change. None of those are true,” wrote one woman.

“My wife does not accept my ADHD, and thinks I am faking it. She says it is an excuse to explain my failures,” said one husband. “My partner still doesn’t understand that I am not doing this on purpose. I try hard to get things done right, but she ignores my effort. I think my ADHD is a gift—I love how I am, and I can’t change any more for her.”

Forty-two percent of adults with ADHD reported that their disorder gets in the way of their sex life. Many say ADHD affects their focus during intimacy: “My mind wanders during sex. It’s hard to stay focused long enough for sex to be enjoyable for me.” Some report that their ADHD missteps outside the bedroom dampen intimacy in bed: “I have been a big letdown to my wife. I’m not always aware of the things that have to be done, yet I hate to be mothered. I need intimacy to feel loved, but my wife doesn’t want to have sex with a child. I don’t blame her.”

ADHD partners say that having different bedtimes limits the amount of sex in some marriages. “The problem is getting to bed early enough that we’re not both exhausted, because my brain always wants to do one more thing.”

Medication affects intimacy, too. Antidepressants that curb libido are problematic for some. For others, ADHD meds cause difficulty. “My stimulant medication wears off

Marital Medicine: Tips for Success

FOCUS ON TREATMENT

ADHD diagnosis and treatment is essential to a strong ADHD relationship. “I was diagnosed nine months ago and started on medication, which has profoundly changed me and the way I see our relationship. But we had 16 years of damage before this. My best advice is to get treatment as soon as possible!”

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

“We discuss the division of labor in our household,” wrote one respondent. “Asking someone with ADHD to do all the housecleaning leads to resentment. My partner handles the jobs I find boring.”

LEARN ABOUT ADHD

Understanding ADHD is key to

in the evening, and that makes me irritable. I don't even want to be touched."

There are ADHD partners who are happy with their intimacy, however. "We have a healthy sex life. I think ADHD makes sex spicier!" said one woman with ADHD.

"It's All My Fault"

Many ADHD partners believe that they alone are to blame for problems in their relationships. "My negative view of myself is the worst thing about ADHD in our marriage," wrote a female partner. "I am amazed that he still wants to stay with me."

"I feel like I'm not good enough" wrote one husband. "All that time lost! My marriage could have been so much better if I had a normal brain, or had known about my ADHD so I could have treated it. The damage is done; my wife can't let go of the hurt," wrote a husband of 14 years.

This level of despair was mirrored when *ADDitude* asked ADHD partners what was "wonderful about ADHD in your relationship." About 20 percent could not find anything positive about the ADHD influence on their marriages. "It's a curse," wrote one husband.

Light at the End of the Tunnel

The vast majority of those surveyed, however, identified various positive aspects that ADHD brought to their relationships. The most common attribute was spontaneity. "My husband loves my spontaneous, never-say-die attitude," said a wife with ADHD. "He is amazed by how productive I am when hyperfocus kicks in, and by how accepting [ADHD] has made me of others who struggle."

Hyperfocus was mentioned on both sides of the equation: as a negative influence ("My hyperfocus on him when we were dating brought about our marriage, but after we

had children, I hyperfocused on them, which made him feel I didn't love him.") and as a positive one ("When I work hard, I can use my hyperfocus to our advantage").

Creativity ranks high as a positive trait for an ADHD marriage partner. Respondents say creativity makes daily life and special occasions interesting. "I am great at parties! I make every event as special and thoughtful as possible, and I am very creative," reported a wife with ADHD.

A Fab Relationship!

Rachel and her husband have been together for 20 years. She was diagnosed with ADHD 10 months ago. "In the past, he would watch me folding towels. I felt criticized, like I wasn't doing it right," she said. "After my diagnosis, I told him that I didn't want to fold towels the way he does!"

Rachel has learned to ask for help. "I wanted to take on everything all by myself," she said. "Now my husband says, 'You can ask me to do these things, like vacuuming the cat hair.' It's made life so much easier."

"I still get distracted, even with ADHD medication, but I have a better understanding of the disorder. So when I interrupt him in mid-sentence, I realize that I am doing it and take responsibility for it," she said. "I'll say, 'Yes, I did interrupt you, and that was my mistake. Please go on with what you were saying.'"

The best thing about ADHD in her relationship, according to Rachel, is her ability to see their potential as a couple. "I surprise him a lot," she said. "I recognize now that he doesn't see the world the same way I do. But I like ADHD; it makes me awesome. We have a fabulous relationship today, better than ever before!" **A**

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understanding each other. It's important that both partners learn about ADHD, not just the partner who has it. Knowledge is power in these "mixed" marriages. Some people call ADHD the "third partner" in their marriage, and say it deserves respect for the role it plays.

COMMUNICATE HONESTLY

Conversations quickly escalate to arguments and hurt feelings in ADHD marriages, so it makes sense to work together

on communication. That may require the assistance of a counselor or online class, but the investment will yield huge dividends for the couple.

KEEP IT BALANCED

A successful ADHD marriage requires give and take, according to one respondent. "No one is perfect, not even people who don't have ADHD. But I never use my ADHD as an excuse for bad behavior. You have to take responsibility, without blame or shame."

CHANGE WHAT YOU CAN, ACCEPT THE REST

The ADHD partners we interviewed have taken big steps toward making their relationships work. But all of them still deal with it every day. What sets them apart is that they and their spouses/partners play with the cards they were dealt. In 12-step vernacular, they change the things they can change, and have the serenity to accept the things they can't. When both partners embrace ADHD, the chances of a strong relationship improve.