

Relationship Issues for Adults with ADHD

by Robert Tudisco

Eastchester, NY—2002

As any adult with ADHD knows, it is very difficult to cope in the non ADHD world we live in. A relationship with a significant other can further compound these difficulties. If the respective other does not have ADHD or understand the way we think, these difficulties can be magnified tenfold. As much as our respective others try to educate themselves about ADHD, the differences in brain chemistry can push a relationship to its limits, and in many cases, beyond. All good intentions aside, short of crawling into our skin and seeing the world through our eyes, it is nearly impossible for another to truly understand.

I am not a marriage counselor, nor a psychologist, but I am an adult with ADHD. I have been married for eleven years to the most non of the non-ADHD spouses. Making a mixed marriage like ours work isn't always easy. But, I can honestly say, it is worth every challenge we face. I also believe that we sought each other out because of our differences. Here are some guidelines you may find useful if your relationship faces these pressures.

Educate Yourself

The most important thing for an adult diagnosed with ADHD and their respective other is to educate themselves. Being diagnosed is helpful, but ADHD is a complex disorder. It affects adults differently than children. There are also co-morbidities that are frequently present which can either mask symptoms or make them worse.

It is extremely important for ADHD adults to understand themselves and why they do the things that they do. This is just as important for the non ADHD spouse or partner. Reading about this neurological disorder will help them to understand the actions and reactions of their ADHD partner. Understanding is the first step in bridging the gap between diametrically opposed thought processes. Education will also help in understanding that inappropriate conduct, while clearly inappropriate, is not due to a lack of caring about a partner or the relationship

One of the problems that was recurring in my marriage was the distribution of household chores. This was, and still can be, the source of much resentment. My wife often felt, and rightly so, that I wasn't contributing as much effort as she was. When we would discuss it, even before my diagnosis, I would often ask her to make me a list of what she needed of me. I thought that a list would make it tangible, and I could work through it. What followed was even more resentment. Her response was that we were adults, and she didn't need anyone to make a list for her. Why should I need that? Understandably, it didn't seem fair to her.

After my diagnosis, I began to understand why I needed the list. When I asked for one and got it, things were much simpler, and the list got done. I needed something visual and tangible to work through. A list is especially helpful when you want to please someone and aren't completely sure what they want. Add to this, a tendency to hyper focus or daydream and the outlook is not good.

There are still times of resentment, but they are fewer. We both have seen that I can accomplish things. It just may be in a different way. I also think that seeing my willingness to help went a long way in demonstrating that I wasn't taking her for granted or being lazy.

Don't Hide Behind Your Disability

It is important for both the ADHD adult and their respective other to understand that ADHD is NOT an excuse for inappropriate behavior. When lateness or impulsivity disrupts the flow of a relationship, it is important that the ADHD adult not hide behind their condition or for their partner to get that impression. Understanding how this neurological disorder affects behavior is useful in trying to prevent or avoid misunderstandings in the future.

This is one of the central issues that people with ADHD, both children and adults, face on a daily basis. Unfortunately, no matter what we say or do, there are those who believe that the whole concept of ADHD is nothing but an excuse for inappropriate behavior. Any appearance that a disability is being used as an excuse is like throwing gasoline on a fire. The issue is key to the raging debate in this country with respect to discipline for special needs children in school.

In truth, there is no excuse for inappropriate behavior. The adult with ADHD and the non ADHD partner must remember is to concentrate,

constructively, on why the behavior occurred and how to avoid it in the future. It is also important, when a disability is involved, for the non-disabled partner to understand that the conduct, although clearly inappropriate, is not a reflection on their partner's feelings about them or the relationship. Understanding the disability is crucial in understanding why the behavior occurs and what can be done to effect positive change in the future--changes that both partners can effect together. If this can be accomplished successfully, the relationship will be stronger because of it.

Another issue often overlooked by the non ADHD partner is the pain and anguish that their partner goes through in trying to do the right thing. And that at times, in spite of their efforts, things do go wrong. I usually start out with hope at getting where I am supposed to be on time. That hope gets quickly destroyed when hyper focus or guilt at not being more productive interfere with my ability to leave point A to get to point B. I get angry with myself. My conduct becomes inappropriate and wrong. I know that and beat myself up over it. That doesn't mean it is excusable by any means.

This remorse is something rarely seen by the other side. There is this belief that we take pleasure at being late, being irresponsible or otherwise acting inappropriately. I have yet to meet the adult with ADHD who has expressed this mythical pleasure. I can honestly say that if we could "just do it", we would!

Medication Helps

Medication can help in many ways. First, the medication can go a long way in helping an individual effect positive change in their life. Second, medication is a significant help in showing the non- ADHD partner how different their counterpart can be under medication. It is an effective way to help them understand that ADHD is a medical condition, not an excuse. The non-ADHD partners are in a better position than the disabled adults to assess the difference between their partner on medication and off. These differences in behavior are usually much clearer to another person.

I can't tell you how many times this conversation has taken place on a weekend in my house.

"Rob, you're not medicated, are you?"

"Actually, I'm not, honey. How can you tell?"

There was one time that I ran out of medication, and my prescription had to be ordered. I had no medicine for several days. That weekend I thought my wife was going to throw me out a window. The interesting part is that we were married for many years before I was diagnosed. I think, my being off medicine, showed her how far we both had come. There are also times when she will ask me whether or not I plan to take medication, depending on whether or not we are going to a social function. It helps her be prepared for the evening.

Medication is not a cure, and it may not address all of your symptoms. The benefit of medication is that it can be an effective tool for making positive changes in the ADHD person's life. With the help of a supportive partner, these changes can be more effective and may strengthen your relationship.

Conclusion

I don't have all the answers, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about, and trying to resolve the issues in my relationship with my family, because it is so important to me. I believe it may be helpful for ADHD couples to know that there are others out there who have the same struggles in their relationships. It also may help to recognize that common concerns reinforce the notion that my husband or girlfriend isn't doing this because they don't care about me or our relationship. Relationships are difficult to maintain, especially when a disability is involved. But, to borrow from the Venus and Mars theory, it is helpful to understand that there are differences in the way that people with ADHD, and those without, think and perceive the world around them. Understanding this can go a long way to making things better.

So good luck in your relationships-- and tell your non ADHD partners-- that there are many others out there just like them, too.

Robert M. Tudisco is a practicing attorney and freelance writer. He is also an adult diagnosed with ADHD. He is the Coordinator for the Westchester County Chapter of CHADD in New York. He is an avid runner and lives with his wife and young son in Eastchester New York. Robert welcomes comments and questions at his website www.ADDcopingskills.com.

First published in FOCUS, summer 2002

[^top](#)

Last Modified:

2004-09-01 20:01 PDT

© 1998-2004

a nonprofit organization