

Tips on ADHD in Couples

by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey

In couples the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can be particularly vexing. The distractibility, impulsivity, and excess energy associated with the syndrome can perturb intimate relationships in ways that leave each partner exhausted, angry, hurt, and misunderstood. This is doubly unfortunate because two people suffer. However, if the situation can be subtly regulated, the ADHD couple can find satisfaction commensurate with the high energy the couple usually possesses.

The following guidelines or "tips" might be helpful in settling the chaos that is so often present in the ADHD relationship and moving on towards a satisfying mutual relationship of love and understanding.

1. Make sure you have an accurate diagnosis. There are many things that look like ADHD, from too much coffee to anxiety states to dissociative disorders to hyperthyroidism. Before embarking on a treatment of ADHD consult with your physician to make sure what you have is really ADHD and not something else.
2. Once you are sure of the diagnosis, learn as much as you can about ADHD. There is an increasing body of literature out on the topic. The more you and your mate know, the better you will be able to help each other. The first step in the treatment of ADHD-whether it be in a couple or elsewhere-is education.
3. Declare a truce. After you have made the diagnosis and have done some reading, take a deep breath and wave the white flag. You both need some breathing space to begin to get your relationship on new footing.
4. Set up a time for talking. You will need some time to talk to each other about ADHD-what it is, how it affects your relationship, what each of you wants to do about it, what feelings you have about it. Don't do this on the run, i.e., during TV commercials, while drying dishes, in between telephone calls, etc. Set up some time. Reserve it for yourselves.
5. Spill the beans. Tell each other what is on your mind. ADHD shows up in different ways in different couples. Tell each other how it is showing up between you. Tell each other just how you are being driven crazy, what you like, what you want to change, what you want to preserve. Get it all out on the table. Try not to react until all the beans have been spilled.
6. Write down your complaints and your commendations. It is good to have it in writing what you want to change and what you want to preserve. Otherwise you'll forget.
7. Make a treatment plan. Brainstorm with each other as to how to reach your goals. You may want some professional help with this phase, but it is a good idea to try starting it on your own.
8. Add structure to your relationship.
9. Lists.
10. Bulletin boards.
11. Notepads in strategic places like by bed, in car, in bathroom and kitchen.
12. Write down what you want the other person to do and give it to him in the form of a list every day.

13. Keep a master appointment book for both of you. Make sure each of you checks it every day.
14. Avoid the pattern of mess-maker and cleaner-upper. You don't want the non-ADHD partner to "enable" the ADHD partner. Rather set up strategies to break this pattern.
15. Avoid the pattern of pesterer and tuner-outer. You don't want the non-ADHD partner to be forever nagging and kvetching at the ADHD partner to pay attention, get his act together, come out from behind the newspaper, etc.
16. Avoid the pattern of the victim and the victimizer. You don't want the ADHD partner to present himself as a helpless victim left at the merciless hands of the all-controlling non-ADHD mate.
17. Avoid the pattern of master and slave. Akin to #16. However, in a funny way it can often be the non-ADHD partner who feels like the slave to her or his mate's ADHD.
18. Avoid the pattern of sado-masochistic struggle as a routine way of interacting. Prior to diagnosis and intervention, many ADHD couples spent most of their time attacking and counter-attacking each other. The idea is to try to get past that and into the realm of problem solving. What you have to beware of is the covert pleasure that can be found in the struggle.
19. In general, watch out for the dynamics of control, dominance and submission, that lurk in the background of most relationships, let alone ADHD relationships. Try to get as clear on this as possible, so that you can work toward cooperation, rather than competitive struggle.
20. Break the tapes of negativity. Many ADHD couples have long ago taken on a resigned attitude of the there's-no-hope-for-us.
21. Use praise freely. Encouragement, too. Begin to play positive tapes.
22. Learn about mood management. Anticipation is a great way to help anyone, and especially someone with ADHD, deal with the highs and lows that come along.
23. Let the one who is better organized take on the job of organization. However, this job must then be adequately appreciated, noticed, and compensated.
24. Make time for each other. If the only way you can do this is by scheduling it, then schedule it. This is imperative! Clear communication, the expression of affection, the taking up of problems, playing together and having fun--all these ingredients of a good relationship cannot occur unless you spend time together.
25. Don't use ADHD as an excuse. Each member of the couple has to take responsibility for his or her actions. Don't blame it on ADHD. On the other hand, while one mustn't use ADHD as an excuse, knowledge of the syndrome can add immeasurably to the understanding one brings to the relationship.

Edward (Ned) Hallowell is a child and adult psychiatrist and the founder of The Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health in Sudbury and Andover, MA. His groundbreaking books, including *Driven to Distraction*, a 1994 bestseller about attention-deficit disorder, and *Worry*, about how to control anxiety, have distinguished him as one of the country's leading psychiatrists. Visit his website at drhallowell.com.

John J. Ratey, M.D., is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and has a private practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has lectured and published many articles on the topic of treating ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) in adults using psychoeducation and pharmacotherapy. He specifically is interested in the impact of ADD on life issues such as relationships, employment, and personal fulfillment. His website is <http://www.johnratey.com/>.