

ADD and Intimate Relationships

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San Diego, CA—2003

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Editor's Note: The following material is from a talk given to an adult ADD Support group in San Diego.

Ways In Which ADD Undermines Relationships

* **Impulsivity:** difficulty thinking through consequences of actions. "She/He doesn't think before she/he acts."

* **Need for Stimulation:** high stimulation activities in beginning of relationship. Later, relationship becomes boring. "In the beginning he was attentive to my needs, now he seems as though he could care less."

* **Conflict Seeking Behavior:** one way to get stimulation is by subconsciously provoking arguments. "If I say black, she says white."

* **Forgetfulness:** appointments, where you put things, people's names, etc. "He'd forget his own head if it weren't screwed on tight."

* **Poor Communication Skills:** difficulty with listening and verbalizing. brains are racing ahead to next thought. "She never listens to what I say."

* **Lack of Organization:** piles of laundry or paperwork due to distractibility. "Even his piles of papers have piles of papers."

* **Poor Follow Through:** difficulty completing tasks. "She never finishes anything she starts."

Things to Ask Yourself in Choosing The Right Mate

- * Were you friends first?
- * Are your friends or family telling you to take it slower?
- * Are your friends or family telling you that your new interest is less than wonderful?
- * Ask yourself this question, "If this person never changes, do I want to spend the rest of my life with him/her exactly the way they are today?"
- * If the person you are in love with has ADD, is she/he working on some of their destructive ADD behaviors? Have they sought a medical evaluation?
- * Is your partner willing to participate in couples counseling, either premarital or marital?—not necessarily because you already have problems, but to learn how to avoid them and develop the healthiest relationship possible.

Unrealistic Expectations in Romantic Relationships

- * All you need is love.
- * I've met the most wonderful guy/gal. Finally, there is someone who can meet all my needs.
- * I know she/he has problems, but she'll change if I just love her/him enough.
- * It's not my fault!
- * Now that we're married, everything should settle down and it will be smooth sailing from here on out.
- * If he would just take his medication, everything would be fine.
- * If only we had kids—that would keep us together.

More Realistic Expectations for Romantic Relationships

* Let's learn to live together. Learning how to love each other on a daily basis will sometimes be difficult—very difficult—but worth it.

* The honeymoon phase is a lot of fun and important to our relationship. Let's enjoy it while it lasts, for soon the work of maintaining the relationship begins. If we learn our lessons well, we will be better able to weather the storms of life which are sure to come our way.

* No one but me is really responsible for my needs. I can enjoy what my partner brings to the relationship, but ultimately, it is my responsibility—not my partner's—to make certain my needs are met.

* My partner and I are two separate individuals. I may need to change, but whether or not my partner needs to change is completely up to him/her. I accept and love my partner completely in this moment for who he/she is, not for who he/she might become.

* In order for our relationship to work well, I must be willing to lay down my right to be right. There may be other new possibilities I have never been able to see before because I have only looked at life through my eyes. The issue is not whose fault it is, but what I need to do differently in order for the two of us to grow and develop from the concept of "me" to the concept of "me and you."

* Whether or not my partner takes their ADD medication is ultimately their business. If invited to comment on their medication practices, I will do so. Otherwise, it is their responsibility. My responsibility is to take care of my life and the responsibilities I have.

* Our relationship will grow in positive ways if we work at learning and using new skills that will help us resolve conflict, communicate better, and have a mutually satisfying life together. If we can't get our act together without children, we'll never get it together with children.

ADD and the Challenges of Good Communication

Good communication is important in any relationship: family, employer, friend, romantic partner. You have to talk, and you have to listen. It sounds so simple, but it rarely is.

Setting the Foundation for Good Communication

Most conflicts in a romantic relationship are not about the conflict; they are about significance!— the quality of feeling valued, important and loved. We all need it. We always have, beginning at birth. When we listen to our partners and they listen to us, the underlying message is you are significant to me. I want to know and understand you. I want to take the time to know who you really are. I want you to know that I care about you. Having our significance needs met through good communication is often more important than getting our way or having our partner agree with us.

Common ADD Communication Behaviors

* **Not talking**—often from preoccupation with internal thoughts, feelings, worries. We create intimacy by communicating with each other. *Intimacy: "into-me-see"*

* **Impulsivity**—can be a good thing because it is helpful to know where your partner really stands on issues, what their real thoughts and feelings are. Sometimes, poor impulse control can get the ADD person in trouble over and over again—when you speak your mind at the wrong time.

Control your impulsivity: Open mouth, insert foot, to control. Then breathe, think first, think slowly, then speak. One way ADD people try to show their partner they are listening is to finish their sentences for them. Good intentions, but often leads to frustration.

* **Subject changing**—very common. Big problem. Because nothing ever gets resolved. Neither partner feels heard, neither partner feels significant and neither partner knows how you got from point a to point z.

* **Low self-esteem**—after a lifetime of feeling criticized and ridiculed, defensive behavior results. Being told for years that you are not good enough creates a defensive way of communicating, feeling like you always have to defend yourself—whether or not anyone is accusing you of anything. You spend a lot of time and energy developing your case, so to speak, and, not nearly enough time listening to what your partner has to say.

* **Pressured speech**—rapid fire, constant talking. Difficult for partner to get a word in edge wise. You have a need to get all the information out there, all at once for fear of forgetting something (especially common with the hyperactive/impulsive type). Often unaware of other person's need in the conversation. Become monologue. Person with ADD often thinks out loud, speaks what they are thinking. Serves the purpose of self-stimulation.

* **Not remaining focused**—not being present when partner is talking due to mind wandering/daydreaming. TV, computer, kids distract.

* **Obsessive thinking**—getting stuck in thinking to the exclusion of everything else (In the brain, it's an overactive cingulate gyrus).

* **Not receiving the intended message**—misinterpreting comments, feeling attacked. (In the brain, it's the temporal lobe that is creating this problem). The brain can confuse incoming information.

* **Brain melt-down**—usually 1 of 2 things happen. Either a person can become totally stressed and the ADD person shuts down, or the stimulation can prolong the conflict. Both cause problems. A person has difficulty sorting through and taking in information. ADD person walks away. Best thing to do is to give space, physically and emotionally, to gather thoughts and regroup.

* **Conflict-seeking behavior**—stimulation seeking. "Adrenaline junkie"—"I like to be angry, I feel good when I'm angry." Not good for relationships.

Guidelines for Good Communication

* When your partner is speaking to you, ask yourself, "Am I really listening to him/her right now?" Remind yourself that what your partner is saying right now is really important and that you really need to attend to what he/she is saying.

* Remember to breathe.

* Slow the conversation down. If you're talking too fast, you need to slow down what you're saying. If the conversation is going too fast for you to keep up, for whatever reason, identify that and work at slowing it down so you can both be heard and understood.

* Make your point, clearly and concisely, then be quiet and listen. Ask your partner to paraphrase back to you what you just said to make certain that you have communicated clearly. Then invite your partner to share their views with you.

* If you're taking medication for your ADD, you need to be on it during conversations with your partner. It can be difficult to have a decent conversation unless you're on your medication.

* If the conversation begins to get antagonistic, take a break. Give yourselves permission to take a breather and then come back at a time when cooler heads will prevail. It is often helpful for both partners to agree on a time to come back to the conversation (i.e. one hour, 4 p.m. that day).

* Remember what's important in all good communication: I want to get my idea across. I want to be heard. What is the most loving and respectful way you can do that? What can you do to make it more inviting for your partner to want to share with you?

* Love is a choice, not a demand. Remember that your partner is only obligated to you as long as he or she wants to be. Avoid ultimatums.

* When all else fails—or before it gets close to that point—get the help of a professional who can impartially direct you through the process and teach you both how to communicate better.

* If you're in a committed relationship, be willing to do whatever it takes—in healthy ways—to make the relationship work—evaluation, medication, therapy, less work at the office, doing the things you liked doing together when you first started dating. It all helps and it all counts.

Positive Attributes of ADD in a Romantic Relationship

* **Creativity:** in problem solving and having fun together.

* **Loyalty and charisma:** quick to forgive and forget, sensitivity, patience, understanding and kindness.

* **Empathy:** warm-hearted, compassionate, giving the shirt off their back without a second thought, knowing the need and wanting to help. Often grown out of a life of pain.

* **Intuition:** had to develop intuition as a way to cope with ADD challenges of inattention. Quickly can figure out what others are thinking or doing.

* **Fun-seeking:** open doors to new worlds, new views on life, new experiences for their partners. "Never a dull moment."

Guidelines for Making Your Love Last

* Don't argue in the bedroom.

* Love notes.

* Date night.

* Date weekend.

* Love codes. (i.e. on pagers)

- * Stay in touch.
- * Send flowers.
- * Tag team parenting.
- * Educate yourself about ADD.
- * Take your medication regularly (if you have made the personal decision to start it).
- * Speak highly of your mate.
- * Understand, accept and celebrate differences in relationship.

The Sweetheart Approach

S—Structure
W—Welcome
E—Encourage
E—Easy Does It
T—Trust
H—Humor
E—Esteem
A—Accept
R—Romance
T—Thankfulness

Ways to Keep Your Partner

- * Let go of things that are not that important to you.
- * Set aside some time each week to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the week together. Stay in touch with each other's lives.
- * It's never too late to say you're sorry.
- * Surprise your partner with something they love, but you really don't care too much for. Do it with no strings attached and no complaining.

- * Have your partner's car washed for them.
- * Discover something the two of you enjoy doing together—do it often!
- * Go see a romantic movie together.
- * Let go of having to say the last word.
- * Together, volunteer to serve a Thanksgiving Day meal at the local homeless shelter.
- * Take five minutes to tell your partner as many things as you can that you love, appreciate and admire about them.
- * Send your partner a surprise email.
- * Have lunch together at a special place, maybe even a picnic.

Resources

- * Halverstadt, J. (1998) *ADD and Romance*. Taylor Publishing Co., Dallas, Tx.
- * Gottman, J. (1976) *A Couple's Guide To Communication*. Research Press, Il.

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