

ADHD Relationships

By Louise Levin

If the course of true love never did run smooth, then why do we follow its bumpy path? Relationships, whether they be personal, professional or tangential are all equally important to supporting our inherent human need for social interaction and emotional connection. When a loved one is ADHD, the challenges and obstacles on the path to a healthy and meaningful relationship may appear too great to overcome. With all of the stimulation, stress and intensity that one is exposed to in the current economic, political and social environments, the addition of an auxiliary stress—ADHD— can prove to be the straw that breaks the relationship's back. However, with conviction of sentiment, patience and strong understanding of ADHD and its daily challenges hope, once lost, can be recovered.

Whatever you may have heard, ADHD has a biological foundation; it is a neurobiological disorder, located in the prefrontal lobe of the brain that affects attention, executive function and impulse control. Compromised abilities to sustain appropriate levels of attention, to generalize behaviors from one situation to the next and to effectively manage daily life may all contribute to a fractured and discordant relationship. These symptoms that define the ADHD individual as narcissistic, manipulative and crazy, only exacerbate romantic tensions, perpetuating a cycle of guilt, blame and shame felt by both partners and can become frustratingly commonplace to the emotional dynamic.

When considering these and other external pressures, the aforementioned troublesome “straw” translates into “compassion exhaustion.” This is the state achieved when one can no longer support the extreme and erratic symptoms of ADHD, especially those that manifest themselves as narcissism, or self-involvement, relegating the non-ADHD partner to the role of shrew, “nag,” or emotional scapegoat. This “ailment of the ego” directly diminishes the self-esteem, comfort and potency of the non-ADHD partner, undermining the health of an entire family system or peer network. These factors further contribute to a chaotic emotional landscape, in which effective communication and support of healthy boundaries are lost.

Communications in the best of relationships are often problematic; when adding the stresses of ADHD to the mix, one may come to feel that his or her needs aren't being met, that a significant other is not “meeting halfway,” or that one is no longer consulted in major, life altering decisions. Healthy dialogue and lines of communication will continue to degenerate, often to an irreparable level, or “point of no return.” For example, when one is communicating with an ADHD spouse or loved one, no matter how important or sensitive the topic, he or she may “zone out” at the most critical or sensitive juncture. This conveys a sense that the party is either disinterested or disrespectful when, in fact, he or she may care deeply about what is being said; something else has simply, temporarily caught their attention.

As frustrations increase, one or both individuals utilize several coping mechanisms. The most common, and the most detrimental, is the use of triangulation, or the incorporation of another individual into the adult hierarchy. This third party can include an extended member of the family, a lover, a friend or a spouse's own child. Under all circumstances, the integrity of the parent/couple dyad, or unit, is compromised. When couples bring another individual into their hierarchy, the integrity of the boundaries between the established ranks will begin to blur. For example, couples experiencing marital problems may involve their children, lovers or friends in secrets and emotions that none of the parties are emotionally or experientially equipped to participate in.

These and other diversionary tactics, implemented to take the focus from relationship problems, may also include an active search for external stimulation. The desire for stimulation may lead an ADHD individual to pursue rapidly changing paths, dictated by impulse rather than premeditated reason. An impromptu vacation, erratic change in professional goals or a simple missed dinner date can be common manifestations of the disorder. In more extreme situations, this high-adrenaline lifestyle may lead to more

complex problems, including substance abuse, extramarital affairs, gambling/shopping addictions, or a detrimental restlessness with the “status quo” of family life and responsibilities. These behaviors may also be manifested in the frustrated partner as a way to cope with their disappointment or rage with their ADHD partner. Divorce, separation or emotional stagnancy may be the unfortunate consequences.

To reestablish healthy equilibrium in a relationship, and to reconnect with a significant other affected by ADHD, marriage and family therapy, coaching and/or medication are often utilized to effectively identify and resolve issues. There are a number of techniques and methods in place to mitigate and manage symptoms of ADHD, and partners who work together to understand the challenges of the disorder can learn to overcome them. Though the obstacles are significant those involved, when provided with the proper tools, learn to successfully navigate the often-bumpy terrain of an ADHD relationship.