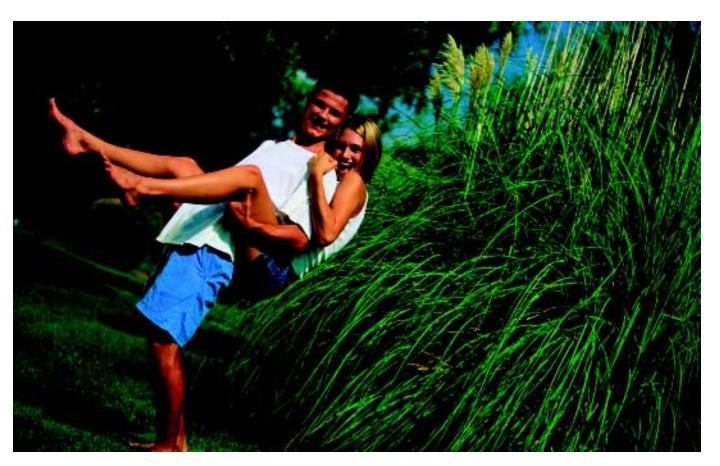


Michael had lost track of time at the office and was late picking up his son, Christopher, from school for the 4th time this month. Wondering whether the teacher would have more complaints about his 8-year-old son's aggressive behavior, he nearly rear-ended a truck. He also forgot to pick up the milk and dry-cleaning his wife, Melanie, had requested. Melanie was angry but not surprised, she figured Michael was just selfcentered and didn't care about her or their son. She was sick and tired of Michael's forgetfulness, his tuning her out and failing to honor his commitments or promises. She calculated all the unfinished projects rooms without doors, their half-tiled bathroom, the wood for the fence sitting in the yard for two years, and all of the broken promises. When she confronted Michael about his mistakes, she listened to his lame excuses, then something snapped and she shouted, "I can't take it anymore. You're just like Christopher. Either you go to see Dr. Jones who diagnosed Christopher with having AD/HD last week, and find out what's wrong with you, or I want a divorce. Then I'll only have one child; taking care of your messes is like having a second one."

Snapshots of an AD/HD Marriage Snapshots of an AD/HD Marriage



In the courtship/honeymoon stage of a relationship, the positive side of AD/HD often dominates.

Michael and Melanie's exchange illustrates how undiagnosed AD/HD can impact a marriage. The deficits in executive functioning, inhibitory control and attentional processes are the core characteristics of AD/HD. They predispose a spouse with AD/HD to be forgetful, disorganized, distracted, irresponsible, and to communicate poorly, and over-react emotionally. Such behaviors spur negative reactions and blameful attributions from the spouse without AD/HD, putting distance between the spouses, and eventually threatening the marriage. In order to fully understand the developmental course of the impact of AD/HD on marriage, we will provide snapshots of Michael and Melanie's interactions at key points during the course of their relationship.

The Courtship

It was love at first sight when Mike and Melanie met at a friend's party in 1995. Initially, they were inseparable and totally infatuated with each other. Michael courted Melanie like no other man she had ever dated. He bought her flowers and candy, left her love notes in surprising places, cooked her gourmet dinners, took her to romantic piano bars, and made love to her almost every day. Unbeknownst to Melanie, Michael also spent endless hours cleaning and organizing his otherwise messy apartment to look "picture perfect" every time Melanie visited. Devoting so much energy to Melanie, he fell seriously behind at his job selling office equipment, and was nearly fired. His parents, brother, sister and friends hardly ever heard from him due to his hyperfocusing on Melanie. Six months after they met, they were married and had a very romantic honeymoon in Hawaii.

In the courtship/honeymoon stage of a relationship, the positive side of AD/HD often dominates. Michael's ability to hyperfocus made it easy for him to pull out all the stops and take Melanie on the romantic ride of her life, winning her over. Characteristics such as forgetfulness, inattention, disorganization and impulsivity were not apparent to Melanie because Michael went out of his way to hide them. Even if Melanie had noticed some of Michael's other AD/HD characteristics, she would have overlooked them, blinded by his

charm. Of course, Michael neglected his work and family responsibilities, and worked hard to hide his disorderliness from Melanie.

The Honeymoon Ends Abruptly

Three months after their honeymoon, they've moved into Melanie's old apartment, and she is beginning to discover the true Michael. He is a total slob—he leaves dirty clothes all over, rarely hangs up towels after showering, lets papers and mail pile up, never washes a dish and ignores an overflowing trash basket.

Melanie, on the other hand, likes her apartment neat and well organized. Since Michael moved in, she feels invaded by Michael's messes. At first, she politely asked him to clean up after himself, and to try to keep things a little neater. It wasn't until she yelled that he promised to straighten up, but he was often distracted by a television show or something else before he actually did it.

Melanie also noticed a decrease in Michael's romantic behavior. Before they were married, he spent every free moment with her—they were romantic and intimate. Now, he prefers to spend that time watching sports on television or going out with his friends. He surfs the Internet rather than coming to bed, comes home from work late, and often forgets to pick up the things she asked him to get on the way home. His head is buried in the newspaper during meals and she has to shake him to get his attention.

What happened to the wonderful man she married? How did she miss all these problems before they were married? And why did Michael just switch off the romance after all those months of nonstop bliss? She is very disillusioned, angry and unhappy.

The honeymoon can end abruptly for couples when a spouse has undiagnosed AD/HD. When they settle down and begin building a life together, the spouse with AD/HD stops hyperfocusing on the relationship and the romance tends to dissipate. The spouse without AD/HD often feels as if the spouse with AD/HD has flipped a switch or has two personalities, and can't believe the sudden change when the spouse with AD/HD turns off the charm and stops hiding his/her AD/HD symptoms. The forgetfulness, disorganization and inattention become very apparent, and neither spouse has a context in which to understand these characteristics. They both draw negative conclusions about each other's motives and behaviors. Arguments and disagreements develop, and the couple develops negative patterns of communication and ineffective methods of conflict resolution.

Four Years Later: The First Child

Michael and Melanie have achieved the American Dream—they are homeowners with a wonderful three-year-old son. Both work full-time while Christopher attends nursery school in the mornings and daycare in the afternoons. His nursery school teacher has commented several times that Christopher has difficulty settling down during story time and nap time, but Michael and Melanie have not given much thought to these comments. Sadly, the couple feels like they are living the American nightmare rather than the dream. Their marriage is only a shell of the love affair they once enjoyed. Rarely sharing intimate moments or enjoying each other's friendship, Melanie continually reminds Michael of all his broken promises, unfulfilled dreams and incomplete projects.

Michael in turn accuses Melanie of criticizing him, demanding perfection and being a "slave driver" rather than a wife. Neither spouse understands exactly why their marriage has deteriorated. Michael now hyperfocuses on his job, where he is the number one salesman, which is the only reason his boss overlooks his chronically late paperwork. And, at this point, he is seriously tempted to have an affair with the number two salesperson—an attractive, vivacious, single woman.

The additional responsibilities of a home and a child further overwhelm the inefficient executive brain functions of the adult with AD/HD.



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The couple has been practicing a communication technique called "the dialogue," where they pick a single topic and take turns being the speaker and listener in an attempt to truly hear each other's positions.

Snapshots of an AD/HD Marriage

The additional responsibilities of a home and a child further overwhelm the inefficient executive brain functions of the adult with AD/HD. As an adult with undiagnosed AD/HD, he does not understand what is going on and externalizes blame on his wife or others to protect his damaged self-esteem. This fuels endless conflict and negative communication between the spouses, who may begin to turn to other sources for satisfaction.

Five Years Later: The Diagnosis

The vignette described at the start of this article represents the next snapshot of this marriage. When Christopher was 8, he was diagnosed with AD/HD by Dr. Jones. During the evaluation, Melanie realized that her son was a carbon copy of his father. She read several books about adult AD/HD and was convinced Michael had AD/HD also. She then threatened to divorce Michael in order to coerce him into going for an AD/HD evaluation.

Michael was planning to "blow off" Melanie's threat, however, while looking at their wedding album he realized how far off course they had gotten. He had also secretly noticed many of his son's AD/HD characteristics in himself, but was too stubborn to tell Melanie. Michael decided that he owed it to their marriage to get the evaluation, and scheduled an appointment with their doctor.

Dr. Jones interviewed Michael and Melanie together in order to get Melanie's corroboration of Michael's reports. This also helped to make the diagnostic process a psycho-educational/healing experience for the couple. As Dr. Jones reviewed each successive AD/HD symptom with them, the couple tearfully realized the extent to which these symptoms had been crippling their marriage. Dr. Jones carefully separated the disorder from the person, helping Michael to see that he has intrinsic self-worth as a human being even though the neurobiological disorder of AD/HD may apply to him. He also helped Melanie see that it was inevitable that she would blame Michael without understanding the role of neurobiology. Dr. Jones traced the course of their marriage to help them understand that the current situation was a result of several issues: the neurobiology of AD/HD, the impact of unresolved childhood issues, incorrect attributions and distorted beliefs about the reasons for their spouse's actions, as well as years of learned negative communication and ineffective conflict resolution techniques.

When Dr. Jones concluded that Michael had AD/HD, the couple felt strangely relieved. Perhaps it wasn't all their fault, and maybe they had a second chance to regain their lost dreams for a happy, fulfilled relationship. Could medication be the answer they were looking for? Little did they realize the hard work ahead of them, and that medication was only one coping technique. Over the next few weeks, Michael noticed a sadness upon him at unpredictable moments, during which he mourned all of the missed opportunities due to his AD/HD. This reaction is very natural after receiving a diagnosis of AD/HD in adulthood.

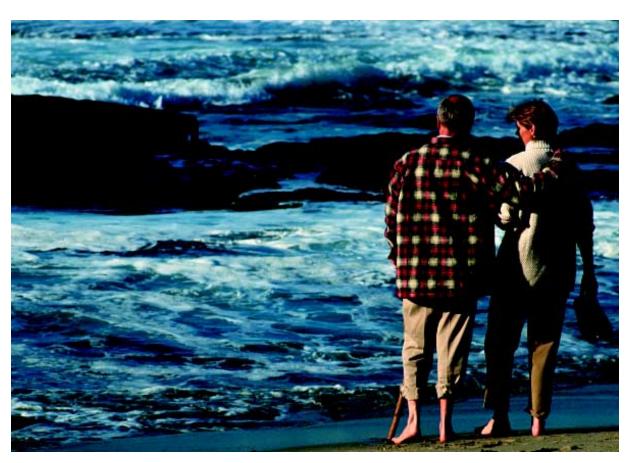
Dr. Jones made it clear that the couple would need marital therapy and that Michael would need a combination of stimulant medication, coaching and perhaps individual therapy. However, couples in such a situation often grasp at straws, and consequently put more faith in the role of medication than the rest of the recommendations. After all, medication is easier to implement than therapy and coaching. The way Michael was evaluated is also very common. After a child is diagnosed with AD/HD, one spouse sees the similarities and either requests an evaluation or is coerced into one by the other spouse.

Six Months Later: Hard Work Starts to Pay Off

In our final snapshot, we rejoin Michael and Melanie six months after the AD/HD diagnosis. They attend marital therapy weekly, an adult AD/HD support group monthly, and Michael takes medication twice a day. Michael is also considering hiring a coach to help him at work. Christopher also takes stimulant medication and has significantly improved his performance at school

The stimulant medication helps Michael stick to his priorities, finish tasks, listen to Melanie attentively, and control his impulsive response tendency when he is angered. It also helps him control himself in dealing with Christopher's challenging behavior. Melanie goes with him to his medical follow-up visits and gives him feedback to help judge the effect iveness of the medication.

The couple learned that repairing the damage to their marriage was hard work. It has been very difficult for them to break the pattern of accusatory-defensive communication. They have been practicing a communication technique called "the dialogue," where they pick a single topic and take turns being the speaker and listener in an attempt to truly hear each other's positions, rather than interrupting and accus-



ing one another. They have needed a great deal of guidance from their marital therapist to replace arguments with dialogues, and they still slip back into their old ways at times.

Accepting and embracing organizational tools has also been a challenge. Since Melanie believed AD/HD was Michael's problem, she failed to understand why she should provide him with reminders to perform his responsibilities and use his planner. After all, she felt that as an adult he should be responsible for his own behavior. To give him reminders and prompts seemed to her like a form of "co-dependency." This had been drummed into her head over the many years that she saw her father unsuccessfully try to overcome his alcoholism. Only when the marital therapist presented coping with AD/HD within a "rehabilitation model," did Melanie consider that it might really be her role to participate in helping her husband use organizational tools

Their therapist helped them come to regard the inevitable slip-ups that occurred as "AD/HD moments," to be identified and coped with, combining humor and forgiveness with effective time management and organizational tools. Medication helps Michael complete more of the household projects than he did in the past, and with organizational help, he keeps his piles under better control. However, he still tends to

leave his clothes out and forgets to hang up the towels. But, instead of "melting down" with regard to Michael's messes, Melanie gently taps Michael on the shoulder, as a signal for him to tend to his mess.

Although the couple never rekindled the intensity of their courtship phase, they have regained their friendship. Because they have a way to understand "AD/HD moments" and some tools to cope with them, they are less angry and communicate more effectively. As a result, their sexual relationship has improved tremendously. But every once in a while, they fall back into their old ways and have an argument over something insignificant. They will need to continue marital therapy for some time, and realize that medication will not solve all of their problems. Nevertheless, Michael is still very careful not to let his medication run out.

Michael and Melanie's story represents the experiences of many couples where a spouse is diagnosed with AD/HD during the course of the marriage. However, regardless of the interventions available, not all couples are able to save their marriages. Unfortunately, at this point, we have very little empirical research to guide us in understanding the nature of marital difficulties, the best assessment and treatment methods, and which interventions work for whom, in couples where one or both spouses have AD/HD.

AD/HD behaviors with the greatest negative impact on relationships

- Doesn't remember being told things
- ☐ Says things without thinking
- ☐ "Zones out" in conversations
- ☐ Has trouble dealing with frustration
- ☐ Has trouble getting started on a task
- ☐ Under-estimates time needed to complete a task
- Leaves a mess
- Doesn't finish household projects

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The therapist helped them come to regard the inevitable slip-ups

Snapshots of an AD/HD Marriage

Couples Study Underway

My colleague, Eleanor Payson, and I have undertaken a pilot study to identify the AD/HD behaviors which couples perceive to have the greatest negative impact on their relationships. Eighty couples where one spouse had AD/HD, completed a checklist of 34 AD/HD behaviors, rating the extent to which each behavior occurred and impacted their marriage. The spouse with AD/HD rated him/herself and the spouse without AD/HD rated the other spouse. The behaviors

- Doesn't remember being told things
- Says things without thinking
- **that occurred as •** "Zones out" in conversations
- "AD/HD moments." Has trouble dealing with frustration
 - Has trouble getting started on a task
 - Under-estimates time needed to complete a task
 - Leaves a mess
 - Doesn't finish household projects

Further research with larger samples of couples is necessary before we can reach definitive conclusions, but you can see that Michael and Melanie had problems in all of these areas. If you or your spouse have similar difficulties, there is hope that your relationship can improve. You might start by reading a self-help book such as ADD and Romance. Then, seek out a marital therapist experienced in treating couples with AD/HD. The earlier in your relationship that you seek out therapeutic help, the easier it will be to make significant changes. ■

Arthur L. Robin, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Wayne State University in Detroit, Mich.

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The earlier in your relationship that you seek out therapeutic help, the easier it will be to make significant changes.