



*Dealing with the
impact of AD/HD on*
Marriage

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WHILE ANY MARRIAGE has its challenging moments, when one or both spouses have AD/HD, those times only seem to multiply. Noted psychologist Arthur L. Robin, Ph.D., recently discussed the characteristics of AD/HD marriages throughout the course of a relationship (October 2002 *Attention!*[®]). He explained that during the courtship phase of the relationship, the positive aspects of AD/HD often dominate. However, as the relationship progresses, responsibilities build and the newness of the relationship wears off, the less endearing aspects of AD/HD can frequently negatively impact a relationship. He also cited eight behaviors that are often problematic to relationships where one of the individuals has AD/HD. These eight behaviors are:

1. Doesn't remember being told things.
 2. Saying things without thinking.
 3. "Zoning out" in conversations.
 4. Problems dealing with frustrations.
 5. Trouble getting started on a task.
 6. Under-estimating time needed to complete a task.
 7. Leaving a mess.
 8. Not finishing household projects.
- Using stickers and sticky notes.
 - Using alarms.
 - Creating "To Do" lists.
 - Sending yourself e-mails.
 - Putting things you need to remember by the front door.
 - Creating your own memory cues, things that have worked in the past, such as checking your "To Do List" at the end of every day.

This article will take the information presented in Dr. Robin's article a step further by discussing some of the interventions that can be helpful in reducing the negative impact of these eight behaviors.

Doesn't Remember being Told to Do Things

Intervention 1 Make proper use of memory prompts and make the regular and consistent use of prompts a habit for life even when it seems boring, inconvenient or frustrating to do so. Memory prompts can include:

- Leaving messages on your home or work answering machines to remind you of things you need to do

Intervention 2 Be aware of the rationalizations that keep you from properly using memory prompts. Don't let your internal rationalization statements like, "I'll write it down in a minute," sabotage your use of memory prompts. Be aware of these statements and how they sabotage your success so that you can avoid giving into them.



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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

Intervention 3 Realize that you are not going to remember what you were told to do if you never stop to listen in the first place. Reduce all other distractions, stop thinking about other things, and intentionally focus on what the other person is saying. If necessary, repeat back to him or her what you heard. Go ahead and write down what you need to remember on your "To Do" list or set up some other prompt right away.

Saying Things without Thinking

Intervention 1 Be aware of your verbal impulsiveness in public settings and the topics that make your spouse or significant other uncomfortable. Be considerate when it comes to discussing personal topics with others.

Intervention 2 Learn how to engage others in conversation. Encourage them to talk about themselves and their interests. You might not say a single thing about yourself and the other person will leave the conversation thinking that you are a fascinating individual. And while it might be a good idea to avoid certain



topics (e.g., sex, religion, politics), it is normally safe to find out about kids, hobbies, areas of interest and jobs.

Intervention 3 Try to be aware of how others are reacting to you when you are speaking. If they appear uncomfortable or are trying to change the topic, recognize that. It is also important to realize that adults with AD/HD often enjoy intense conversations because it feeds their need for stimulation. Most other individuals do not have this same need, or at least not to the same extent. Conversations that you find fun or exciting might make others feel uncomfortable.

Intervention 4 Help your spouse understand AD/HD better so that he or she will be less defensive and not personalize things when you *do* say something without thinking.

Intervention 5 When your spouse's feelings are hurt by something that you said impulsively, don't negate his or her feelings. Be patient, listen to why what you said was hurtful, and try not to become defensive so you can really hear his or her concerns.

"Zoning Out" During Conversations

Intervention 1 Realize what listening really communicates to your spouse. It tells him or her that:

- You value his or her opinion.
- You think what he or she has to say is important.
- You care about him or her.

Intervention 2 Practice the following listening steps:
Step One: Limit or eliminate all other distractions. For example, mute the TV, turn off the radio or turn away from the computer.

Step Two: Take a deep breath, slowly inhale and exhale. Quiet your mind and relax. As you breathe out, feel the tension leave your body. If there is anything you are focusing your mind on, make a quick note of it to yourself, then let go of it and focus your full attention on your spouse. Use a relaxed gaze (what some people refer to as *soft eyes*). This will help you relieve tension while you are listening.

Step Three: While your spouse is speaking, listen carefully. Do not:

- Think about what you were just doing.
- Think about what you are going to do when your spouse finishes talking.
- Think about what you are going to say in response to your spouse.

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- Think about topics unrelated to this conversation.

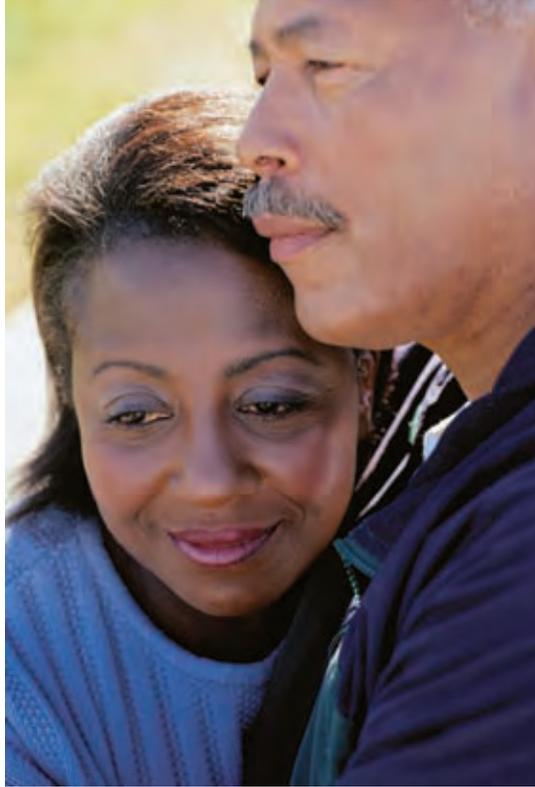
Simply open your mind to take in what your spouse is saying. If you find your mind wandering to other things, recognize this and refocus your attention.

Intervention 3 As an adult with AD/HD, it can be very difficult to stay focused and listen to what your spouse or significant other is saying. If it is not a good time to listen to your spouse, calmly let your spouse know that you will listen to him or her when you have completed your task. However, your current task should be worthy of postponing your spouse, and not a reason to continue watching TV, surfing the Internet or the like.

Trouble Dealing with Frustrations

Intervention 1 Actively work on reducing the areas of frustration in your life, which may help you feel less overwhelmed and irritated.

For many individuals with AD/HD, the number one cause of frustration can be their tendency to lose or misplace things. A principle that can help to com-



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but this is, “*everything has a place, its place is the same place all the time, and I am responsible for putting it in its place as soon as I am done with it.*” This is a no excuses kind of rule. As soon as we make excuses for not putting things where they belong, they get lost and our frustrations build.

Intervention 2 When it is feasible to do so, hire someone to handle some of the things that you find frustrating. For instance, if house cleaning is frustrating, hire a housekeeper. If household projects like building a deck are frustrating, then hire a carpenter.

Trouble Getting Started on a Task

People with AD/HD often avoid activities that require an extended period of concentration and focus. The problem is that one still needs to take care of things that are not stimulating and/or require an extended period of concentration and focus. They still need to be done and the best way to deal with them is in a proactive manner.

Intervention 1 The goal here is to “*figure out what it is you are avoiding the most and take care of it first.*” In short, to gain proper control over the impact of your AD/HD, you must learn to *avoid avoidance*.

Intervention 2 Learn how to train yourself to first take care of things you might intentionally want to avoid and don’t allow yourself to get away with those old behaviors. Consider small rewards for yourself for accomplishing tedious but necessary tasks.

Under-Estimating the Time Needed to Complete a Task

Intervention 1 Determine the average amount of time you under-estimate how long it will take you to finish a task and as a general rule of thumb, purposefully add that time onto any estimate. For instance, if it normally takes twice as long to complete a task as you think it is going to take, then make it a habit to double the amount of time you give yourself.

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Intervention 2 Ask someone who has done the task previously how long it took them. Take that time and add an extra time allowance to complete that task within a reasonable period.

Intervention 3 It is important to learn the concept of under-promising and over-delivering. If you get the task done earlier than you said you would, your spouse will be happy. If it takes longer than you stated, then they will be dissatisfied. Given this point, it is best to under-promise and over-deliver.

Leaving a Mess and Not Finishing Household Projects

Intervention 1 Take a second look at the idea of *avoiding avoidance*. Both problematic behaviors listed above are often caused because avoidance has occurred. That project, which was interesting at first, has lost its intrinsic interest or excitement and so you avoid completing it. That stack of papers does not get picked up because you think you will take care of it later. In the end, the stack of papers does not get picked up or that project does not get finished. This is because neither

task is stimulating and both cause frustration because their completion is no longer rewarding to you. However, the reality is that life will be better for you and your spouse if you go ahead and complete them.

Intervention 2 Realize that your spouse's need for neatness, order and completion is just as valid as your need for stimulation. Be willing to put forth the effort to meet his or her needs.

All these interventions can be helpful in sustaining a happy and successful marriage, but seeking the assistance of a marriage counselor who is cognizant of the impact of AD/HD on relationships may also help your relationship. It is important to understand that AD/HD alone may not be to blame for all of the issues that arise in our marriages. A good marriage counselor should be able to help you determine which issues are affected by AD/HD and which are not. ■

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