Bridge Over Troubled Water:
Navigating the AD/HD Affected Relationship
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Learning Objectives
• Articulate the diagnostic components of adult ADHD
• Identify the symptoms of ADHD that impact and interfere with a healthy partner relationship.
• Define conflictual issues that are present in the relationship due to ADHD symptoms
• Help couples develop coping strategies to handle unhealthy responses and reactions
• Assist couples in resolving interpersonal conflicts with more clarity and purpose.

The AD/HD Affected Couple
I. Overview of Adult ADHD
II. ADHD Across the Four Life Dimensions
III. Relational Roadblocks
IV. Strengthening the Relationship
V. Q&A

I. Overview of Adult ADHD
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- Affects from 4 to 6% of adult population (Kessler, Adler, Barkley 2006)
- Lifespan disorder
- Highly heritable (Worcester, 2010)
- Neurobiological
  - Dysregulation of dopamine and norepinephrine
    - Dopamine – attention, focus, staying on task (Antai-Ontong, 2008)
    - Norepinephrine – attention span, impulsivity and distractibility (Antai-Ontong, 2008)

I. Overview of Adult ADHD

- Neurobiological impact of adult ADHD
  - Prefrontal cortex/Executive function
    - Attention span
    - Judgment
    - Decision making
    - Planning
    - Prioritizing
    - Impulse control
    - Modulation of emotion

I. Overview of Adult ADHD

- Common characteristics of adult ADHD
  - Inattention
  - Impulsivity
  - Restlessness
  - Distractibility
What It Feels Like to Have ADD:

"I have time gaps, thought gaps. You know when you lose something, and they tell you to retrace your steps? 98% of the time, I can't. It goes something like this. 'Okay, I grabbed my keys as I was heading out the door, now I'm at my car and I'm holding my dog's leash. Holding my keys, by the door... at the car. EXPLETIVE! I JUST HAD THEM! Why does this always happen to me?' I'm such a mess, OH! I forgot to get that stain off my pants. AGH, my keys, WHERE ARE MY KEYS?!?!'

This is a big part of the ADD for me. I spend a few precious minutes just thinking about how horrible I am for being in my thirties and not having "fixed" this yet, and how I really need to go back to the psychiatrist to get started on medication again (but it makes my mouth dry at 4:30 every day,) when I could be actually looking for the keys.

Then I empty out my purse on the ground, go through all the pockets, lament the fact that I got a purse with so many pockets, when I realize I was supposed to be at work 10 minutes ago. Thank God my work has somewhat flexible hours. So, this particular dance, or a version of it, happens almost every day."

I. Overview of Adult ADHD

- Therapist Treatment
  - Thorough history
  - Collateral information
  - Differential diagnoses
  - Assessment tools
    - Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS v1.1)
    - Brown Attention Disorder Scale for Adults
    - Conners Adult ADHD Rating Scales
    - The AQ (ADD Adult Questionnaire) Thompson and Thompson
    - DSM
    - Qualified med referral

ADHD or ADD? Understanding the subtypes

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Predominantly Hyperactive/Impulsive Presentation
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Predominantly Inattentive Presentation
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Combined Presentation
### I. Overview of Adult ADHD

#### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Predominantly Hyperactive/Impulsive Presentation (DSM-5 2013)

- **Hyperactive features:**
  - Feeling overactive or as if ‘driven by a motor’
  - Frequently feeling restless or fidgety
  - Talking too much
  - Difficulty sitting still for a prolonged period of time

#### Impulsive features:
- Finishes others’ sentences
- Interrupts others
- Difficulty waiting turn

### I. Overview of Adult ADHD

#### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Predominantly Inattentive Presentation (DSM-5 2013)

- **Inattentive features:**
  - Trouble concentrating on what others are saying
  - Problems remembering appointments or obligations
  - Misplaces or has trouble finding things
  - Avoids or delays getting started on tasks – especially details
  - Difficulty with organization
  - Trouble paying attention when doing boring or repetitive work
  - Easily distracted
  - Careless mistakes
  - Difficulty with follow through
I. Overview of Adult ADHD

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Combined Presentation (DSM-5 2013)
- Features of both subtypes

II. ADHD Across the 4 Life Dimensions

- Effective Overall Treatment
  - Education
  - Medication
  - Therapy
  - Support
  - Exercise and diet
II. ADHD Across the 4 Life Dimensions

• Impact across the four dimensions of life:
  • Physical dimension
  • Emotional dimension
  • Personal dimension
  • Relational dimension

II. ADHD Across the 4 Life Dimensions

• Physical dimension
  • Self medication is common
    • Illegal substances
    • Legal substances
    • Behaviors

II. ADHD Across the 4 Life Dimensions

• Emotional dimension
  • Self image
  • Anxiety
  • Depression
Emotional Dimension - Comorbidity

- Comorbidity in adults with ADHD
  - Comorbidity is the rule not the exception (Ed Jesalva, M.D.)
  - Substance abuse/dependency
  - Mood disorders
  - Anxiety disorders

II. ADHD Across the 4 Life Dimensions

- Personal dimension
  - Missing the mark
  - Education
  - Jobs
  - Spiritual

How does someone with ADHD write an essay:

1. Sit down in front of your computer.
2. Stare at screen.
3. Fiddle with the font for 30 minutes.
4. Get up and go get a drink.
5. Sit down in front of your computer.
7. Fiddle with the margins for a while.
8. Look up something on Wikipedia for your essay.
9. 2 hours later you’re on some random Wikipedia page and you have no idea how you got there.
10. Get up and go to the bathroom.

(Continued on the next page)
11. Decide that the computer is too distracting so you write an outline in your notebook.

12. You get a text from your friend and an hour later you realize you’re in the Facebook app on your phone and you need to get back to work.

13. Take your outline and type it up on your computer.

14. Turn the lines from your outline into paragraphs and think to yourself, “Man, I’m on fire. What’s next?”

15. Realize you don’t want to overdo it so you take a dinner break.

16. About 2 am, after watching a movie and playing some video games you realize you really need to finish your essay (because of course it’s due tomorrow, why else would you be working on it tonight?).

17. Crank out your paper in the next 3 hours because your brain is too tired to put up a fight anymore and you’ve just downed your 3rd Mountain Dew (or caffeinated beverage of choice).

18. Crash for about 3 hours.

19. Wake up and reread your essay. First thought is that’s it complete crap. Second thought is maybe it’s not that bad and do some editing.

20. Get tired of editing and think to yourself that it’s pretty good after all.

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II. ADHD Across the 4 Life Dimensions

- Relational dimension
  - Individuals with ADHD have a harder time starting and maintaining interpersonal relationships. (Adler, 2008)
  - Poor social skills
  - Distractibility
  - Impulsivity
  - Unaware of how he/she presents to others
  - Forgetfulness

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IV. Roadblocks to Relational Success
III Roadblocks to Relational Success

Anything that prohibits a relationship from being mutually satisfying and fulfilling

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Roadblock One: Overhelping and Excessive Caretaking

- **Overhelping**
  - Doing too many things for your partner without consideration

- **Excessive Caretaking**
  - Too absorbed, too wrapped up—almost to an obsessive degree—in managing your partner's life.

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Roadblock One: Overhelping and Excessive Caretaking

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**Roadblock One: Overhelping and Excessive Caretaking**

Questions to ask the Overhelper and Caretaker

- Are you fearful of what might happen if you step back?
- Are you disappointed about how your relationship has turned out?
- Have you participated? What is your responsibility?
- What do you need to change? Are you willing to make changes for the sake of your relationship...even if it is difficult?

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**Roadblock Two: Learned Helplessness**

- A person’s conditioned belief that he/she isn’t capable of doing anything or accomplishing anything.

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**Roadblock Three: The Parent Trap**

- Unhealthy communication pattern in which the non-ADHD partner approaches and relates to the partner with ADHD as a parent would treat a disobedient child.
- ADHD partner responds in a child-like manner.
- Includes both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Extremely toxic.
Roadblock Three: Avoiding the Parent Trap

Communicate as an adult
- Your words express what you need or feel

Use assertive communication
- Express your needs and wants in a manner that is direct and honest, not hostile or mean

Assertive Communication Tools

'I' statements
When I ______, I feel ______, and I would prefer _______

Avoid Absolutes
Frequently /More often than not /It seems like a lot of the time

Play the Broken Record
Calmly and firmly restate your point (or request) regardless of your partner’s response

IV. Strengthening the Relationship

- Decide what’s real and unreal
- Lower any expectations
- The Frankenstein dilemma
- Role expectations
- Working together
- Good self care
IV. Strengthening the Relationship

- Decide what's real and unreal

IV. Strengthening the Relationship

- Lower expectations
  - Shoulds and oughts
  - Ask for help

IV. Strengthening the Relationship

- The Frankenstein dilemma
IV. Strengthening the Relationship

• Role expectations

IV. Strengthening the Relationship

• Working together
  - Examine systems
  - SWOT analysis
  - Couple goals
  - Family goals
  - Mission statement

IV. Strengthening the Relationship

• Good self care for non ADD partner
IV. Strengthening Personal Boundaries

Personal Boundaries: Our emotional needs and preferences and how they get played out in reciprocal interactions with everyone in our lives, especially our partners.

- How do I like to be treated?
- What will I allow, and not allow, to be said and done to me?
- What seems appropriate to me, both verbally and physically?
- What are my priorities?
- What is my bottom line?

Strong Personal Boundaries = a sense of protection and security
Creates respect and dignity in relationship

Poor or weak Personal Boundaries = feelings of vulnerability and defenselessness
Creates anger and resentment in relationship

Boundary difficulties in an ADHD relationship
- Time
- Forgetfulness
- Impulsivity
Establishing Personal Boundaries

1. Take a Personal Inventory

Purpose: Learn how to express your desires, needs, and feelings with more clarity and less emotion.

- What makes me feel content?
- What makes me feel productive and effective?
- What were the times in my life when I felt most content, productive, and effective?
- What gets in the way of my feeling contented, productive, and effective?
- How have I tried to change the things that get in the way?
- Have those efforts worked?
- If not, is there anything that I could do differently in the future?

Establishing Personal Boundaries

2. Create a Won’t Do/Will Do List

Purpose: Replace old, dysfunctional ways of expressing desires and needs with ones that are healthier.

Example of Won’t Do/Will Do List

Problem
My husband avoids conversations about money.

What I Won’t Do Anymore
Badger and nag him. Get angry at his avoidance.

What I Will Do in the Future
Have more awareness of the appropriate time to approach him. Ask permission to have the conversation. If he avoids the conversation, voice my frustration in a calm manner. If necessary, make money decisions on my own.
Establishing Personal Boundaries

1. Take Inventory
2. Won’t Do/Will Do List

3. Put plan into action:
   - Choose appropriate time
   - Communicate in caring manner
     - Ask permission
     - Use ‘I’ statements
   - Do follow up*
   - Keep options open – you may have to revise plan

An ancient Chinese proverb says that the best time to plant a tree was thirty years ago,

The next best time to plant a tree - is TODAY

"It keeps me from looking at my phone every two seconds."
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Q & A

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Resources

• New Harbinger Publications www.newharbinger.com
• ADDA (Attention Deficit Disorder Assn.) www.add.org
• CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder) www.chadd.org
• Attention Deficit Disorder Resources www.addresource.org
• National Resource Center on ADHD www.help4adhd.org
• ADDvance www.addvance.com

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References