

PLEASE KEEP
YOUR BRAIN
TURNED ON

AD/HD in Adult Relationships: A Team Approach

A chat with Gina Pera

FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, WELL-KNOWN JOURNALIST GINA PERA HAS RESEARCHED

and written about AD/HD in adults while also advocating for better awareness and treatment standards. Pera is the author of *Is It You, Me, or Adult ADD? Stopping the Roller Coaster When Someone You Love Has Attention Deficit Disorder* (2008, 1201 Alarm Press). *Attention* recently published two excerpts from the book—“The Biology of Denial” in the August 2008 issue and “Dealing with Denial” in the October 2008 issue. Pera leads discussion groups for the AD/HD community in Silicon Valley and an international online group for partners of adults with AD/HD. She is a member of the editorial advisory board of *Attention* magazine.



Gina Pera

A full transcript of this question and answer session is available for CHADD members only on chadd.org, the CHADD website. CHADD and the National Resource Center on AD/HD sponsor an Ask the Expert event each month. Check the website for more information about the series and to read transcripts of sessions with experts on other topics.

People with AD/HD have an exceptional need for mental stimulation. Many couples suffer when one person or the other gets bored, because they've heard everything the other has to say. Any suggestions?

Is that really true that we humans have a limited amount of things to say? My husband and I are going strong after fourteen years. And I stayed up way too late last night talking with my good friend of twenty-five years. After all this time, we still have many interesting thoughts and new experiences to share. We've both changed and grown a lot over the years, but we maintain that connection. But I think we also both feel a “responsibility” of sorts not to bore each other or take the friendship for granted. In general, it's tricky to know what's an “exceptional need for mental stimulation” and what's a troubling tendency to be easily bored (in other words, a neurobiological trait that might merit treatment).

Some people stimulate their interest in a well-worn subject by diving deeper into it, studying it or experiencing it from a new angle. So, I guess it's the same way with couples. When both partners stay engaged in life, learning new things they can share

with each other, the connection has a better chance of staying lively. But when one partner feeds on novelty alone, lacking an ability to sustain interest, and expects a partner to be the equivalent of stimulant medication, you're right—that can be a problem. It's also problematic if one partner falls into a mental or intellectual rut and assumes this has no impact on the partner; it does.

Can you share some examples of how couples can realistically share household responsibilities without an imbalance of work or setting up the person with ADD for failure? What areas do you see as strengths for those with ADD where they can add to rather than hamper things in the relationship and meeting responsibilities?

Boy, this is the big question, isn't it? The solution offered in the partners' group [sponsored by our CHADD chapter] is LIVE IN A DUPLEX—side by side!

The biggest problem happens around the issue of what's a FUN chore and what's DRUDGE work. Too often, the adult with AD/HD will take the fun chores because they are more motivating. But then the partner gets stuck with always changing the litter box—or something.

Beyond that, I think we just can't make generalizations about adults with AD/HD regarding household chores. Some like to work in bursts of energy. My friend with AD/HD says he gets the house cleaned on Saturday morning by blasting disco music (he's of that era). That gets him going and actually makes it fun.

Some also do well to have a checklist—they love that

feeling of checking off tasks. It feels like a reward. The important thing is to work together on finding a balance. Neither partner should be stuck with all the drudge work—or enjoy the fun tasks like going to Home Depot for light bulbs... and coming back six hours later.

Is self-absorption (i.e., it's all about me) a guy thing, or an AD/HD thing?

I find that few generalizations hold true for either men or women with AD/HD. But when left unaddressed, AD/HD symptoms can definitely contribute to being a bit self-centered.

When you are easily distractible, when you live in the moment, and need higher degrees of stimulation to pay attention, it's not that easy to be empathetic to another person. In fact, it's not even easy to be empathetic to yourself—such as thinking ahead to how you're going to feel when the eBay spending spree shows up on your credit card next month.

One benefit of medication treatment that surprises many partners: increased empathy in the partner with AD/HD. The partner who has AD/HD notices more details (“Is chopping that onion making you cry?”) and is more motivated to take steps to help (“Here, let me cut it for you”).

Are divorces more common in marriages when one partner has AD/HD? If so, why?

Unfortunately, yes, untreated AD/HD is associated with a higher divorce rate.

No one has studied the “why” behind these divorces. But it's safe to say they happen for the same reasons that untreated AD/HD is associated with higher rates of bankruptcy, traffic citations and accidents, unplanned pregnancy, incarceration, and job loss: AD/HD symptoms.

Being distractible, impulsive, and/or inattentive impairs an adult's ability to act in a mature and responsible manner—for example, to think of consequences, plan ahead, take others' needs into consideration, and show cooperation.

Being easily bored and always chasing stimulation (especially when it comes to romance) also leads a person to abandon promising relationships in search of the new and novel.

The good news is that, in most cases, adults with AD/HD can defy these statistics. But it starts with an accurate diagnosis and solid strategies.

How can a spouse help without becoming the coach, parent, boss, or bad guy? What boundaries are needed?

I'd say education is always the first step. That means reading a few books and attending some CHADD meetings so you can talk with other adults with AD/HD and their partners. Many have experienced this issue and learned to move past it.

It also depends on how long the person has been pursuing AD/HD treatment. In the beginning, partners often need to work together closely, especially, if the partner with AD/HD is pursuing medication treatment, in working with a prescribing physician. Having feedback from a spouse really helps to adjust the dosage, find the right combinations, etc.

In the beginning, it can seem as though the partner is “codependent.” But the goal is working on treatment strategies that will enable you to equalize the relationship.

This is probably the biggest hurdle for couples to get past—and some therapists don't help. There is this idea that, “He/she is an adult, and should be responsible for treatment. I don't want to feel like a parent by getting involved.” But in many cases, if you don't get involved, that almost guarantees that you'll need to act like a parent/coach for a much longer time.

Is there a way to help the partner with AD/HD translate the leadership and “team player” qualities used at work into behaviors at home?

I have a sign on the door that leads from our garage to our kitchen. It's for my husband, who has AD/HD, and it says: “Please keep your brain turned on.”

So many adults with AD/HD I've spoken with say that they save all their focus and energy for work. Home is the place where they kick back, recharge, and relax. They simply don't have enough motivation, cooperation, focus, and all the rest to be “on” at work and at home.

Some say that the structure of work makes it easier to stay focused. They know what's expected, and can deliver. At home, the demands are always changing, especially if there are children. But some also say that the rewards at work are clearer, too—there's a salary or the next sale or a promotion.

At home, the rewards are more subtle. Some adults with AD/HD simply need their attention drawn to the fact that there are big rewards to being “on” at home, too. ●

