

Restoring Balance in Your Relationship

by Colette de Marneffe, Ph.D.

As a couple therapist specializing in ADHD, I frequently hear a client lament “Janet acts like she’s my mother,” or “Paul treats me like a child.” When adult partnerships come to feel like parent-child relationships, frustration, resentment and disappointment build on both sides.

Relationships in which a member has ADHD are particularly vulnerable to becoming unbalanced in this way. This is not surprising when one considers some of the hallmark characteristics of adult ADHD: disorganization, difficulty managing time and responsibilities efficiently, forgetfulness, a tendency to misplace and lose things, and difficulty juggling multiple tasks. Add to this the fact that people often choose a partner with complementary characteristics, or strengths in their areas of weakness. What does this mean for a partnership in which one member has ADHD? An adult with ADHD, who is struggling with time management, planning ahead, and maintaining consistency in routines and behaviors, is often drawn to an individual who excels in these areas. The non-ADHD partner, in turn, may be particularly attracted to her mate’s spontaneity, creativity, energy and ability to live in the present. In addition, he or she may feel comfortable being “the organized one” while his or her partner with ADHD may be “the laid-back one” or “the passionate one.”

As with all couples, characteristics that initially contributed to attraction and compatibility can become sources of conflict over time. Ann, a woman whose ADHD creates significant organizational and time-management challenges, once appreciated her husband, George’s, efficiency and predictability. Now, however, she resents his efforts to schedule her time and neaten her paper piles, and she often views him as rigid and controlling. George, initially drawn to Ann’s openness and more relaxed approach to life, is now annoyed by her difficulty staying on top of parenting tasks and sees her as being irresponsible and unreliable. Temperamental differences such as these often become a greater source of relationship conflict as responsibilities increase. While job, parenting and financial demands mount, a greater level of efficiency and orchestration is needed. ADHD, when untreated, compromises efficiency in myriad ways, often taking a considerable toll on long-term relationships.

The most important goal of ADHD couple therapy is to restore the sense of working as a team. This begins with learning about ADHD and recognizing the ways it affects behavior and relationship dynamics. Once couples have a thorough understanding of ADHD, they can begin to look at their patterns through a different lens, letting go of blame.

A new balance must be created, with changes in roles and responsibilities, for a more satisfying relationship to take shape. In looking at each partner’s strengths and weaknesses, we can identify ways to divide and share responsibilities that play to each person’s strengths. This does not mean that the partner without ADHD will continue to

take responsibility for the repetitive, time-sensitive, or organizational responsibilities simply because he or she is better at staying on top of them. In order to build a more balanced relationship, the partner with ADHD must learn new strategies and habits, such as systems for keeping a schedule, organizing work and household spaces, paying bills and creating reminders for tasks and appointments. Once the partner with ADHD assumes the responsibility for learning compensatory strategies, often with the help of a therapist or coach, the partner can begin to let go of these responsibilities. Partners can work together to create and maintain a household that is ADHD-friendly, and which capitalizes on their different strengths and weaknesses.