

■ Devon Adult Autism and ADHD Service

■ **Attention Deficit  
Hyperactivity Disorder  
(ADHD) and Relationships**

## Foreword

The purpose of this booklet is to give an overview of the ways that ADHD might affect social interactions with others, across a variety of contexts such as intimate relationships, family life, and general social interactions.

If you are reading this and you have ADHD, you may find this booklet helpful in starting to recognise some of the ways that your ADHD may be affecting your social relationships. Or you may already be aware of this and want some ideas for how to tackle these. You may also find it helpful to share this booklet with your family and friends so that they can better understand ADHD and its influence on relationships.

The pack has been put together by staff at the Devon Adult Autism and ADHD Service (DAANA). We have tried to bring together all the most important and up-to-date information for you. However, we know that this is a developing area and we are always pleased to receive new information and your suggestions and ideas for improving the pack. If you would like to pass on any comments or suggestions, please contact:

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Devon Adult Autism and ADHD service

Devon Partnership Trust

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## Introduction

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects you throughout your life and across lots of different areas. One of the overlooked ways that it can often affect you is socially – it can affect your interactions with others, your friendships and relationships, and how you are perceived by others.

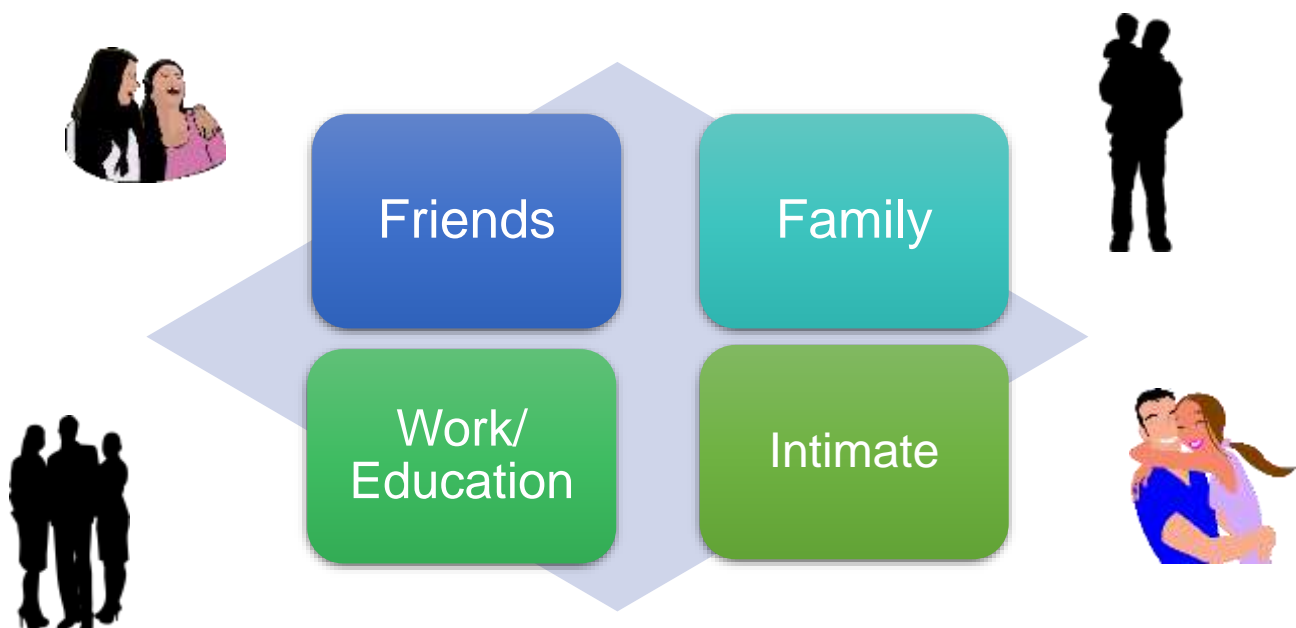
Often, a misunderstanding or lack of knowledge about ADHD can lead to others interpreting social behaviours associated with ADHD as intentional and neglectful. It can therefore be helpful to give them more information about ADHD, to reduce blame and conflict.

*However*, it is also helpful for you, as someone with ADHD, to notice and understand how your behaviour affects others so that you can use strategies and ideas to manage these. This booklet includes some ideas to help support change and signposting for further information.

This booklet may be difficult or uncomfortable to read at times, especially if you have had difficulties with your relationships throughout your life. But it is important to remember that the first step in trying to improve your relationships is through understanding and that by reading this booklet, you are taking this first step.

## Types of Relationships

There are four main types of relationships that most people have to manage regularly:



Some aspects of ADHD will affect all of these, whereas some types of relationships might be affected in different ways. This booklet will start by taking a general overview of how ADHD can affect interactions and relationships, before focusing on intimate relationships in the later sections.

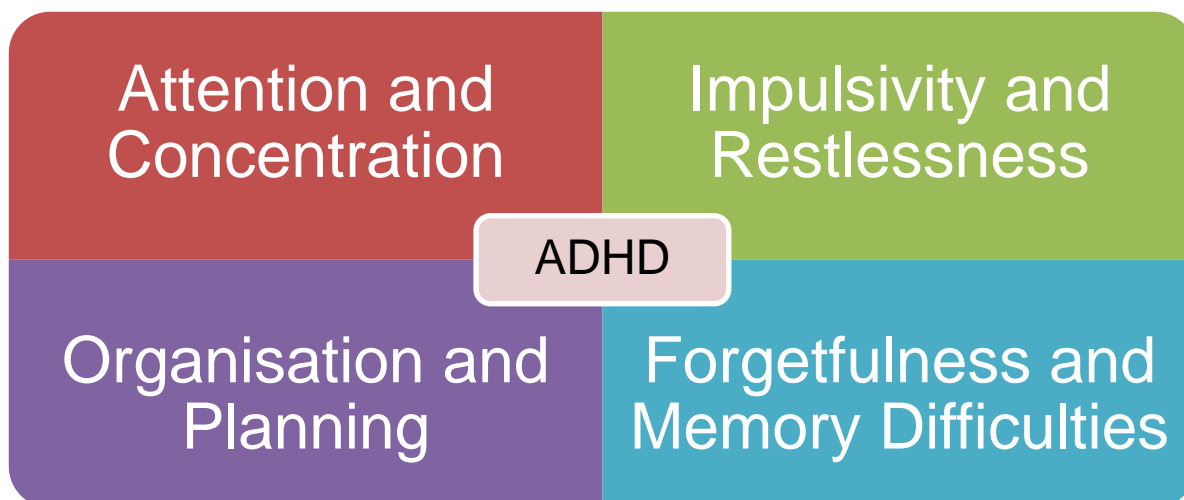
## **Benefits of ADHD in Relationships**

This booklet focus on the difficulties and challenges that can occur when one or more people in a relationship has ADHD. However, before we look at that, it's worth noting that there are many positives and strengths associated with ADHD, which make it appealing to have a friend or partner or parent who has ADHD.

People with ADHD are often great at thinking of something to do, coming up with spontaneous plans, fun ideas. They usually find something to talk about and they can be good at empathising with others' emotions. They can come up with creative solutions to a problem, see a situation from a different perspective, and are often good in a crisis. So there are many reasons why others would want to be in a relationship/friendship with someone who has ADHD. The ideas and strategies in this booklet are designed to help you to get the best out of these relationships.

## 1. How ADHD Symptoms Can Affect Relationships

There are the four core areas that are looked at in an ADHD assessment and the main areas in which people report difficulties:



If we have difficulties in any of these areas, it's likely to affect our relationships and the conversations we have with people. Also, others might misunderstand the reasons for this. The boxes on the next page show some of these difficulties.

It's easy to see how ADHD can affect relationships. When the other person doesn't understand the effects of ADHD and thinks that there is another reason why the person with ADHD forgets appointments, interrupts, can't remember what the other person said, and this keeps happening, they might end that relationship or be less interested in the person with ADHD. Then friendships and relationships end, or there is lots more tension in the household/family.

It's therefore common for people with ADHD to have lots of experiences of rejection by other people. Rejection is never a pleasant experience. The more we experience it, the more we want to avoid it and start to be cautious and possibly on the lookout for it happening again. Sometimes this gets called Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria.



|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b><u>Attention &amp; Concentration</u></b></p> <p><b>A Person with ADHD experiences:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty paying attention during conversations.</li> <li>- Distraction by surroundings.</li> <li>- Hyperfocus on other topics that may not appear relevant.</li> <li>- Following tangents in thought processes</li> <li>- Making mistakes</li> </ul> <p><b>Viewed as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disinterest in conversations.</li> <li>- Feeling that they find you boring.</li> <li>- They are choosing to focus on something else or changing the topic.</li> </ul> | <p><b><u>Impulsivity &amp; Restlessness</u></b></p> <p><b>A person with ADHD experiences:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty sitting still for long periods (e.g. watching television/films).</li> <li>- Fidgeting/checking phone during conversations.</li> <li>- Impulsive speech – interrupting people or saying inappropriate or irrelevant things.</li> <li>- Strong and quick emotional responses.</li> <li>- Taking risks</li> <li>- Poor sleep</li> </ul> <p><b>Viewed as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disinterest in shared activities.</li> <li>- Disinterest in conversations.</li> <li>- Rudeness.</li> </ul> |
|--|---|

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appearing disinterested and therefore not caring</li> <li>- Being ignored.</li> <li>- That the person has to do everything in order for it to be done correctly</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being 'over-emotional' or being generally irritable.</li> <li>- Not caring about consequences and the impact of risks and consequences on others</li> <li>- That the person doesn't prioritise intimacy</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b><u>Organisation &amp; Planning</u></b></p> <p><b>A person with ADHD experiences:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being late.</li> <li>- Not turning up to a planned event</li> <li>- Difficulty in planning ahead so avoid making plans, e.g. dates, holidays, trips out.</li> <li>- Difficulties prioritising household tasks and knowing how long they might take.</li> <li>- Time blindness</li> </ul> <p><b>Viewed as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not caring enough about the other person.</li> <li>- Not wanting to do shared activities.</li> <li>- Not contributing to the maintenance of the household – not valuing the other person's time and how much they do.</li> <li>- Not following through on what was promised therefore unreliable</li> </ul> | <p><b><u>Forgetfulness &amp; Memory</u></b></p> <p><b>A person with ADHD experiences:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Forgetting conversations.</li> <li>- Forgetting appointments/plans.</li> <li>- Forgetting day-to-day items and having to spend time looking for them or going back for them.</li> <li>- Forgetting about shared bills/expenses.</li> <li>- Not remembering birthdays anniversaries etc.</li> </ul> <p><b>Viewed as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not caring about what was spoken about.</li> <li>- Not caring about plans and appointments.</li> <li>- Not trustworthy</li> <li>- Carelessness about the financial impact of shared expenses.</li> <li>- Not being a priority to the other person</li> </ul> |



## A note on Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria...

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is an American diagnosis, but it isn't given in the UK list of diagnoses. RSD includes being sensitive to rejection, and feeling an intense level of emotional pain when thinking that there has been a rejection.

Whilst in recent years many people have associated RSD with ADHD, it is not thought that people experience RSD *as a symptom* of ADHD. However, we've just seen that people who experience ADHD are more likely to have had more experiences of rejection and criticism throughout their lives because of their ADHD symptoms. In addition, we know that people with ADHD usually tend to feel emotions more intensely than others. It therefore makes sense that people with ADHD might identify with the definition of RSD, but it won't be given as a diagnosis in the UK.

## 2. ADHD and Social Skills

As outlined briefly above, people with ADHD can often have trouble in social interactions and relationships with others as a result of their ADHD symptoms. In this section, we will focus on how ADHD affects day-to-day social interactions and how, as a life-long condition, it can affect the early development of social skills throughout childhood and adolescence.

### How Does ADHD Affect Social Interactions?

The symptoms of ADHD can have an impact on how you interact with others and how others perceive you in interactions in several ways:

**Inattention/Distracton** – Not paying attention during conversations, changing topics mid conversations, doing other things during conversations (texting etc.), zoning out.



**Memory** – Forgetting what is said, repeating self, asking questions that have already been answered etc.

**Impulsivity** – Reacting quickly without thinking (emotionally or otherwise), speaking without thinking (saying something rude or inappropriate).



**Hyperactivity** – Physical restlessness during conversations (which may be perceived as agitation or anxiety) making it appear that you want to be doing something else, internal restlessness as a distraction, making it difficult to focus.

Alongside the direct impact of ADHD symptoms, ADHD can also make it difficult to learn appropriate social skills.

### How do we learn social skills?

Social skills are generally acquired through ‘incidental learning’ – watching how other people behave, copying them, and getting positive feedback from good outcomes (e.g., having a request granted, strengthening a relationship, resolving a conflict). We start doing this in childhood, mimicking the adults and other children around us, and our skills are refined as we grow up.

*However*, this can prove to be difficult for children – and adults – with ADHD for two main reasons:

#### a) Rejection and Exclusion by Peers

ADHD is often thought of as an ‘invisible disability’ – meaning that it might not be diagnosed early enough, and even when it is, other people might not always be able to tell that somebody has it (especially other children). This may lead to behaviours linked with ADHD that are seen as socially inappropriate to be seen as caused by being rude, self-centred, or ill-mannered.

This can lead to ‘social punishment’ of the person with ADHD, including rejection, exclusion, avoidance, and other less subtle ways of showing disapproval towards another person. This exclusion in turn means that they will have fewer opportunities for social learning.

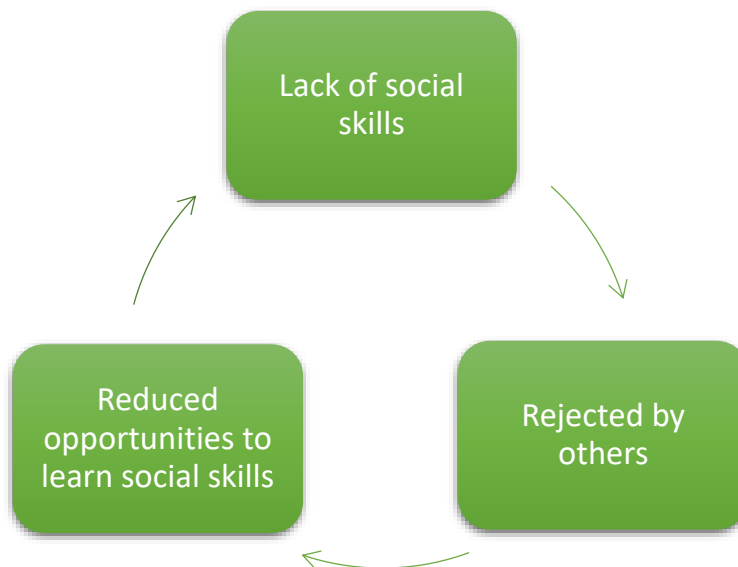
It is also not standard practice for people to let others know when they have committed a social transgression, as this is also seen as rude. This means that people are often left on their own to try and improve their social skills without a clear understanding of what exactly they need to work on.

This social rejection can also lead to the person with ADHD developing poor self-esteem or other mental health problems such as anxiety, which in turn might make it difficult for them to initiate interactions and develop relationships.

### **b) Difficulty in Learning Skills Due to Symptoms**

ADHD symptoms themselves can present barriers to children with ADHD being able to learn and practice social skills. For example, difficulty in paying attention means not noticing the nuances of social interactions, and then difficulty with memory means these skills are less likely to be remembered and practiced in the future.

This comes together to create a cycle that can be difficult to break free from. A lack of social skills can lead to rejection of the person with ADHD by their peers, which leads to having fewer opportunities to practice and learn these skills, meaning they continue to lack social skills and continue to be rejected by their peers.



## Managing ADHD in Conversations

This doesn't mean that every adult with ADHD lacks social skills. But, they might sometimes feel clumsy in conversations, or that they don't know what to say or how to say it. Whilst adults with ADHD may have had difficulty in developing social skills throughout their childhood – this does not mean that it is too late! There are many different strategies for improving these skills as an adult. Some ideas of where to start are listed below, and there are more detailed resources included at the end of this booklet.

### Listening to Others



One of the main difficulties of managing ADHD in conversations is being able to listen to others, even if you care about the person and what they are saying. Starting to work on this area and your listening skills can have a big impact on how others perceive you during interactions.

Here are some ideas to get started:

1. Use **eye contact** to help you focus on what people are saying and avoid distractions in the immediate area.



2. Think about what the **motivation is to maintain concentration** and listen to the person.
  - Is the consequence keeping your job? Keeping your relationship?
  - Thinking about consequences can help you to listen.
  - When you are tempted to or find yourself tuning out, think about what is at stake.

3. **Breathe** – This helps people in lots of different situations. Keep your mind focused on the breath. You could try a different breathing pattern, for example, a four-second inhale through your nose and then exhale through your mouth.



4. **Repeat back** what the other person has said, showing that you have taken it in and helping your memory, e.g., 'you were frustrated when Sheila didn't come through for you'.



5. **Check your understanding** e.g., using a person's name in conversation with them to help you remember it.

6. **Mindfulness** – Regular mindfulness practice can help to 'train' your ability to focus your attention, which may help in conversations.



7. **Concentration strategies** – Many people with ADHD find it easier to focus on one thing if there is something else going on in the background that's taking up part of their attention. This might be using a fidget toy, standing or walking rather than sitting, being in a busy place, or having music on in the background.

## Active Listening

There are **six key elements** to active listening. These all ensure that you hear the other person and that the other person knows that you are hearing what they say.

Responding to what is  
**PERSONAL** rather than  
distant.

Doing more **LISTENING**  
than talking.

Respond with  
**ACCEPTANCE &  
EMPATHY** – not cold  
objectivity.

Trying to understand  
the person's **FEELINGS** –  
**NOT** just the **FACTS**.

Restating and clarifying  
what has been said,  
**NOT IMPOSING YOUR  
OWN INTERPRETATION.**

**AVOID** responding with  
**YOUR** frame of  
reference.

## Going Further

Here are some tips on how you might start to work on other aspects of social skills:

**Knowledge:** The first step to working on anything is having a better understanding of it. Through reading – including this booklet – you can increase your understanding of appropriate social skills and where you may want to start.



**Attitude:** Having a positive and open attitude towards improving your skills, including being open to feedback from others.

**Goals:** Setting clear, achievable goals and only working on one goal at a time. Master one skill before moving on to the next!



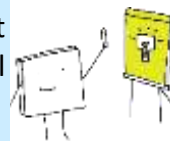
**Echo System:** If you find you frequently miss information, get into a routine of checking with others what they have said. Ask others to give you a summary of the important points during conversations and try to give your summary to show you have heard them.

**Observation:** You can learn a great deal about social skills by watching others. This may be in your work or social life, or even on television or YouTube.



**Role Play:** Ask a friend or family member to help you practice skills in a safe environment and be open to receiving honest feedback from them.

**Visualisation:** Rehearse the skills in your mind, imagining what you might do or say in different settings with different people. This will increase the likelihood of these skills being successful when used in real life.



**Prompts:** Develop and use prompts for your social skills goals. These may be visual (e.g., index cards, post-it notes, phone wallpaper), verbal (asking a friend to gently prompt you), or physical (setting your watch to vibrate periodically as a reminder if your mind has wandered).

### 3. Maintaining and Improving Friendships

Good friendships help you to:

Relieve stress

Increase happiness

Help you in difficult times

Help you to make changes

Share your joy

Improve the way you feel about yourself

Decrease the chances of developing physical and mental health difficulties

For the reasons that we have already looked at in the booklet, this can be difficult for people with ADHD. Making a little effort can produce a massive effect, such as answering phone calls texts, and emails.

Here are some ideas for ways to sustain your relationships and friendships:

- Do **activities you enjoy** and **ask friends to join you**. This way you will feel more comfortable.



- If you are meeting a friend for dinner, a **buffet** could be better as this means you could **walk around**.

- When **inviting your friends** to your home, make it a **potluck dinner** where everyone brings a dish, **limiting the preparations** that you need to make yourself.

- Set aside **one hour per week** to answer messages from friends. **Make this part of a weekly schedule**. This small amount of time will help let friends know you are **thinking of them**.



- **Schedule & set reminders for time together!** Think about and identify strategies that can help you to remember and prioritise these social appointments.

- Write **notes** about conversations that you have had.
  - o **Check in** with the person about what they need you to do





## Positive Relationship Record

Why keep a positive relationship record?

Many people with ADHD have low self-esteem, especially when it comes to how they see themselves as a friend to others. They may believe that they're a bad friend or that they cannot sustain friendships.

It is very easy for us to keep track of all of the negative experiences we have with others – they are often unpleasant and stick in our minds for a long time. However, this can lead us to ignore all of the positive, pleasant interactions that we have with others.

Keeping a record of the positive interactions we have with others can help us to 'see the bigger picture' and help to remind us of the positive relationships and interactions we have with others. This could include receiving a compliment, enjoying time spent with someone, a message that shows someone cares about you, or someone smiling at you at the checkout.

The positive relationship record is best used every day if possible, to help you record as many positive interactions/relationships with others as you can.

*An example positive relationship record can be found on the next page...*



## Positive Relationship Record

| Date and Situation                        | What happened?  | What do I feel this tells me about my relationship? |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Monday 7<sup>th</sup>,<br/>at home</i> | <i>Got a text from a friend asking me to meet up at the weekend</i> | <i>They like me and want to spend time with me</i>  |
|   |   |   |
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## 4. Starting Intimate Relationships

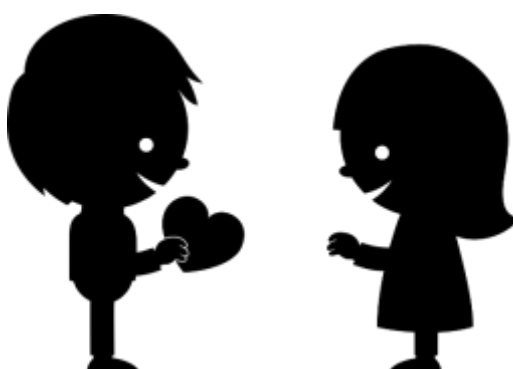
### Hyperfocus

ADHD brains are always looking for something novel and exciting, as this can make it easy to focus and provide lots of good-feeling dopamine hits. New relationships often provide large amounts of this, which means it can be very easy for a person with ADHD to focus a lot on the relationship during these early stages and find it very 'stimulating'.

As with most things, this does start to wear off as they become used to the relationship. They may start to interpret this as boredom or a sign of the relationship having 'run its course', which may lead to ending the relationship or seeking stimulation elsewhere. However, it is very normal for this to happen and it is unlikely that any relationship would maintain the same level of novelty and excitement over long periods.

It is important to consider *why* you might be feeling this way – has the relationship run its course? Or is this a usual reduction in excitement that often occurs for people with ADHD? If it is the latter, it can be helpful to think of other ways to build novelty and excitement into your life, either on your own or in shared ways with your partner.

Many of the social difficulties described in the previous section can also have an impact on intimate relationships, as communication is essential in these relationships. Research on ADHD and marriage has shown that the rates of getting married are not different for those with ADHD, but unfortunately, satisfaction with one's marriage tends to be lower. There is also evidence that separation and divorce rates as we get older are higher. However, by starting to understand ADHD and the impact that it might be having on your relationship, you can start to address these difficulties and work towards positive change.



## 5. Maintaining Intimate Relationships

**What do we need in relationships?** If we struggle in certain areas of relationships we can feel that this means we are not good at relationships at all, because it can feel so overwhelming. However, there are lots of qualities that are important in creating and sustaining relationships. We looked at the most common qualities cited for positive relationships. Have a look at them (whether you have ADHD or not) and see which ones you think you are good at in relationships, which ones you struggle at, and where you are more average.

|                  |                    |                |                      |                    |
|------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Trustworthiness  | Good Communication | Intimacy       | Sexual compatibility | Quality time       |
| Honesty          | Boundaries         | Disagreements  | Affection            | Fun                |
| Acceptance       | Loyalty            | Mutual respect | Teamwork             | Trust              |
| Autonomy         | Commitment         | Validation     | Security             | Empathy            |
| Prioritisation   | Humour             | Time           | Connection           | Growth             |
| Family           | Being interesting  | Excitement     | Compromise           | Encouragement      |
| Forgiveness      | Adventure          | Kindness       | Creativity           | Good conversations |
| Being passionate | Patience           | Fidelity       | Friendship           | Equality           |

Make sure you acknowledge your successes in relationships and think about what other areas could change.

ADHD poses challenges for relationships; for both partners. This section is aimed at helping both people understand this impact and think about what may be helpful to move forward. We refer to the person with ADHD and the 'non- ADHD partner'; if both people in the relationship have ADHD these challenges may still stand, think about whether or how this may apply to you, for example through being the most organised one with ADHD. Remember that as ever not all of these elements will apply to everyone.

We all ultimately want relationships to be rewarding and fulfilling for both people. Most relationships have natural ups and downs, times where you will feel more satisfied or less satisfied with the relationship and your partner.



When relationships are going well it brings out the best in us, feeling generous, compassionate, and supportive. However, ADHD can impact the relationship and make us feel tired, resentful, and unhappy so we are less likely to be the person we would like to be. This section is aimed at helping you to think through some unhelpful patterns you may have got into with regards to your relationship. This is common in any relationship, for people with ADHD and their partner, there may be some specific patterns to look out for.

Do these sound familiar?

**Symptom – Distraction**

**Behaviour** – Whatever is in front of the adult with ADHD takes their attention

**You might feel** – frustrated about struggling to ignore distractions and keep attention

**Partner's possible Misinterpretation** – Non ADHD partner can be or feel ignored unless other stimuli are prominent e.g. yelling. "My partner doesn't pay attention to me; therefore he/she doesn't love me"

**Partner's common behavioural response** – Increase in intrusive behaviour e.g. yelling or belittling

**Symptom – Impulsivity or difficulties with memory**

**Behaviour** – Person with ADHD will often interrupt his/her partner while they are speaking because they don't want to forget thought they are wanting to share.

**You might feel** – anxious about forgetting something important that you need to tell the person

**Partners possible Misinterpretation** – "My Friend is rude to me and doesn't respect me or what I have to say"

**Partners common behavioural response** – The possible feeling of being ignored could lead to anger and attempts by friend to "teach" better manners or have fewer conversations.

**Symptom – Difficulty organising and completing tasks**

**Behaviour** – Adult with ADHD promises to do something e.g. a chore but often does not go through with completing it

**You might feel**- ashamed that you have been unable to complete the task. Worried about the reactions of others.

**Partner's possible Misinterpretation** – "My partner is unreliable or untrustworthy"

**Partner's common behavioural response** – The non ADHD partner assumes the majority of the family responsibilities, this can result in feelings of being overwhelmed and resentful with a consequence of taking on a parental/controlling role in order to keep some order in household.

These experiences can be very painful for everyone. From these examples we can think about work that can be done by both partners. The partner with ADHD can learn to manage their ADHD, through medication or strategies. The non-ADHD partner can try to remember

these challenges are just symptoms, which will help with potential misinterpretations, and may mean that they can act in a different way. Remember you are both battling ADHD!



## Relationship areas that may be affected by ADHD

### Trust

Trust can be affected by ADHD in a relationship. Often the basis of everyday trust is about taking on tasks and following through. To build trust we often rely on people being consistent, this can be difficult for people with ADHD. Other elements build trust in a relationship, being treated with respect, and kindness and having good intentions for example. Trying to be open and truthful about what is hard for you, not covering up mistakes, and taking responsibility for a system to ensure that these mistakes do not happen all the time can help with this. This increase in reliability can be helpful. Often difficulties with emotional regulation can be challenging for people with ADHD. This may mean that you end up in arguments whereby you both may not act with respect and kindness towards each other. Can you think of a verbal cue that you can both use to indicate that you need to step away from the conversation, calm down and come back to it later? Make sure to set a time frame for coming back to this so that your partner can feel that you are going to address difficulties reliably.

### Sex

There are no absolutes when it comes to ADHD and sex. Research does not find that ADHD medication consistently helps or hinders sex (this does not rule out this helping or hindering sex for some people). *Some* people with ADHD are more interested in sex. There may be a higher degree of desire for variety and novelty in sexual experience as this releases more dopamine.

Sensory sensitivities can make sex for the ADHD partner more difficult, at worst when senses are heightened touch can feel painful. Distraction can also be a challenge for some in their sexual relationships, being open and honest about what your challenges are is important.

Maintaining a regular sleep routine can be a common challenge for people with ADHD and they can often get out of sync with their partners' routine. This may make intimacy feel impossible at times which can be frustrating for both partners and can also impact on tiredness. Think about how you may manage this sleep routine as a couple.

Remember the biggest impact on sex is the way that you feel about each other. Dr Ari Tuckman is a specialist in Sex and ADHD and in his research, he asked people what were the barriers in their sex lives. Most of the barriers were around time and energy and how they felt about their partner. He also found that it is very rarely related to one problem. Stress,

depression, and poor self-esteem all impact on our sex life. Some of the difficult communication patterns that can exist when there is ADHD in a relationship can build resentment or upset which impacts the sex life. So if you can work on the challenges within the relationship this is likely to improve your sex life.



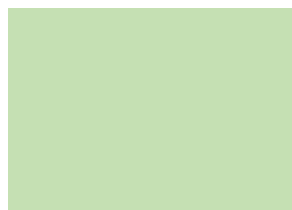
### **Challenging relationship patterns/ traps as a result of ADHD**

Remember we are not often aware that difficult patterns may be happening. If they were easy to recognise and challenge then you would have recognised them and solved them by now- it is tough.

These are just some ideas to help you think through what may be difficult patterns in your relationship. Think about what keeps things going, as you read through think:

- What is your responsibility for this?
- Is there anything you can do that would help this situation?
- What is the barrier to this pattern changing?

First we will think of the pattern and then strategies that may help.



#### **Parent-Child dynamic**



This is a common pattern identified by those who work with couples where ADHD is present

A normal response to life feeling chaotic is to try to become more organised and take control. This often means the most organised one in the relationship assumes this role. They may become responsible for lots of elements of the relationship, finances, housework, organising schedules etc. Over some time this may mean that the ADHD person stops trying and starts under-functioning, i.e. not doing the things that they are capable of. They become rebellious, and defensive and ultimately retreat from the relationship. The more organised person may turn to nagging, criticism, and anger,

For both people in the relationship negative consequences happen; ultimately the person with ADHD may become unproductive and their self-esteem and mood may be impacted as a result. For the person without ADHD may become quickly resentful and dissatisfied with the relationship.

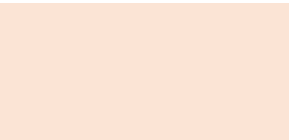


## Over helping dynamic



The over helping dynamic is similar to the parent-child one. But this is more about helping and managing your partner's life (so not only the tasks of the couple). This may mean that the partner without ADHD may become too absorbed in helping or managing their partner's life, doing lots of things for your partner without consideration or agreement. It may result in you stepping in too soon, or when it isn't wanted. This may be driven by a worry about what will happen if things do not get done, but it ultimately results in a constant state of worry and anxiety about what may slide and what may happen if it does. This pattern leaves you feeling burnt out, alone and exhausted.

For the person with ADHD this may make them feel resentful and dependent on the other person. You may back off and feel that you are unable to do tasks as well or efficiently or quickly as the other person.



## Emotional irritability



Most people with ADHD struggle with emotional dysregulation. This may look like arguing to become stimulated enough to concentrate or reacting in situations in a way which is unhelpful for the family or relationships.

It may lead to people saying things impulsively in the moment that they did not intend to, or did not mean. This can be the cause of conflict and the person with ADHD can feel a sense of guilt and shame about what they have said.

This may mean that the partner may feel as though they are walking on eggshells. Think about whether there is a pattern to these arguments, do they commonly happen at the same time of day, or time in a week? Some people with ADHD struggle with the unstructured time of the weekend or some people struggle with the tiredness of the end of the week. What can you put in place at those times to reduce the chance of an argument?

Think of a word that you can use, and understand that means that you need time out from a situation. Walking away is a good coping strategy, some people find going outside for a walk or doing some exercise can clarify their thoughts.

As a partner and a person with ADHD, it is fine to have 'downtime' and time apart. One of the important features of any relationship is autonomy/ independence.



## **Strategies that may help the above**

Take a personal inventory:

- what makes you feel content?
- what makes you feel productive and effective?
- what gets in the way?
- what may you want to do differently?

Then think about a problem that you have in a relationship, be specific. Think about what you currently do which results in negative feelings and then address this. What could change?

Consider an open dialogue between you and your partner about what may be difficult and what you value about the relationship. If this doesn't feel possible, think about whether there is anything that may make it feel more possible, for example, is there a particular mode of communication that works for you both best? For example, some people love to sit down and talk things through, for other emails or text messages feel safer as a starting place. Or it may be that talking is possible when you are going for a walk. Think about whether there is a way to begin these conversations.

Often sitting and reflecting on a situation, writing it down, helps you to think about a subject which may be painful, frustrating, difficult, and upsetting in a less emotional way. This is why some of the exercises below may be helpful, in order to allow you to figure out what is important to you personally and as a couple and to understand the situation more clearly.

It is difficult to change longstanding patterns. It takes time. You will slip back into the pattern, that isn't a failure just a normal part of attempts to change a situation. Try not to panic, you will be over-sensitised to what is happening. You will feel anxious about this and not wanting to get back to the situation you were in.

Both people need to try to bring the person they want to be in the relationship. When happy we resolve arguments easier, and we are more likely to be respectful, proactive, and productive, the same is not true when things are more difficult, and so a negative spiral can ensue.

## **Overcoming communication challenges**

- Use 'I' sentences, talk about how a situation makes *you* feel, not about the other person
- Use assertive communication
- The broken record technique can help, keep coming back to the important thing, and say it again in different ways
- Avoid absolutes 'always' or 'never' as these will frequently get a defensive response.
- Remember to try to use empathy for each other and how difficult it is. We can be empathetic towards someone, but also be clear about what we realistically need to change.

- Think about what you are prepared to do which may help (and what you are not prepared to do)
- Either person can ask for more time to think about something as long as they also give a time when you will get back to them.
- Make sure you have their focus, make eye contact.
- Think about when is the best time to communicate. Don't spring things on someone when they are tired/ already stressed about something else for example.
- Reduce distractions.



### Preferences vs needs (& boundaries)

Remember that in all relationships all people approach tasks for example in different way. Establish whether the task/ issue is a safety one, e.g. leaving medication around where children can get to it. This is a good example of a non-negotiable, the potential consequences are catastrophic so if this happens, as a couple how are you going to manage this? will the person without ADHD be responsible for the medication? Will the person with ADHD ensure they find a strategy that works for them in terms of keeping them in a safe place?

For the non-safety items remember that preferences are not facts. For most household chores there is a way in which we like them to be done, most of these are preferences that can be flexible. Our boundaries are what we cannot flex without compromising how we feel about ourselves. Think as a couple about what things you feel you can be flexible about, and voicing our preferences and then consider where your boundaries are. In terms of chores you cannot have lots and lots of non-negotiables.

Establish where you are **both** able to compromise and how you will approach tasks moving forward.

Always consider what your boundaries are, these are important, and NOT selfish. We sometimes give in on our boundaries because it causes a lot of distress to maintain them. It is important to have your own sense of what your boundaries are in any relationship; put simply what you think is acceptable or not in a relationship.

If you are over-functioning then what stops you from letting things go?



## **Time each week**

Many couples with ADHD report that it helps them to have time in the week to sit and think through what needs doing that week, or you want to do that week for fun. Schedule this at a time that works for you both and is convenient for you. Consider what the priorities are (remember that people with ADHD struggle to prioritise) and then you can highlight what is important to you. This is somewhere you can both express what is important and what is less important.



Think about what you want to accomplish. This can be a good way to decide who has what responsibility, try to think about where your strengths lie and whether you can commit to doing something, and what strategies you could use to support you to do it. Be realistic. This can be a good way to reassure a partner who has been over-functioning that these tasks/chores will be done.

## **Strategies and responsibility**

We have seen the impact of all these difficulties on us and our relationships therefore it is important to really think about what strategies can support you both to complete chores/tasks. The ADHD person doesn't need to try harder, they need to do things differently. This is where strategies come in, we all use strategies to organise so consider this and be realistic.

If you do not do something that you have agreed to do then the ADHD person should remember to take responsibility, own up to it, not get defensive and explain how you are going to do the task now. Remember ADHD can be an explanation for why something isn't done, but it is not an excuse. For the non-ADHD partner try to remember that you are both battling ADHD, and that it is ok to be frustrated, annoyed, worried and sad, but to try to not let this result in communication which may elicit a defensive response. And this will happen at times so try to be kind to yourselves when it does.

## Feeling valued

In addition, a conversation about what you can do to enable each other to feel valued in the relationship is important, what is possible and what is not possible.

|                      |
|----------------------|
| We have fun when we: |
| 1                    |
| 2                    |
| 3                    |

|                                  |
|----------------------------------|
| Unique things we have in common: |
| 1                                |
| 2                                |
| 3                                |

|                                     |
|-------------------------------------|
| Things we want to do in the future: |
| 1                                   |
| 2                                   |
| 3                                   |

|                                     |
|-------------------------------------|
| Qualities we value in other people: |
| 1                                   |
| 2                                   |
| 3                                   |

## Seeing the good in the other person

Consider whether you may have become 'blind' to some of the positives that each other brings to the relationship. We all have biases in the way that we look at the world and our relationships. For example, think about when you get a new car, you suddenly start seeing that car everywhere. That is known as cognitive bias, it's like a new lens gets put in a pair of glasses you are wearing. The same can happen in relationships, where your lens picks out all the difficult stuff, the stuff that isn't done, what is forgotten, what isn't listened to etc. but fails to see the positives. Keeping a positive relationship log can be a good way to draw your attention to the other parts of your relationship which may be less in focus at this time. Try not to judge them, just notice.

Try this exercise

How we met.....

.....

.....

.....

What I liked about them when we met.....

.....

.....

.....

Good memories with my partner .....

.....

.....

.....

What they contribute to our relationship .....

.....

.....

.....

What they do which makes me feel valued .....

.....

.....

.....

### Therapy

Seek help if you need it, often the blocks in relationships are related to barriers in communication. Therefore you may wish to consider therapy as a couple to open up communication and as a space to be able to problem solve difficulties you are experiencing in the relationship. This can include considering how to manage difficulties if they arise later in your relationship, and exploring current difficulties in an environment with someone who will help you through it. It can also provide a distance from your relationship to be able to think about what can change, and what it may not be possible to change.

## ADHD and Family Life

As this booklet has been developed to support adults with ADHD, this section will focus on the difficulties that may arise in parenting and managing family life when one or more of the adults in the family has ADHD. However, we do recognise that ADHD has a strong genetic basis and that it is likely that if one parent has ADHD, children in the family are more likely to have it also. This can present a wider set of challenges than are explored in this booklet, but further information and support can be found in the resources section at the end of this booklet.

Whilst parenting can be challenging for many people, there are some ways that ADHD can present extra challenges:



### Emotional Availability

Having difficulties with attention and concentration can make it hard to be consistently present and focused to support a child's emotions.

The emotional dysregulation often experienced in ADHD can make it difficult to manage your emotional reactions to the child's behaviours. Managing a household can be a stressful process and managing stress can be an issue for people with ADHD.

### Shaping Positive Behaviours

Reinforcement of positive behaviour requires parents to 'catch' it and praise their children quickly, which can be hard with attention and memory difficulties. This may also lead to children feeling that their positive actions are going unnoticed.

### Organising Schedules and Planning Ahead

Parenting involves managing and sticking to the daily and long-term schedules of multiple people. This can be difficult for anyone and ADHD complicates this further. This can lead to children missing appointments or social events, being late for school, and/or not having the supplies that they need on time.

### Attention and Relationship-Building

A need for stimulating activity and difficulties with paying attention for extended periods might make it difficult to spend consistent time with your children. This can lead to difficulties with parent-child relationship building, which is the foundation of a healthy family dynamic.

### Co-Parenting

Parenting with another person when one or both of you have ADHD can present many challenges, whether you are living separately or in the same household.

If one parent does not have ADHD, they may feel a need to pick up lots of the organisational responsibilities for the child or household. If left unspoken and without balance, this can fuel conflict.

There may also be difficulties with consistency in approaches to parenting. The ADHD parent(s) may find it hard to be consistent in their approach, which can lead to conflict between parents and confusion and frustration for the children as they try to figure out what their boundaries are.

The ADHD parent can be perceived by the children in two main ways: 1) as the 'fun' parent, who has fewer rules, is more spontaneous, and provides stimulating activities; or 2) as the unreliable parent, who doesn't get things done on times and misses/forgets important events in the child's life.

**Many of these areas can be tackled by using some of the standard ADHD strategies for attention, memory, organisation and time management. Lots of ideas for these can be found in our Strategies Booklet, available on the DAANA website.**

**There are many different, and important roles in parenting. You may struggle in some areas and less so in others. These also change as your children grow, you may find certain ages more difficult than others.**

### Circle any jobs that you would be interested in doing

|                          |                                    |                                   |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Sports coach             | Conflict mediator                  | Stage manager                     |
| Trash collector          | Entertainer                        | Gardener                          |
| Advisor/ counsellor      | Referee                            | Tailor                            |
| Public relations expert  | Santa and tooth fairy impersonator | Waiter/ waitress                  |
| Tutor                    | Barber                             | Research and development engineer |
| Doctor                   | Promoter                           | Mediator                          |
| Judge                    | Cheerleader                        | Chef                              |
| Police officer           | Translator                         | CEO                               |
| Layer                    | Personal shopper                   | Handyperson                       |
| Therapist                | Personal assistant                 | Event planner                     |
| Occupational therapist   | Dishwasher                         | Medical assistant                 |
| Speech therapist         | Professor                          | DJ                                |
| Bath attendant           | Choreographer                      | Lifeguard                         |
| Masseuse                 | Producer of plays and musicals     | Preschool teachers aide           |
| House keeper             | Documentarian                      | Neighbourhood ambassador          |
| Crisis hotline volunteer | Activities coordinator             | Waste management                  |
| Teacher                  | Chauffer                           | Interior designer                 |
| Caterer                  | Cleaner                            | Art collector                     |
| Organizer                | Nurse                              | Museum curator                    |
| Launderer                | Financial manager                  | Party planner                     |
| Nutritionist             | Accountant                         | Travel agent                      |
| Psychologist             | Musician                           | Artist                            |
| Hairdresser              | Photographer                       | Crafts teacher                    |
| Short-order cook         | Librarian                          | Secretary                         |

Notice that many of these jobs are part of the work of parenting. Keep yourself alive as a parent by spending more time on those tasks that you love. Spend as much time on the jobs that you enjoy as possible. If you need to do something that you struggle with then try to do this in a time limited way.

- **Five activities that you love to do with the kids**
- **Five activities that you hate to do with the kids**
- **Five activities you like but don't have time for**
- **Five activities that sound like fun but you don't do**
- **Which activities can you delegate to someone else? (Partner, babysitter, sibling)**

How can you do something you love while doing something you don't like (for example., create an interesting story line when playing make-believe or being a magazine to a soccer game) how can you do something useful while doing something you don't like? (for example, doing stretching exercises while playing a game on the floor)

Which activities can you limit to 10 minutes a day? Which activities can you limit to 15 minutes a day?

### **Strategies for ADHD-Friendly Approach to Parenting**

*The ADHD information and support website ADDitude has created some guidance on the critical areas across four childhood developmental stages and included strategies for caregivers with ADHD to help with each. This can be found here:*

<https://www.additudemag.com/parenting-with-adhd-strategies/>



## **Helpful Resources and Information**

### *Websites*

#### **The Devon Adult Autism and ADHD Website**

More information about ADHD and other booklets can be found here:

<https://www.dpt.nhs.uk/our-services/adult-autism-and-adhd/adhd>

(including skills books to manage ADHD)

### *Specific websites regarding relationships*

<https://adhdaware.org.uk/living-with-adhd/how-does-adhd-affect-relationships-and-marriage/>

This includes a link to an online support group

The most comprehensive place to start is with Melissa Orlov's website. She has written a number of books in this area:

[ADHD and Marriage | Learn to thrive in your relationship \(adhdmarriage.com\)](#); have a look at the 'videos and podcast' section, for lots of up to date resources.

<https://www.theminiadhdcoach.com/adhd-relationships> How to handle relationships when you have ADHD

CHADD:

- <https://chadd.org/for-adults/relationships-social-skills/>
- <https://chadd.org/for-adults/marriage-and-partnerships/>

Gina Pera is another author in this area, here is her website:

[Adult ADHD Info & Support Resources - Adult ADHD-Focused Couple Therapy™ \(adhdfocusedcoupletherapy.com\)](https://adhdfocusedcoupletherapy.com)

## *YouTube videos*



[Tips for Understanding a Partner with ADHD \(youtube.com\)](#); Susan Tschudi

This is a good, comprehensive talk about the area, it is around an hour long.

[ADHD, sex, relationships & intimacy by Ari Tuckman \(youtube.com\)](#) this is a video with one of the leading experts in this area, he is particularly interested in ADHD & sex. This is another video by him:

[5 Essential Ways to Have a Balanced and Healthy Relationship with Your Partner | Adult ADHD \(youtube.com\)](#)

[ADD & Loving It?! \(Full PBS Documentary\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

[In Conversation with Melissa Orlov: The ADHD Effect on Marriage - Unlocking ADHD \(youtube.com\)](#)

## *Podcasts*

**Talk ADHD podcast**- Melissa Orlov episode [ADHD and relationships with Melissa Orlov of ADHD Marriage \(youtube.com\)](#)-

**ADDitude podcast**- Melissa Orlov exercise talking about resolving conflict in relationships.

**Distraction podcast** episode 29

**The Holderness Family Post cast** - Well known on You Tube. This neuro-divergent couple share how they navigate life and relationship

**The ADHD Couple podcast** Tara Blair Ball and her husband Brian as they navigate life with ADHD and explore the unique challenges and joys of relationships where one or both partners have ADHD.

**Hanging with the Haizmans**

**Translating ADHD**- more information about ADHD generally

## *Books*

Many books can help understand how ADHD can affect relationships, how to support change, and how to develop skills. Here are a few recommendations:



**The ADHD Effect on Marriage: Understand and Rebuild Your Relationship in Six Steps,**  
Melissa Orlov

This book helps guide partners towards an understanding and appreciation for the struggles and triumphs of a relationship affected by ADHD, and to integrate ADHD into their relationship in a more positive and less disruptive way.

**Succeeding With Adult ADHD: Daily Strategies to Help You Achieve Your Goals and Manage Your Life,** Abigail Levrini

This book has skills and strategies for managing ADHD across multiple areas of life, with a chapter dedicated to enhancing your social relationships.