

How to Thrive with Adult ADD / ADHD

by

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Class 10: Relationships and ADD / ADHD

In this course, we'll discuss how ADD traits can pose difficulties in close relationships with those close to you: family, good friends and romantic partners. We'll talk about ways that ADD can be blamed for what are really simply different personality types. Then you'll learn how to create behavioral strategies to enhance your close relationships.

Relationship Challenges with ADD / ADHD

ADD Strengths in Relationships

People with ADD traits bring a special kind of magic to relationships. Creativity, spontaneity, generosity of spirit, loyalty, charisma, and intuitive empathy are just a few of the ways that ADDers draw people in as friends and romantic partnerships sparkle.

Obvious Frustrations

Typical Frustrations - The most obvious frustrations in relationships with ADDers are the ones we hear about the most -- because we've become accustomed to people reminding us about them. Thinking back to our childhoods, our parents and teachers probably made it no secret if they were annoyed about our messy rooms, our constant lateness, our forgetting our homework, our not completing what we started, or our broken promises.

Frustrations that come easily to mind that many ADDers have are:

- **Clutter**
- **Lateness**
- **Forgetfulness**
- **Poor Follow-Through**
- **Over-Promising or Under-Delivering**

ADD in Genetic Families - Since ADD runs in families, you may think back on your family life and determine that your parents or siblings also have ADD. It could be a different kind of ADD than your own. However, a strong ADD component throughout your family would color the way you see the world.

Hidden Frustrations

You probably have a number of components that make up the total package of “YOU.” You may not have realized that some of these traits are typically a result of ADD. Here are some examples of “hidden” traits that can hurt relationships.

- **Poor memory** - You have trouble remembering birthdays, or dates that are important to others.
- **Intense interests that die out** - Hobbies that were once fascinating are suddenly put aside without a thought, when something else takes their place.
- **Relationship intensity** - Feelings about another person can come intensely and swiftly, leading to crushes or premature feelings of love. It’s all or nothing -- when you feel intensely about another person, you want to spend all your time with them. When the feeling dies, you’re not very interested in them any more.
- **Over-scheduling** - There just aren’t enough hours in the day to accommodate everything you want to do, but you try to get it all in.
- **Swift anger** - When you’re frustrated, you let it out. Once you tell the other person how you feel, you feel better.
- **Conflict and argument** - You find yourself in relationships where constant bickering is the norm. You may feel energized after a good argument.
- **Non-assertiveness** - You are willing to take a lot of criticism from people you love, thinking the criticism is deserved, or not very important.
- **Need to please** - It’s important to you that those you love get their needs met, sometimes at your own expense.
- **Inattentiveness** - It’s hard to concentrate on the details of what someone is telling you. Your mind tends to drift to other things. You’re often accused of not listening or not caring.
- **Distraction during lovemaking** - Once the high-intensity thrill of a new relationship is past, your mind drifts to other subjects while making love.
- **Impulsivity** - You make impulse purchases or plans without consulting the person that might be affected. It’s hard to understand their ingratitude when you did it for them!
- **Miscommunication** - What you heard isn’t what the other person meant, or vice versa. You’ve been accused of not “getting it” or misunderstanding what people are saying.
- **Missing the point** - You respond to the literal message of what someone says, but miss the real meaning. This can lead to arguments, frustration and hurt feelings. You don’t understand why people don’t simply say what they mean!
- **Tactlessness** - You’ve hurt people’s feelings or embarrassed others by telling the truth. (No, don’t tell her she looks fat in that dress!)

You may wonder why, in some cases, these personality quirks would hurt a relationship. In some cases, these very traits may be the reason people are attracted to you in the first place!

Significance and Interpretation - What matters in each instance of an ADD trait contributing to relationship breakdown is significance. A loved one or significant other needs to feel that his or her feelings matter! When you are doing what comes naturally to you, the other person may be interpreting that action as a signal that they (or their thoughts, feelings and desires) aren't really important to you. While you know this isn't true, the other person's interpretation can lead to the breakdown in the relationship.

Attributing Motives

People like to believe in a rational universe where everything makes sense. When they see someone behaving in a certain way, their minds search for an answer or rationale. When there are no motives offered for a behavior, people will attribute motives based on their own knowledge or experience.

Example: "Carl is always late meeting me. He must be doing something else that he'd rather do than meet me. He must not really care to get together with me. He's just meeting with me to be polite. I won't ask him to get together any more."

Behavior: Carl is late.

Attribution: Carl is deliberately or indifferently late; he'd rather not be here.

Reality: Carl is late with everyone, due to distraction and poor time sense.

Your "Hidden Traits"

Circle each of the traits on the previous page that you have, or regularly experience.

For each of the hidden traits that you relate to, think of ways these could potentially hurt the feelings of someone close to you.

- Has that person ever mentioned how they feel about you exhibiting this trait?
- Did you take their complaint seriously, or think they were over-reacting?

Style Differences and ADD

It's all too easy for you and your loved ones to make ADD the scapegoat for all differences between you. But people have natural differences in personal style and preferences that make them unique. Many frustrations in relationships – both close and casual -- come from people with different styles clashing or misunderstanding each other.

Here are the most typical areas where people's styles and preferences can differ.

Personal Style Differences

Compare your personal styles:

For each of the style/preference personality “types” described below, indicate on this continuum where you place a) yourself, and b) one person close to you.

Introverted	Extroverted
←	→
Practical	Intuitive
←	→
Fact/Task-Oriented	People-Oriented
←	→
Prefer Closure	Open-Ended
←	→
Assertive	Non-Assertive
←	→

Introversion vs Extroversion

- Introverts draw their energy from within themselves, from their own thoughts and ideas. Their preference would be to read, spend time with one person or a small group, or on a hobby or work they can do alone. They are generally comfortable with their own company.
- Extroverts draw energy from others. They most enjoy interactions with other people, and would be more likely to prefer large gatherings or parties.

Practical vs Intuitive

- Practical and detail-oriented people draw their conclusions on facts, what they can see, hear, taste, touch and smell. They think in logical, sequential order, and consider the details first. They'll think of what seems possible based on what currently exists.
- Intuitive and big-picture people are likely to draw conclusions based on patterns they sense, rather than solely on the facts that they have in front of them. They tend to think of the big picture first, and then the details. They'll think of potential and possibilities more than practicalities.

(NOTE: ADDers are more likely to be intuitive-style.)

Fact-Oriented vs People-Oriented

- Fact-oriented people make decisions based on thoughts and ideas, the rules or the law, what seems right. Their decisions are more objective. They may be more likely to play “devil’s advocate” and see both side of the argument.

- People-oriented people make decisions based on their own or others' feelings, what seems fair. Their decisions are more case-by-case, or subjective. They may be more likely to take things personally.

Closed-Ended vs Open-Ended

- Closed-ended people prefer to have decisions made and finalized. They like to see a clear beginning and end and get satisfaction out of knowing loose ends are tied up.
- Open-ended people like to consider all possibilities before reaching a conclusion. They are uncomfortable with closure that they feel is premature.

Assertive vs Non-Assertive

- Assertive people feel most comfortable when they speak up and get their thoughts and feelings known. They welcome a lively exchange of ideas. They want to stand up for their rights, and are likely to speak their mind. They are frustrated when they cannot do so.
- Non-assertive people feel most comfortable with harmony, and seek to avoid conflict. Their desire to have their own thoughts known is secondary to being in a peaceful, consensual and friendly environment. They are uncomfortable when "pushed" to speak up when they aren't ready to do so.

The Ideal Team - a mix of styles - If differences are understood and respected, the ideal partnership for handling a job or project would be a combination of styles.

Example - Compare these two couples' experiences in buying their first home:

- Couple A – *Each person has a different approach and style. As a team, they brought equal consideration of both the big picture and the details, both practical and emotional feelings about the place were taken into account, and just the right amount of information was gathered before a decision was made.*
- Couple B – *Both members are very similar in style and preferences. Each spouse was equally uninterested in details, they bought on the basis of feelings alone, and they reached a snap judgment quickly. They ended up with a disastrous purchase!*

The Difference Between Style Preference and ADD - Although ADDers may tend to behave in a way that is more typical of one style than another, the main thing to keep in mind with ADD is "can't vs won't." While non-ADDers may tend to think or behave in the way that's compatible with their style, they can change their behavior to suit the circumstance. In many cases, simply bringing the need to a non-ADDer's attention will cause the person to consciously change behavior.

ADDers may find it very difficult to sustain behaving in a different way, although they can do so in short, strategic steps. If it is necessary for an ADDer to change his or her behavior to accommodate a relationship, both partners should help strategically plan how to do so. Communication and cooperation between both parties are essential. And coaching helps!

ADD as Scapegoat

It can be very tempting in a relationship experiencing difficulty to blame one person's ADD for all the friction taking place. This becomes problematic when one or both parties then expect that medication or ADD coaching will then "fix" the ADDer.

Personal Style Differences

Consider a close relationship where there are clear style differences between you and the other person. For each of the differences:

- How do these differences cause frustrations in your relationship?
- Have you or the other person blamed ADD on what are simply style differences?

Rumination and Self-Limiting Beliefs

Rumination

Rumination involves dwelling on negative thoughts. Rumination can create problems in a relationship when you or your partner ruminate on negative memories about past problems, or dwell on all the things that could possibly go wrong in the future.

Science has proven that thoughts are impulses of energy that cross the brain to become action. When we think negatively, we counteract the good that medication can do in focusing attention, or in treating depression. And the more we ruminate on a negative thought, the more our brain falls into a pattern of rumination. That's why it's critically important to develop strategies for counter-acting the tendency to ruminate.

Strategy: The Five-Minute Rule for Rumination

If there is a negative thought you are ruminating about on a regular basis, assign it five minutes out of the day. This should be a very specific five minute time period, such as 8:00-8:05 pm. When the thought enters your mind, banish it until its assigned time period. If the time period comes and goes, and you forgot to ruminate, you've lost the chance until the next day. You will find yourself ruminating significantly less very quickly, as days go by in which you don't allow rumination.

When your partner ruminates - Your relationship partner's rumination about your past "failures" or disappointments can be just as destructive as you ruminating yourself. If your partner is truly ruminating, ask him or her to practice the five-minute rule for the sake of your relationship.

NOTE: Be sure to distinguish between rumination and the need for constructive planning and discussion. Because we ADDers tend to be overly optimistic and don't care for planning and detail, we can mistake our partner's concerns for rumination. Through discussion, determine whether your partner wants to collaborate in finding solutions, or simply wants to continue to harp on past problems and make dire predictions of gloom.

Constructive Planning / Analysis vs Rumination

Think of a situation where someone you know – or you yourself – are ruminating.

- What makes it feel like rumination to you?
- Is there any aspect of it that is constructive or useful?
- How would you save the positive elements, but get rid of the rumination?

Describe the situation to your partner for feedback.

Self-Limiting Beliefs

Negative beliefs will do more to keep you down than any traits of ADD. If you believe there is nothing you can do to change, then it will become true. When the people closest to you feed negative beliefs, then both you and they are collaborating to sabotage your success.

Destructive Messages

The people with whom you have close relationships can make a significant impact -- both positively and negatively -- on your success in enhancing your relationship. A healthy relationship has to fulfill the needs of both parties, with both desiring to share in its emotional rewards. Sometimes we fall into patterns with others where one is always “right,” and the other is always to blame. These kinds of relationships can be very destructive to an ADDer’s self-esteem.

“Pulling Up the Drawbridge”

David Giwerc, former president of ADDA, gives an analogy of a castle and a drawbridge. Think of your self-esteem as your castle. People need to cross a moat to get to your castle, and they can only cross if you let down the drawbridge to let them in. Those we love are often not conscious of the ways they hurt our self-esteem. But once we make them aware, and they continue to do so, we can choose not to allow them over our drawbridge and into our castle. They may remain in our lives, but their negative messages are only heard at a distance as they shout across the moat. Our self-esteem isn’t damaged by this faint sound.

Negative Messages

- Are negative beliefs or destructive messages present in a particular relationship that’s important to you?
- Have you frankly communicated to the other person how these messages make you feel? How might you do that?

Social Cues

It can be said that most of what we know to get along in life, we learned in kindergarten. With ADDers, however, we may have missed some social cues along the way because we didn't notice and pay attention to them. As we grew up, these cues became the unwritten social rules that govern behavior. Most people don't tell others about these "rules," but violators can get punished in subtle ways.

Social cues can develop within families, or among circles of friends. If you violate these "rules," it may cause stress to a relationship partner.

Examples are:

- Not volunteering to help with the dishes with all the other women
- Mentioning a topic that's sensitive within a family or group
- Saying at your mother-in-law's Thanksgiving dinner that you'd like to spend Thanksgiving skiing next year
- Telling your best friend's new boyfriend how well she's doing since she left rehab
- Coming to a baby shower an hour late, after the presents were opened.

Social and Behavioral Style

Everyone has a way of relating to the world. If we were to simplify ways of describing different personalities into four styles, they could be grouped in the following way:

- **Driver** - Assertive, confident, focused on getting the results. Can be bossy under pressure.
- **Persuader** - Assertive, a "cheerleader," wanting to sweep along others with his enthusiasm. Can take things personally.
- **Amiable** - Friendly, cares about being part of a group, values harmony and dislikes conflict. Doesn't let people know when he's upset. May not get his own needs met.
- **Analytical** - Thoughtful, detail-minded, focused on doing a good job. Can get impatient with conflict or dealing with feelings when he thinks they are irrelevant.

Assumptions – It's natural to assume that other people behave the way you would in a situation. If you're an assertive "persuader" style, you'd assume that the other person would let you know if something bothered them. But if they were an "amiable" style, they probably wouldn't say anything, but silently resent it. Assumptions are dangerous to relationships!

Flexibility - The most successful people in interpersonal situations are those who are flexible; who can modify their natural style to fit the needs of others. But, in order to be flexible, it's important to be aware of your own style, and of the people around you.

ADD and Social Style - ADDers may not notice if their approach is rubbing others the wrong way. When this happens, it creates friction and discomfort in working and personal situations. And when we are in hyper-focus, we may forget to pay attention to how we're coming across to other people.

Behavioral Style Differences

- Which of the four Behavioral Styles do you think you are?
- Can you think of someone whom you interact with regularly who is opposite?
 - What kind of potential misunderstanding could this style-opposite create?
 - What can you do about it?
- How can you and your partner each accommodate the other's style without stifling your personality?

Communication Clarity

Many ADDers are the most articulate people on the planet! Where we sometimes run into difficulty is helping others to keep up with us. Some ADD challenges regarding communicating our thoughts are:

- **Speaking too fast** - We have so many thoughts at once and we want to get them all out before we forget what we wanted to say.
- **Going off on conversational tangents** - The intuitive leaps our brains make can lead to quick leaps from one topic to another, sometimes in mid-sentence. When speaking with another ADDer, this can make for fascinating conversation. However, some others may have a hard time keeping up and getting our point.

Achieving Clear Understanding

ADDers are often accused of "selective listening." We remember what we're told if it interests us, but forget other details of conversations. Some ADD challenges in being the receiver of clear conversation are:

- **Attention "blinking out"** - Because our attention is inconsistent, it may waiver even when we think we're taking in every word.
- **Focusing difficulty** - If what is being said isn't terribly interesting, we have trouble concentrating on it.
- **Poor memory** - If someone is communicating important information or sequential steps of action, we may not get it all.
- **Mental multi-tasking** - Although you are involved in a conversation, your mind may be on other things.

Conversational Context & Meaning

We may understand the words other are saying, but miss the context and meaning. The same statement can take on very different meanings, depending on the situation and who is saying it.

- **Cultural Nuance** - The level of frankness people use when speaking is highly influenced by culture. People don't always say exactly what they mean.

Example: In some cultures, people avoid using a direct statement to tell people what to do. Instead, they use a gentle question: “*Would you like to...?*” or “*Perhaps you'd like to...*” Misunderstandings can occur if the asker assumes that the listener knows he is being given an order, and the listener assumes he is really being given an option!

Other cultures, such as the Japanese, avoid giving a direct negative answer. Rather than say “no” outright, a Japanese businessman might say “*We would have to consider that.*”

- **Cultural differences in communication style are present between different geographic regions of the US, or can be influenced by your family's ancestry.**

Communication Misses

- Think of a time when you have experienced an example of communication misunderstanding. With this specific instance in mind, consider whether it was related to:
 - Nuance, or cultural context?
 - ADD traits such as flickering attention or memory?
 - Assumptions?
- How could you prevent misunderstandings like this in the future?

Active Listening

Active listening involves taking active part in making sure you understand exactly what the person speaking is intending to say to you.

Strategy for Active Listening: Repeat key phrases for clarification. Repeat any directions or implied action agreements to make sure both parties have the same understanding of what will be done. Determine whether the direction itself needs further clarifying.

Example: “OK, so we'll meet inside the restaurant at 6:00. Let's say whomever gets there first gets a table.”

- What are all the specifics you notice in the above suggestion?
- What possible misunderstandings could arise if this sentence weren't as specific?

Relationship-Enhancing Strategies

Be Proactive, Not Reactive - ADDers are often hard-wired to react more than to think proactively. This contributes to making some aspects of relationships with us “high-maintenance.” The way to counter-act this is to be proactive in planning how to deal with areas that are causing you friction. In many cases, your relationship partner can help.

Ask -- Don't Guess - One clear way to find out how people close to you feel about you is to ask! Even the smoothest of relationships have areas where people can rub each other the wrong way. If your relationship partner hasn't spoken up about these, you may find out some things that are enlightening. You may also hear some very pleasant surprises about why people love you!

If you choose to ask someone close to you for feedback, don't let it be a mind-dump. Structure it so the feedback can be specific. For example, ask:

- What are five things you especially like about me? Please give specific examples.
- What are five areas where you'd like me to improve to help our relationship? Please give specific examples.

It can be useful to get this kind of feedback from romantic partners, parents, siblings, close friends -- and perhaps even work colleagues you are close to. And ask the person to write down the answers. This can help you see patterns that show up across the board. Once you are clear about areas you'd like to work on, you can develop strategies for doing so.

Collaborate on Strategies

In some cases, you may want to enlist the other party's help in developing your strategy. This would be most important in the case of domestic partners. In order to help, your partner should be aware of your strengths and challenges, and have a desire to see the end result.

Contracts - One good method for working on a change strategy with a partner is to have a "contract" for how you'll deal with a particular issue. This can be verbal, although it is more powerful when written.

In the contract, lay out specifically:

- what behavior you'd like to change
- what strategy you will follow to do so
- how your partner agrees to help you
- what the end result will be
- when the result will be achieved

Example: Geri and Ben had been having arguments about Geri's not listening to Ben's concerns regarding their home renovations, and Geri's not following through on making calls that she had agreed to. Geri realized she didn't always remember what Ben had suggested to do, or why. Ben usually brought up these things when they were watching TV, when Geri was trying to wash the dishes, or when they were getting dressed.

Geri drew up a written contract that they both agreed to follow. (See below.)

GERI'S CONTRACT

Behavior Commitment: To actively pay more attention when Ben talks to me, and follow-through what I agree to do as part of our conversations.

My Strategy: To not multi-task when Ben is telling me anything, and to ask questions and paraphrase what Ben says so we both feel confident that I am fully listening and remembering important details.

Ben's Strategy: To let me know when he has something important to communicate, so I will know to sit down with him and pay more attention. To ask questions and fully engage me in a conversation about the topic, rather than simply talking and assuming I heard everything.

Our Strategy: When there is follow-through involved, I will clarify it, Ben will verify that we're in agreement on what we will do, and I will write my follow-through piece in my daily "TO DO" list.

Result: Ben will feel he has been heard in matters that are important to him, and I will follow-through on anything I agree to as part of these conversations.

Timing: Starting immediately, Ben and I will use mealtime to have these conversations, when we both are seated and relaxed and can make eye contact. These conversations will not take place when I am serving, cooking or washing dishes.

Brain-Storming - Once you have decided what behaviors or habits you would like to work on changing, you and your partner may want to do a bit of brain-storming to determine a good strategy for changing it.

Creating Your Own Structure - It is ironic that the most successful strategies for behavioral change involve creating structure and planning -- just what ADDers typically find most difficult. But the structures you devise will be ones that work with YOUR style, tendencies, traits, and your best methods for focusing and remembering.

In the example above, Geri knew the following about herself:

- she had a tendency to multi-task;
- she needed to look at Ben while he was talking in order to remember information;
- she had to write down what she needed to do in order to remember it;
- it was important for her to feel that she and Ben were collaborating on the home repairs, rather than feeling that Ben was simply delegating tasks to her.

Being aware of these things allowed Geri to devise a strategy that would work. Because Ben now felt that his concerns were significant to Geri, he was glad to collaborate in creating the "contract."

Creating a Change Strategy in a Relationship

- What area would you like to work on, that is within your power to change?
- What requires the collaboration of the other person?
- Are there any concerns that the other person would prefer that you don't change your behavior?

How will you use what you've learned?

Now that you've gotten some ideas for strategies, and questions to bring up with a relationship partner, what will you do with the information? It will be easiest to forget about it!

Instead, if there are areas of a relationship that you would like to improve, create a real strategy for improving it.

Create an Intentional Strategy

1. Consider specific steps that could move the relationship in a positive direction.
2. Think through any pre-work that might need to be done.
3. Decide if you will ask your partner's help in changing.
4. If so, determine when and how you'll bring it up with the other person.
5. **Put it in your calendar** as an important appointment or commitment to have the conversation!

This last step can be the most important in determining if you'll actually follow through on your intention. I hope you do.

PRACTICE

What ADD traits do you feel are potential or actual trouble spots in your close relationships?

- Are there any ADD traits you have that you never considered a problem growing up, but deserve some thought now?

For each of the hidden traits that you relate to, think of ways these could potentially hurt the feelings of someone close to you.

- Has that person ever mentioned how they feel about you exhibiting this trait?
- Did you take their complaint seriously, or think they were over-reacting?

Consider a close relationship where there are clear style differences between you and the other person. For each of the differences:

- How do these differences cause frustrations in your relationship?
- Have you or the other person blamed ADD on what are simply style differences?

Are negative beliefs or destructive messages present in a particular relationship that's important to you?

- Have you frankly communicated to the other person how these messages make you feel? How might you do that?

Which of the four Behavioral Styles on page 8 do you think you present to others?

- Can you think of someone whom you interact with regularly who is opposite?
 - What kind of potential misunderstanding could this style-opposite create?
 - What can you do about it?
- How can we accommodate each other's style and not stifle our personality?

Think of a time when you have experienced an example of communication misunderstanding. Consider whether it was related to:

- Nuance, or cultural context?
 - ADD traits such as flickering attention or memory?
 - Assumptions?
- How could you prevent misunderstandings like this in the future?

How would you create a change strategy in your relationship?

- What area would you like to work on, that is within your power to change?
- What requires the collaboration of the other person?
- Are there any concerns that the other person would prefer that you don't change your behavior?