

Introduction

The View from the ADHD Roller Coaster— Both Sides

Monday, 8 PM

The monthly meeting comes to order in the heart of Silicon Valley, a world center of leading-edge technology. Household names such as Google, Yahoo, Apple, YouTube, Netflix, and Hewlett-Packard dot this short stretch of coastal California between San Francisco and San Jose. In attendance this evening are software developers and computer scientists, some from these very companies.

What's on tonight's agenda? The Next Big Thing in high-tech? Not exactly. Not unless you have adult ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder). In that case, keeping track of your keys can be a very big thing indeed.

Phillip,* 32, a talented software programmer with a beautiful smile and an engaging personality, begins: "Okay, I've been practicing some of the suggestions we talked about last time for keeping track of my keys, and I can't believe how well they're working." No one snickers. No one rolls their eyes. Most people attending this support group for adults with ADHD chuckle and nod in agreement, relieved to hear someone speak openly about an embarrassing problem that they, too, have, or a problem similar to theirs.

Make no mistake: Silicon Valley might be a worldwide magnet for people with ADHD, what with their stereotypical love of the new and novel. But even here, ADHD is not limited to young men who tinker in high-tech,

* Not his real name. Descriptions of activities and individuals throughout this book are drawn from composites created from multiple accounts.

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and its challenges aren't limited to lost keys. The people gathered tonight—male and female, professionals and blue-collar workers, teens and retirees, long-time locals and new immigrants from many different nations—find themselves dogged by a few or many of these other difficulties:

- Losing track of priorities
- Arriving late to events and missing deadlines
- Having trouble initiating tasks and following through to completion
- Being chronically disorganized
- Managing finances poorly
- Losing their temper easily
- Overspending, smoking, video gaming, and other addictions
- Not being “present” in relationships

As you would expect, behaviors like these seldom won them kudos from bosses, coworkers, family members, or even grade-school teachers. As a result, some people have lost jobs, partnerships, houses, large fortunes, and self-worth. Or, at best, they believe (or have been told often enough) they have fallen far short of their potential. Some have been unsuccessfully treated for anxiety or depression for years without knowing that, in fact, untreated ADHD was making them anxious or depressed.

Many of these late-to-diagnosis adults have long suspected that they were a bit “different.” When they finally learn about ADHD, most wish they'd learned sooner. Much sooner. It explains a lot about how their unwitting actions generated unpleasant consequences as well as why, just when they started getting traction in life, they'd often slip on that invisible banana peel.

Meanwhile, tonight, as these adults share their triumphs and difficulties, ones that their families and the public frequently fail to understand or accept, you can almost see the lightbulbs flashing on. Apprehensive newcomers relax their jaws. Arms unfold. Possibilities expand as they realize that they are not alone, that other smart people, accomplished people, well-meaning people ride the same roller coaster.

They begin to realize they're not “lazy, stupid, or crazy,” as that breakthrough ADHD book title goes. Most important, they learn that practical solutions exist for helping them optimize their abilities. For many, this is the only gathering where they feel truly understood.

But if you stumble on this group while looking for the Toastmasters meeting down the hall, and if you stay a while to listen and watch, you might wonder why these “normal-looking” adults have never picked up

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certain “mature adult behaviors,” like getting organized or getting to bed at a decent hour. You might ask yourself:

- “Didn’t their parents teach them?”
- “Don’t they realize why these issues are important?”
- “Do they just *not care*?”

The short answer: ADHD challenges have little to do with intelligence, caring, the lessons their parents tried to teach, or what they know to be right or wrong. It has more to do with

- having difficulty focusing one’s attention *right now*,
- on the most critical task, speaker, or activity, and
- once focus has been achieved, maintaining it instead of yielding to distraction.

As one prominent ADHD expert, psychologist Russell Barkley, says, “The challenge is not knowing what to do. It’s in doing what you know.” So, instead of calling it an attention-deficit disorder, we could call it an *intention-inhibition disorder*. That’s because it’s a condition in which the best intentions go awry.

Same Meeting Room, the Following Tuesday, 8 PM

Be careful talking about good intentions to newcomers at *this* week’s gathering! It’s the same room but a very different crowd. The people gathered here tonight aren’t adults with ADHD; they are their partners. And most have *had it* with good intentions. They are also done with being doormat and “dumpee,” warden and watchdog, crisis manager and caretaker, and a parent instead of a partner.

Ironically, the two meetings that take place one week apart—one for adults with ADHD and the other for the partners of adults with ADHD—typically show little overlap. That is, one partner or the other in a couple is either “in denial” about ADHD or feels no need to learn about it. It’s too bad, because when couples act as a team in learning about ADHD, they tend to speed through the learning curve—with fewer bumps and bruises, too.

The group assembled tonight *has* come seeking knowledge. They also seek clarity and hope that they can somehow stabilize their lives with partners who seem focused on destabilization. Until recently, most did not know that adult ADHD exists, much less that it can affect their lives so profoundly. Or they’ve suspected ADHD for a long time, but they just can’t get their partners to consider the idea or do anything about it.

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When they finally hear other people voicing similar threads of befuddlement, the floodgates open. Let's listen in as the new folks introduce themselves:

- **“Communication problems” plague Donna and her husband.** “When we started dating, we had great conversations. Now I can't speak a word before he changes the subject or zones out. I hate the way this makes me feel, like I'm boring or not worth listening to. When I try breaking off the relationship, though, he becomes attentive again, only to backslide two weeks later. He finally told me last week that he has ADHD, but he insists it is an asset. I've read some Web sites that advise us spouses to be more understanding, but that's not helping.”
- **Jose's partner has a spending problem.** “On impulse, she bought 20 expensive handbags on sale months ago, planning to sell them online. She's procrastinated and they sit in the spare bedroom, along with the other ‘bargains.’ I love her, but we can't afford this. If I complain, though, she says I make her feel bad. She's been treated for depression for years, but a friend recently suggested learning about ADHD.”
- **Sheila's husband gets distracted while watching their child.** “He left our squirming baby on the changing table when the doorbell rang—and stayed to chat with the mail carrier! Maybe he has ADHD, as our therapist suggests, but is that an excuse? To top it off, he got angry with me when I pointed out the risk! But what do I do when I can't trust my husband with our child?”
- **Surrounded by clutter, Lauren feels she's “catching” ADHD.** “Our home is so crammed with my partner's crafts projects that I can hardly move or think! I've read about the association between ADHD and hoarding, and came to learn more.”
- **Brenda's fiancé is the love of her life, but his difficulties at work are driving them apart.** “Paperwork takes him twice as long as it does his coworkers, who seem half as smart as him. He loses track of time, works until midnight, and then forgets to phone me. He was diagnosed with ADHD as a kid but says he outgrew it. I don't think so.”
- **Does Dan's new girlfriend find him a boring kisser?** “I like her so much, but she keeps showing up late—or not at all—for dates, and later she's super apologetic. And, while we're enjoying a long kiss, she'll get distracted by the least little thing. One time she blurted, ‘Forgot to feed Rex!’ That's her dog. She says she was recently diag-

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nosed with ADHD, but maybe she's just using that as an excuse and she's really not interested in me."

- **Doreen's teen son says his Dad has ADHD, too.** "Our son won't accept that he has ADHD, but he's failing in school. He also asks why he should take medication if Dad won't. My husband 'copes' with his own ADHD by drinking beer and riding herd on our son. Their constant fighting is driving me nuts."
- **Eric went from being a "catch" to "dropped" in three months flat.** "My new boyfriend wanted to be with me all the time and was over-the-top thoughtful. But when it stopped suddenly, he implied it was my fault, which made no sense. I'm just trying to understand what happened."
- **Jade discovered her husband's credit-card debt after the honeymoon.** "He owes \$30,000! At first he said he'd hoped to pay it before I found out. Totally overoptimistic! Then he blamed me for overreacting. I'm feeling some kind of emotional whiplash, from our honeymoon to this. Our pastor suggested looking into ADHD, but is *lying* a trait? He'd told me he was entering the marriage debt-free. I love him, but I'm not sure I can forgive this betrayal."
- **Liz is tired of other people holding her responsible for her husband's failings.** "He's my sweetheart and now we finally know why he does what he does. I'm not angry with him, but I *am* angry with the people, including his family, who blame me for not making him do things they expect of him. They don't believe in ADHD and think it's the woman's role to be a 24/7 executive secretary for her husband."
- **Frank can't compete with his wife's BlackBerry.** "When she learned she might have ADHD, my wife researched it and hyperfocused on getting better organized. She claims her BlackBerry helps her focus on the job. Great, but where's the focus on me? If I take more than 30 seconds to say something, she eyes her 'CrackBerry' for the latest text message. We both work hard, but she *never* turns it off."

As these introductions continue, comments echo all around the room: "Your partner does that, too?" Some people laugh in amazed relief, but others fight back tears. Sure, they're grateful for the long-overdue validation, but reality can hit hard:

- "You mean our problems aren't all my fault—not me being rigid, anal, controlling, demanding, or 'no fun'?"
- "You mean our problems aren't all my partner's fault—not bad temper, selfishness, or apathy?"

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- “You mean the invisible enemy we’ve been battling not only has a name, it has a *solution*?”

Most group members here tonight still love their partners. That’s why they’ve come to this meeting. (Some, though, are straining to remember why they went on that second date, and a few are asking for referrals to good divorce attorneys.)

The confusion crept up on them stealthily, they explain, and most of their partners’ behavior grew sharply more problematic with time and new responsibilities. They tackled each particular set of problems as it turned up, and so the roller coaster ride smoothed out, lulling them into the idea that their lives would stay less chaotic for a while. But then the next dip happened and the next and the next. And, so the roller coaster will continue, until they either stagger to the exit sign, succumb to permanent emotional whiplash, or develop awareness about ADHD and get on a new track.

Teresa: “You Aren’t Crazy. Things Aren’t Right.”

Never in a million years would I have thought my husband has ADHD. That’s because, like most people, I had a lot of misconceptions about it—that only children have it, that it means you’re “hyper,” that it’s just an excuse for bad behavior, or that adults with advanced degrees or good jobs can’t possibly have it. Fortunately, my husband figured it out and sent me to a support group to learn more. That has made all the difference in our life together. In fact, it’s kept us together.

We were living where I think a lot of people live right now, dealing with something “a little out of whack.” A spending problem. A shoot-off-the-mouth problem. A clutter problem. A motivation problem. A can’t-quit-drinking or -smoking problem. Not to mention all the confusing ups and downs of selfishness and generosity, irritability and sweetness, brilliance and boneheadedness. Both parties are just muddling through.

When I now observe friends struggling with similar issues, I suggest they look into ADHD, which is far more common than most people know. They seem encouraged to hear, “No, you aren’t crazy. Things aren’t right, and they can be better.”

From living with my husband’s unrecognized ADHD for so long, I can almost spot couples affected by it in a crowd. These people are metaphorically stumbling around blind. We need to focus on educating them.

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It's not solely ADHD's symptoms that afflict relationships, though, and double the rate of divorce for adults with ADHD. It's the years of ignorance about the symptoms' existence—and misattributing them to lack of caring, selfishness, and immaturity. Moreover, people who've grown up with undiagnosed ADHD often lug around a lifetime of poor coping strategies. And typically, the same is true for their loved ones. With both of you reacting blindly, your life together might feel like a wild ride indeed.

Could ADHD be contributing to *your* relationship woes? You'll have a good idea if it's "you, me, or adult ADHD" by the end of Part One of this book. Then, if it is ADHD, you'll learn what you both can do about it. As many support-group members have learned, and their stories will illustrate, there's simply no reason to keep struggling or simply coping when you can start creating big, positive changes.

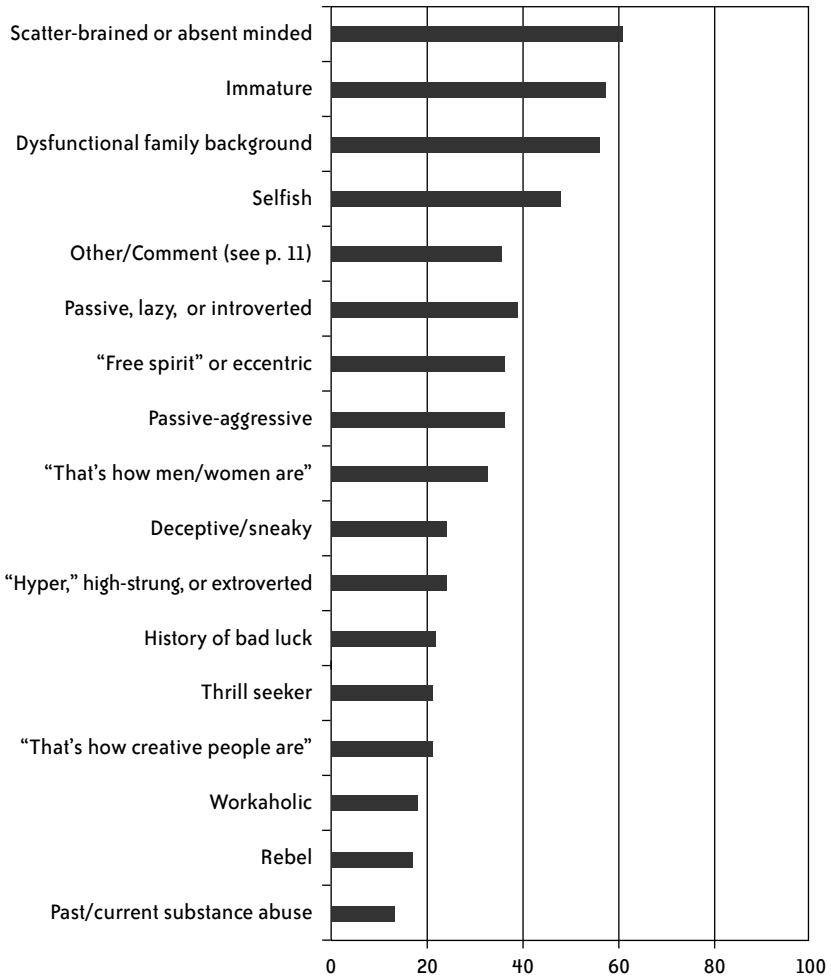
Part One begins with the basics and expands slowly into the complexities, helping you to:

- **Identify ADHD symptoms** and understand why the term *Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder* confuses everyone (Chapter 1).
- **Gain a solid overview of ADHD**, including its central challenge of self-regulation (Chapter 2).
- **Distinguish between actual symptoms and poor coping skills** developed over a lifetime's lack of awareness about ADHD (Chapter 3).
- **Recognize common patterns** in the areas of driving, money management, sexual intimacy, and more (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

Along the way, it's important to remember: *ADHD can manifest itself in many different ways. There is not one way of having ADHD.* You might relate to many, or only a few, of the examples in this section, but if someone you love has ADHD, a clear enough picture should start to emerge.

ADHD Partner Survey Snapshot: Scatter-brained, Lazy, or ADHD?

Survey question: "Before you learned about ADHD, how did you explain your partner's problematic traits to yourself or others? (Select all that apply. Then add any not listed and/or comment on this subject.)"



For the question on the opposite page, one in three ADHD Partner Survey respondents selected “other/comment.” Many amplified this selection by briefly explaining why they didn’t recognize a partner’s ADHD symptoms from the very beginning.

Here is a sampling:

- I really had no idea why she acted like she did!
- He’d left a miserable marriage and was worried about finances. Then I learned he’s always had financial trouble.
- I loved and believed in him but could not understand why he couldn’t get his act together.
- Every one of his friends and family had the same phrase: “Well, that’s Joe for ya!”
- Low self-esteem; bad school experiences.
- I just thought he was wired this way: very smart but slow and methodical. He could not multitask very well.
- The world revolves around her.
- I figured he never learned consequences because his parents always cleaned up his messes. Now I see he just doesn’t learn from consequences!
- My wife changed so drastically after we had two children I simply thought motherhood overwhelmed her.
- Little willpower or discipline.
- Nasty jerk!
- His entire family saw him as being just “out there”—he was the way he was and no one cared to ask any questions. I just thought he had a lot of growing up to do.
- Who knew? It was the ’70s!
- I attributed his problems to his father abandoning the family, coming from a different culture, and the economy (lots of people were being laid off at that time).
- I figured that since I couldn’t get him to talk much or maintain eye contact, he must be very shy.
- Coming from a dysfunctional family myself, and this being my first serious relationship, I did not have a good frame of reference for comparison.
- I chalked it up to her being a Type A personality.
- I was baffled. Friends and family thought he was lazy but generally a nice guy.
- His IQ is very high—hence the “absentminded professor.”
- I thought she might have bipolar disorder because of mood swings and avoiding sleep until she dropped.
- Socially impulsive; hotheaded.
- Commitment-phobe; had emotional baggage.
- I knew “theoretically” about ADHD and had friends with ADHD, but it’s quite another thing to live with it full time. So I mistakenly thought a lot more than ADHD was going on.

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Red Flags for Adult ADHD

Some adults with ADHD experience only a few of the challenges listed below—and perhaps to a relatively mild degree—while others face a greater number of more significant challenges.

- A lifelong history of difficulty with attention and/or a history of disruptive or impulsive behaviors
- Organizational challenges (time management difficulties, missed appointments, frequent tardiness, unfinished projects)
- Erratic work history (frequent job changes, lack of preparation, missed deadlines, poor reviews)
- Anger control problems (argumentative, overly controlling parenting style, conflicts with coworkers or child's teachers)
- Marital stress (partner complains that he/she does not listen, forgets promises and important events)
- Being over-talkative, interrupting, speaking too loudly
- Parenting problems (difficulty establishing and maintaining household routines, inconsistency in dealing with the children)
- Money management issues (impulsive purchases, failure to pay bills or taxes, bankruptcy)
- Substance use or abuse, especially alcohol, marijuana, or caffeine
- Addictions such as excessive collecting, shopping, sexual avoidance or hypersexuality, overeating, and/or compulsive exercise or gambling
- Frequent accidents on the job or in sports activities
- Problems with driving (speeding tickets, accidents, or excessive caution to compensate for attentional problems)
- Familial factors, such as being the parent or child of a person with ADHD, receiving an ADHD diagnosis in childhood, or being “just like” a relative with ADHD
- Considered successful but showing impairment when compared to their potential; expending more energy than others for the same amount of work
- Over-reliance on coping strategies to compensate for their weaknesses, but still experiencing problems with career or workaholism

Source: Adapted with permission from the Web site of the Canadian ADHD Resource Alliance (CADDRA), CADDRA.ca.