

Loving with ADHD

Relationships are often measured by whether our partner feels considered and cared for in everyday life. More often than not, it's the small things that matter most.

Healthy relationships are built through hundreds of ordinary moments, such as remembering what was said, following through on plans, arriving on time, and sharing the responsibilities of daily life. For many people living with ADHD, these everyday expectations can become genuinely challenging.

Marriage researcher John Gottman found that healthy couples consistently respond to one another's everyday bids for attention and connection. Although these moments may seem small, they quietly build trust, emotional security, and satisfaction over time. For couples affected by ADHD, responding consistently to those bids can become more difficult because of executive functioning challenges.

Executive functioning refers to the mental abilities that help us plan ahead, manage time, shift attention, remember what needs to be done, and follow through. Someone may care deeply about their spouse while struggling with the very abilities that help that care become visible in everyday life.

Over time, responsibilities within the relationship can become uneven. Psychologists sometimes refer to this as the *mental load*. Carrying that responsibility day after day can become emotionally exhausting. As a therapist, I've found this to be one of the most painful moments for couples. By the time couples find the right help, they've often spent years viewing their partner through a lens of disappointment rather than understanding.

Over time, it becomes easy to assume that these patterns reflect a lack of love or commitment within the relationship. When these experiences repeat over time, relationships can gradually become polarized. One partner may begin carrying more of the mental load, while the other increasingly feels criticized or discouraged. As resentment grows, it becomes easier to notice what our partner isn't doing than to recognize what they continue to bring to the relationship.

Understanding the cause doesn't erase the hurt, but it changes where the conversation begins. Instead of arguing about whether someone cares, couples can begin asking how they can help one another express that care more consistently.

Attachment researcher Sue Johnson observed that beneath many relationship conflicts is a simple question: *"Are you there for me?"* Forgetfulness, distraction, and inconsistency can unintentionally leave a partner feeling uncared for.

Understanding ADHD is important, but our partner is never just their diagnosis. Executive functioning difficulties may explain certain patterns, but they do not define a person's character, intentions, or the value they bring to a relationship. Every marriage eventually asks us to do two things at the same time: honestly acknowledge the areas that need support while continuing to appreciate the person standing in front of us.

Many couples find relief when they realize they have been fighting the symptoms rather than understanding the cause. They begin to recognize that the problem was never a lack of love, but the difficulty of expressing it consistently. Once they understand what has been happening, the conversation often changes. Instead of questioning one another's love, they can begin working together to strengthen the ways they show it. As understanding grows and practical supports become part of everyday life, couples often begin recognizing the care that has been present all along.