

# Seeking Harmony in a Beautiful Mess: Designing for Romantic Relationship Navigation of ADHD-Neurotypical Couples

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## Abstract

Romantic relationships require continuous effort in maintaining emotional connection, building trust, and adapting to each other's needs. These dynamics become more complex in neurodiverse relationships, where partners may have differing cognitive styles and ways of processing emotions. When one partner has ADHD, differences in attention regulation, decision-making approaches, and time management can shape relationship interactions in unique ways. This study explores how ADHD-neurotypical romantic partners navigate these differences, emphasizing mutual adaptation rather than deficit correction. Through semi-structured interviews with ten participants, we identify key challenges in communication, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution, as well as the strengths that ADHD partners bring to relationships. Findings highlight the need for support mechanisms that foster collaboration and shared agency, rather than reinforcing asymmetrical caregiving dynamics. We propose design implications for embracing neurodiversity and promoting equitable relationship practices, contributing to more inclusive and adaptive relationship-support technologies.

## CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in accessibility.

## Keywords

ADHD; Neurodiversity; Romantic Relationships; Communication Challenges; Inclusive Design

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## 1 Introduction

Falling in love is easy. Making a relationship work? That is the tricky part. Romantic relationships require continuous effort in constructive communication, mutual compromise, and sustained commitment [5, 10, 15]. When one partner has ADHD, these efforts may take different forms, as cognitive and behavioral differences

shape how each partner engages in the relationship. Differences in attention patterns, decision making styles, and time management can lead to misunderstandings between partners [11, 14, 19]. For example, an ADHD partner may appear distracted during a serious conversation—not due to disinterest, but because they are juggling multiple thoughts or struggling to stay anchored in the present moment [9].

Given these unique relationship challenges, interventions specifically targeting adults with ADHD are crucial. However, designing effective interventions for adults is challenging, as their daily lives involve complex individual and relational contexts that conventional ADHD interventions—such as pharmacological treatments, CBT-based symptom management [13], or strategies focusing primarily on organizational skills and self-regulation [12]—may not fully address. Recent studies have proposed more holistic approaches involving close relatives, such as family members or spouses, to better manage the multifaceted daily challenges faced by adults with ADHD. For example, couple-based counseling has been suggested to directly mitigate relationship difficulties arising from ADHD symptoms [19].

However, symptom-management approaches that involve partners often frame the ADHD partner as someone who needs to be fixed, potentially undermining their agency within the relationship [7]. They can also evoke feelings of inadequacy or shame if the ADHD partner is implicitly blamed [3]. Addressing these concerns requires a shift in perspective. Rather than attributing all relationship difficulties to the ADHD partner's characteristics, a neurodiversity lens encourages us to regard ADHD as an inherent variation in cognition [8, 17]. This perspective allows for recognition of the distinctive contributions ADHD traits can bring to relationships, alongside the challenges they may pose. For instance, spontaneity, creativity, high energy, and hyperfocus—traits often associated with ADHD—can enrich romantic relationships by fostering emotional vibrancy, shared adventures, and unique forms of support [16].

Building on this background, our study explores the design space for technologies that foster respectful relationships, mutual empathy, and appreciation of unique qualities among romantic partners in mixed-neurotype relationships, particularly those involving ADHD. To gain a balanced understanding of relationship challenges, coping strategies, and communication patterns from both ADHD and neurotypical perspectives, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants—6 adults with ADHD and 4 neurotypical individuals who have been in relationships with ADHD partners. Our findings highlight how mixed-neurotype couples navigate relational and communication challenges. Neurotypical



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partners supported ADHD partners in managing daily routines, while ADHD partners eased tension and brought fresh perspectives. Couples engaged in ongoing conversations and used external tools to bridge cognitive gaps. Neurotypical partners struggled with overstepping boundaries, while ADHD partners felt guilt and a desire to be accepted as they are. Based on these findings, we propose design implications that center contributions—particularly those of ADHD partners that often go unrecognized—while supporting shared understanding and mutual appreciation. Such approaches can help build more balanced dynamics by validating different forms of effort and enabling both partners to engage with empathy, respect, and complementary roles that draw on their unique strengths.

The contribution of our paper is three-fold: (1) we provide empirical insights into the lived experiences of ADHD-neurotypical couples, moving beyond symptom management to explore interactive challenges in their relationships, (2) we introduce a new perspective by applying a neurodiversity lens, reframing ADHD traits as potential strengths rather than deficits in romantic dynamics, and (3) we propose design implications for technologies that emphasize collaborative rather than corrective approaches, empowering ADHD individuals to build more balanced and inclusive romantic relationships.

## 2 Study Design

The purpose of our study was to explore coping strategies mixed-neurotype couples use to address challenges that arise in romantic relationships, as well as the challenges they encounter in this process. To this end, we conducted episode-focused semi-structured interviews with individuals with ADHD and neurotypical individuals who have dated them.

### 2.1 Participants

To gain insights from both partners in romantic relationships involving individuals with ADHD and understand their experiences with relationship challenges, we set out three criteria to recruit suitable participants for our study: (1) adults with ADHD (self-diagnosed or formally diagnosed) with romantic relationship experience; (2) neurotypical individuals currently or previously in a relationship with someone with ADHD; (3) those who have struggled with or effectively managed ADHD-related relationship challenges. We promoted the study by posting a recruitment announcement, including a survey link, on a X(Twitter)-based community for ADHD women, as well as in online communities from three universities located in Daejeon. As a result, ten participants (age range: 21–31,  $M = 25.0$ ,  $SD = 3.74$ ) were recruited. Six were individuals with ADHD, and four were neurotypical individuals with experience in romantic relationships with ADHD partners. The sample included six women and four men; five identified as heterosexual, four as bi/pansexual, and one as lesbian. Three participants joined as couples, and the remaining four participated individually or were not in a relationship. Participants received 30,000 KRW (approx. \$20 USD). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of KAIST. To ensure confidentiality, participants who joined as couples were informed of potential privacy risks, and the researcher explicitly assured that no personal information shared by one partner would be disclosed to the other.

### 2.2 Study Procedure

To explore how ADHD-neurotypical romantic partners address relationship challenges and build mutual understanding, we conducted semi-structured interviews consisting of three key stages.

First, participants were asked about their attitudes toward romantic relationships and overall experiences to provide context for interpreting how their beliefs and past relationships shaped their approach to challenges.

Second, participants were asked about challenges encountered in the relationship and communication, coping strategies, and any unmet needs they experienced across three phases: (1) relationship initiation and early bonding, (2) development and maintenance, and (3) dissolution (if applicable). To facilitate discussion and self-reflection, we included a brief activity where participants selected ADHD-related characteristics that applied to themselves (or their ADHD partner) from a list and identified which had positively influenced their relationship. This served as a reference point to guide the conversation. The list was developed based on prior literature that explores characters of adult ADHD [16, 18], and included 18 traits described in a neutral tone with accessible phrasing (e.g., “Emotional Swings: Mood and energy shift rapidly throughout the day,” “Goes Own Way: Solves problems in unique ways; prefers original over conventional thinking”). These traits were selected to be relatable to participants while being informed by both clinical literature and accounts of lived experience, in a way that avoids pathologizing or idealizing ADHD.

In the final stage, open-ended and adaptive questions were used to explore individual experiences more deeply.

Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours and was conducted either in person or online via Google Meet, depending on participants’ availability. A total of six interviews were conducted in person, while four were conducted remotely. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

All audio recordings from interviews were transcribed, and data from the activity were incorporated into the transcripts for analysis. To ensure participant anonymity, all personally identifiable information was removed. Thematic analysis [6] was conducted to examine key aspects of ADHD-neurotypical romantic relationships, including relationship expectations and attitudes, relationship concerns, conflict resolution strategies, needs and frustrations in conflict situations, and the role of ADHD-related strengths and challenges in romantic dynamics. During the initial phase of analysis, one researcher generated preliminary themes through open coding using ATLAS.ti [1]. Another researcher reviewed these themes and provided feedback on their categorization and supporting quotations. Through ongoing discussions, disagreements were resolved, and the themes were iteratively refined to ensure coherence and depth in the analysis.

## 3 Findings

In this section, we report major findings about the challenges, strategies, and needs of ADHD-neurotypical couples in navigating romantic relationships.

### 3.1 Navigating and Leveraging Differences

ADHD-neurotypical (NT) couples employed various strategies to manage differences in daily routines, communication styles, and relationship expectations.

**3.1.1 NT Partners' Active Involvement in Managing ADHD Partners' Daily Lives.** Concerned about how their ADHD partners' impulsivity and time management difficulties disrupted shared routines and well-being, NT partners supported scheduling, finances, and self-regulation through tracking or control-based strategies.

P1 (NT) encouraged her partner, P2, to record alcohol consumption in a shared calendar, aiming to help him recognize patterns and reduce drinking. However, she noted that the approach was abandoned after a week. P6 (ADHD) shared that a sticker board, provided by her ex-girlfriend as a reminder for medication, was ineffective: *"Even right after taking my meds, I often forget that I already took them, so using it was meaningless."* Some NT partners took on a managerial role in finances and smartphone usage through mutual agreement. P1 (NT) supported P2's efforts to manage impulsive spending by following a rule they had set together: whenever P2 explained what he needed to purchase and why, P1 would transfer the corresponding amount. This arrangement was initiated by P2 and based on mutual trust. Similarly, P8 (NT) used parental control features via Apple's Family Sharing to help her partner stay focused by limiting screen time—also at the partner's request. However, most of these strategies were not sustainable, as they did not fully account for ADHD-related cognitive differences, such as difficulties with working memory and challenges in self-monitoring without immediate external feedback [2, 4].

**3.1.2 Negotiating Different Communication Styles Through Mutual Adaptation.** Cognitive differences resulted in divergent communication styles, which often caused misunderstandings. These differences were sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of affection or respect. Couples engaged in extensive discussions and utilized external tools to address these gaps. Written aids, such as notes and pinned messages in messaging apps, were commonly used to help ADHD partners manage working memory difficulties.

ADHD partners often communicated with direct honesty, which at times overwhelmed or hurt NT partners. P10 (ADHD) recalled openly admitting to being attracted to someone else: *"That was a real mistake. I always thought knowing the truth was better no matter what."* Some NT partners attempted to address and modify this communication style. P5 (NT) described her frustration, saying: *"Being honest isn't everything."* Differences in expressing affection also led to misunderstandings. P4 (ADHD) explained his reluctance to verbalize affection: *"I don't feel comfortable making empty gestures just for the sake of social niceties."* In response, P3 (NT) selectively reinforced only desired expressions of affection, a strategy that later contributed to further tension. Some ADHD partners sought external support to navigate emotional conversations. P6 (ADHD) described turning to AI for guidance: *"I had no idea how to comfort them. I felt like I'd just end up repeating the same words over and over like a parrot...so I asked GPT for advice on what to say."*

Maintaining attention during deep conversations was another challenge. P2 (ADHD) described difficulties in sustaining focus: *"When my partner shares their worries, I try my best to listen, but I can*

*only focus on the parts that interest me. For the rest, I completely lose track, and I feel guilty about it."* To address this, some NT partners implemented structured support strategies. P1 (NT) helped P2 retain key agreements by pinning messages in their chat app: *"You know how you can pin messages in KakaoTalk? I don't write down every little detail, but I at least note the fundamental principles we agreed on."* P5 (NT) took a structured approach to improving comprehension of conflicts: *"When my partner, P6, struggles to follow the cause-and-effect of our relationship conflicts, I make sure to write everything down in my notes so that I never forget it myself."*

**3.1.3 The Positive Impact of ADHD Traits on Relationships.** While differences often required negotiation, they also enriched relationships. Flexibility in thinking, spontaneity, and optimism introduced new perspectives and helped ease tensions. P9 (ADHD) described how her personality complemented her partner: *"My girlfriend cares a lot about other people's opinions, while I just do whatever I want...I think being with me has really boosted her self-esteem."* P8 (NT) appreciated her partner's unconventional mindset: *"Talking to them makes me realize I don't have to conform to society's unspoken rules. It's refreshing."*

Additionally, diverse interests and impulsivity added excitement to the relationship. P7 (ADHD) reflected on how this dynamic worked in his favor: *"Since I don't act predictably, my partner never really knows what to expect. That means I can always surprise them in a good way."* P1 (NT) found P2's spontaneity particularly appealing: *"He knows about so many different things, so there's always something interesting to talk about...When I run out of date ideas, they just find a cool workshop or activity for us to do."*

Honesty also fostered trust. P4 (NT) noted: *"They can be a bit oblivious, but I think it just means they genuinely want to be honest with me."* P8 (NT) found openness reassuring: *"They shared a lot of deep personal things with me right from the beginning...Their raw honesty made it easy for me to open up too."*

### 3.2 Challenges and Needs in Negotiating Differences

While some strategies successfully facilitated understanding, ADHD partners often felt burdened by the pressure to change. NT partners, in turn, struggled to balance acceptance with the desire for change.

**3.2.1 ADHD Partners' Self-Blame and the Need for Acceptance.** ADHD partners sometimes felt overwhelmed by continuous feedback and assistance, leading to feelings of inadequacy. P2 (ADHD) questioned why his partner provided so much support: *"Why do they do so much for me?...I feel like I have nothing to offer in return...I feel both burdened and guilty."* P7 (ADHD) echoed similar concerns: *"I try my best to contribute to the relationship, but I always feel like I'm falling short...I constantly wonder if I'm being a burden."* He especially reflected on a long-distance relationship with a significant time difference, where staying in touch via text messages required him to sacrifice focus on his daily life. He shared, *"It was a huge effort for me, and I was a bit disappointed that he didn't recognize it."*

At the same time, many ADHD partners wanted to be accepted as they were. P8 (NT) described the moment she stopped trying to change her partner's time management habits: *"I once strongly urged them to be more punctual, but they told me point-blank that*

*it's just not how their brain works."* P4 (ADHD) resisted attempts to shape his communication style: *"It felt suffocating to be forced into scripted responses."* He later expressed a desire for acceptance over understanding: *"I don't want to be 'understood'—I want to be accepted."*

**3.2.2 NT Partners' Struggles with Setting Boundaries.** NT partners wrestled with whether to accept ADHD-related behaviors or encourage change. P3 (NT) admitted avoiding difficult conversations: *"I tell myself I'm just being understanding, but deep down, I'm afraid bringing things up might lead to a breakup."* P8 (NT) struggled with the extent of involvement in her partner's life: *"My partner might be able to handle things on their own, so I worry that I might come across as nagging or like a mom telling them what to do. I'm not sure whether saying something would actually help their life, or if just saying 'It's okay if you can't get the assignment done' would be more supportive. That's been my biggest dilemma throughout the relationship."*

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Surfacing Invisible Effort for Mutual Understanding

In mixed-neurotype relationships, support from neurotypical (NT) partners—such as managing calendars, sending reminders, or offering structured guidance—is often more visible and easily acknowledged. In contrast, the efforts of ADHD partners are less visible yet deeply taxing: staying present in a conversation, replying to messages amidst cognitive overload, or simply showing up on time may require tremendous internal negotiation. Because these acts rarely leave a visible trace, they are easily dismissed or misunderstood.

This invisibility creates asymmetry not only in perceived effort but also in emotional validation. ADHD individuals may feel unrecognized or judged against neurotypical standards, while NT partners may feel emotionally or logistically burdened, yet unsure how to voice their needs without causing harm. Mutual understanding, therefore, must begin with recognizing that both partners are adapting—just in different ways. Rather than framing support as a one-sided act of caregiving, relationship tools can emphasize shared negotiation, emotional labor, and contextual empathy. To support this, systems could intervene at moments of tension—such as when one partner is about to express frustration or when unspoken resentment begins to build—by helping reframe communication through mutual recognition. When a user types a message that carries a blaming tone (e.g., accusing the partner of not trying hard enough or repeating the same mistake), an AI agent could prompt a moment of pause. Drawing on interaction history and previously recorded effort-related input, it could gently remind the sender of the partner's typical challenges or past attempts to adapt, encouraging empathy before confrontation. Rather than automatically defending or correcting, the system would suggest more constructive language that acknowledges effort, expresses emotional needs, and invites joint problem-solving.

### 4.2 Reframing ADHD Traits as Relationship Assets

ADHD traits like spontaneity, emotional expressiveness, and divergent thinking are often seen as disruptive. Yet, our findings show they can also enhance relationships by injecting vitality, humor, and new perspectives. These dualities, however, can create tension when misunderstood. Reframing such traits as assets rather than deficits can enable more balanced role negotiation. This shift affirms ADHD partners' agency and counters a solely compensatory model of support. Design can facilitate this by helping couples reflect on how ADHD traits have positively shaped their relationship. For instance, systems could support this by periodically prompting each partner to reflect on how the other's traits have influenced their mindset, habits, or approach to life—such as becoming more flexible, curious, or emotionally expressive. Over time, these reflections could be translated into metaphorical visualizations, such as character representations or shared environments that gradually reflect elements of the partner's traits. This evolving representation would serve as an ambient reminder of mutual growth, reinforcing appreciation for ADHD-related strengths and encouraging their intentional expression in everyday life.

## 5 Limitations and Future Work

Our study presents several limitations. First, the sample included only ten individuals, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In particular, all four neurotypical participants were women, and none of them were men with experiences of dating ADHD partners. Including more diverse gender compositions and relationship constellations could offer a broader understanding of mixed-neurotype dynamics. Second, our study primarily included college-aged participants, which may limit the diversity of relational experiences. Building on this work, we plan to conduct participatory workshops further explore shared needs and design opportunities in mixed-neurotype romantic relationships.

## 6 Conclusion

This study explored how adults in mixed-neurotype romantic relationships navigate everyday challenges, communication differences, and mutual support. Through interviews with both ADHD and neurotypical individuals, we identified how each partner contributes in distinct ways—whether by providing structure or bringing emotional vitality. These findings suggest opportunities for technologies that recognize invisible effort, support balanced communication, and help couples appreciate neurodiverse strengths. Future work will involve co-designing such tools with couples to further ground designs in lived experiences.

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