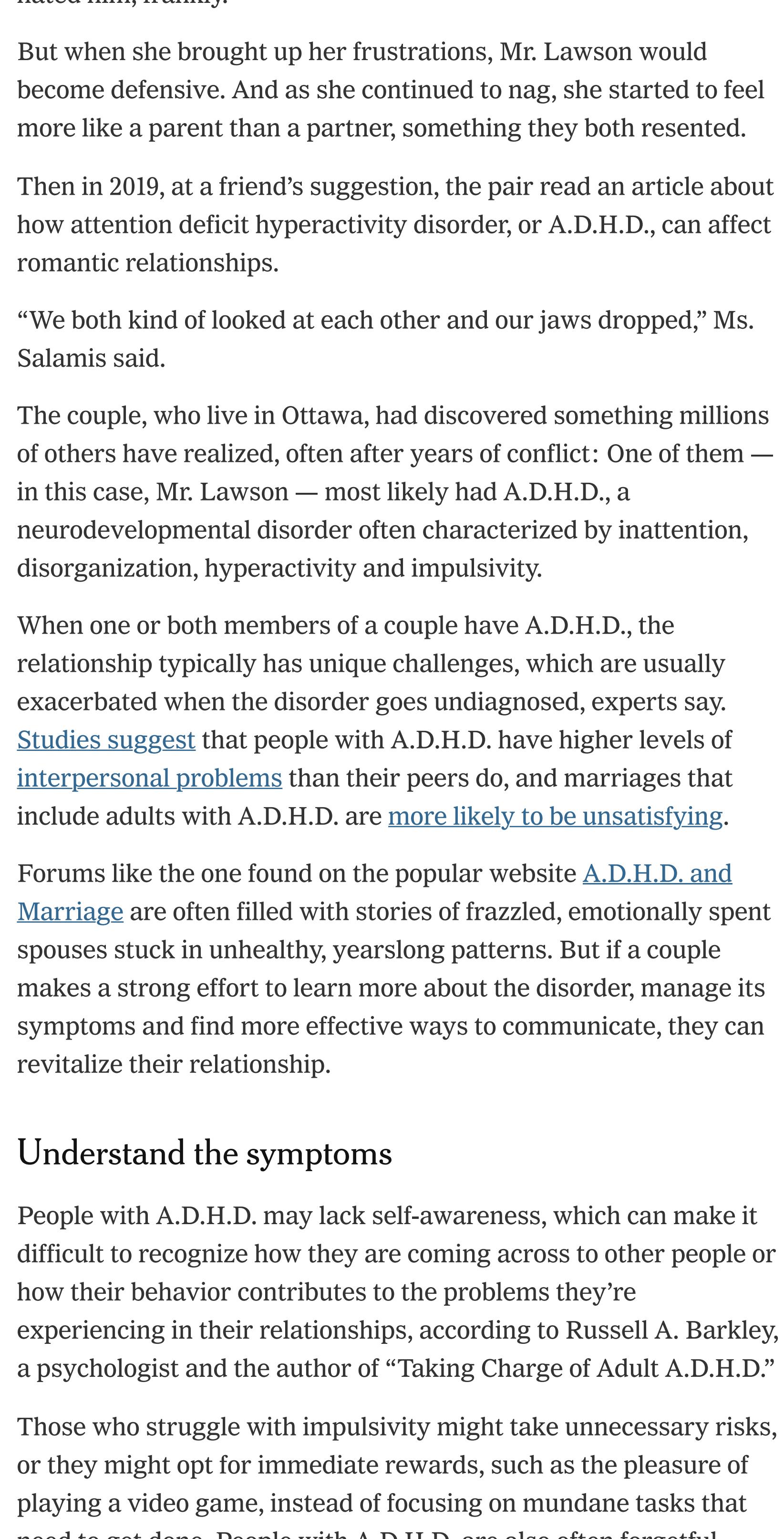


# A.D.H.D. Can Strain Relationships. Here's How Couples Cope.

The symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder can push couples to their breaking point, but there is hope for those willing to seek help.

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Lucy Jones

By Christina Caron

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When Chris Lawson began dating Alexandra Salamis, the woman who would eventually become his partner, he was "Mr. Super Attentive Dude," he said, the type of guy who enjoyed buying cards and flowers for no reason other than to show how much he loved her.

But after they moved in together in 2015, things changed.

He became more distracted and forgetful. Whether it was chores, planning social events or anything deadline-driven — like renewing a driver's license — Ms. Salamis, 60, had to continually prod Mr. Lawson to get things done. Invariably, she just ended up doing them herself.

"I was responsible for nothing," Mr. Lawson, 55, admitted.

Ms. Salamis, who is not one to mince words, described that period of their relationship as "like living with a child," later adding, "I hated him, frankly."

But when she brought up her frustrations, Mr. Lawson would become defensive. And as she continued to nag, she started to feel more like a parent than a partner, something they both resented.

Then in 2019, at a friend's suggestion, the pair read an article about how attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or A.D.H.D., can affect romantic relationships.

"We both kind of looked at each other and our jaws dropped," Ms. Salamis said.

The couple, who live in Ottawa, had discovered something millions of others have realized, often after years of conflict: One of them — in this case, Mr. Lawson — most likely had A.D.H.D., a neurodevelopmental disorder often characterized by inattention, disorganization, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

When one or both members of a couple have A.D.H.D., the relationship typically has unique challenges, which are usually exacerbated when the disorder goes undiagnosed, experts say. [Studies suggest](#) that people with A.D.H.D. have higher levels of [interpersonal problems](#) than their peers do, and marriages that include adults with A.D.H.D. are [more likely to be unsatisfying](#).

Forums like the one found on the popular website [A.D.H.D. and Marriage](#) are often filled with stories of frazzled, emotionally spent spouses stuck in unhealthy, yearslong patterns. But if a couple makes a strong effort to learn more about the disorder, manage its symptoms and find more effective ways to communicate, they can revitalize their relationship.

## Understand the symptoms

People with A.D.H.D. may lack self-awareness, which can make it difficult to recognize how they are coming across to other people or how their behavior contributes to the problems they're experiencing in their relationships, according to Russell A. Barkley, a psychologist and the author of "Taking Charge of Adult A.D.H.D."

Those who struggle with impulsivity might take unnecessary risks, or they might opt for immediate rewards, such as the pleasure of playing a video game, instead of focusing on mundane tasks that need to get done. People with A.D.H.D. are also often forgetful about what they're supposed to be doing and tend to have big, emotional reactions that are stronger than what a situation might warrant — which can lead to explosive conflict.

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Contrary to the assumption that people with A.D.H.D. are always unfocused, many can focus intently on the things that interest them. But if they are especially attentive to a loved one during a relationship's honeymoon phase and that intense interest eventually fades, a pattern can emerge where the non-A.D.H.D. partner feels unloved.

"If your partner is chronically distracted, that means they are also distracted from you," said Melissa Orlov, a marriage consultant who leads seminars for couples who are struggling with relationship difficulties, in part because of A.D.H.D. "That becomes very confusing and then it angers the partner because they feel like they're not really being paid attention to. You're like, 'What, don't you love me anymore? This isn't the way it used to be.'"

While this can be incredibly frustrating to the partner who does not have A.D.H.D., understanding these symptoms is a step toward embracing feelings of compassion and empathy over continual resentment.

"Our loved ones with A.D.H.D. cannot help behaving the way they do," Dr. Barkley said. It is a biological disorder, he added, "not a lifestyle choice. It is not simply something they could change in their mind over time if they wanted to."

## Find coping strategies

Dr. Alicia Hart, 34, a primary care doctor, met her husband when she was 18. They both said "I love you" within three days and "were in a committed serious relationship from then on," she said. "People thought we were nuts. I mean, we met at a frat party."

The couple, who live in Portland, Ore., with their three kids, both have A.D.H.D.

Most of their conflict has revolved around scheduling mishaps, "threatening to record conversations to prove that they happened or me starting another overambitious project without thinking it through or thinking of the impact on him," Dr. Hart said in an email. "I also hate being late and have developed one million strategies to avoid this, where he has literally no concept of time and cannot be on time to save his life."

By playing to their individual strengths, they're able to keep the household running. He pays the bills and manages all the finances. She keeps track of the daily routine, setting alarms on their smart speaker to help him remember things like lunchtime. They use a shared online calendar and a wall calendar, too.

Robyn Aaron, a 36-year-old mother of two who was diagnosed with A.D.H.D. last year, said she and her husband now have a weekly meeting to stay organized, but they try to make it as fun as possible.

"We treat it like a date night — pour a glass of wine, maybe even light a candle," said Ms. Aaron, who lives in Lisbon, Iowa. "He gives the check-in on finances; I give the skinny on the calendar."

They also discuss their ongoing do-it-yourself projects, upcoming trips and any needs or wants.

"It's become even more important to us since the pandemic began to connect in this way, and it's super helpful for my coping strategies with A.D.H.D., too," she added.

## Show your partner you're trying

In the book "A.D.H.D. After Dark: Better Sex Life, Better Relationship," Ari Tuckman, the author, psychologist and sex therapist, surveyed more than 3,000 adults in couples where one partner had A.D.H.D. He found that the people who felt that their partners put in the most effort at either managing their own A.D.H.D. or supporting a partner with A.D.H.D. had almost twice as much sex as those who said their partners put in the least effort.

For some partners with A.D.H.D., it can be hard to accept the need for change and can also be difficult to be optimistic that new strategies will make a difference, especially if medications or past strategies haven't worked.

But it's worth continuing to educate yourself about the different options available to people with A.D.H.D., or perhaps even seeking out a different clinician from the one you've been seeing, he added.

Dr. Tuckman also advised both partners to choose their battles.

"A.D.H.D. doesn't invent new problems, it just exacerbates the universal ones," he said. "It's the stuff that every other couple argues about, just more often."

It is within your right to insist that your partner get the kids to school on time, for example, and ideally you will find a way to make that happen. But, Dr. Tuckman cautioned, "you only get a small number of deal breakers."

## Consider a blend of treatments

Experts agree that medication alone is not the best way to manage A.D.H.D., but it can complement other strategies like cognitive behavioral therapy, [coaching](#), mindfulness and exercise.

It wasn't until he had been married for 16 years that Taylor Weeks, 36, finally realized that A.D.H.D. had been at the root of so much of the discord between him and his wife.

As far back as he can remember, he struggled with time blindness and forgetfulness, continually dropping the ball and then chastising himself for it.

"It has always been kind of a huge stressor for my wife," said Mr. Weeks, who lives in Rio Rancho, N.M. "She's constantly been frustrated with me."

He is now seeing a psychologist, taking medication for the A.D.H.D. symptoms and practicing mindfulness to help ease his anxiety.

He still struggles with forgetfulness, but his mind feels more clear.

"Before, I felt like I always had a bunch of thoughts going through my mind all the time," he said. "But when it came down to try to articulate what I'm thinking, it was really difficult for me to get that out of my head and get my point across."

His wife is noticing, he added, and told him he's easier to communicate with and seems more engaged with their four children.

Mr. Lawson's relationship also improved after he was eventually diagnosed with A.D.H.D. and prescribed a medication that improved his memory and ability to focus.

"It's literally like a blanket has been removed from my head," he said.

Just as important, they also attended couples therapy and learned how to better relate to each other and develop strategies to get things done at home.

Ms. Salamis, for her part, worked to break old patterns of behavior where she would continually check up on her partner or try to manage every aspect of their household. There was no need to do so anymore, because he was actually doing the things that needed to get done.

It has been a long road to get to this point, Mr. Lawson continued, but now, he said, "I can be the guy she fell in love with."

Christina Caron is a reporter for the Well section, covering mental health and the intersection of culture and health care. Previously, she was a parenting reporter, general assignment reporter and copy editor at The Times. [@cdcaron](#)

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