

Soft Focus

A couples guide to ADHD.
For the one who has it, and the one who doesn't.

SOFTFOCUSADHD.COM

Soft Focus

A couples guide to ADHD.

First edition.

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This book is for general information and support. It is not medical advice, it cannot diagnose anyone, and it is not a substitute for professional help. If you are struggling, please speak to your GP or a qualified therapist. In the UK, Samaritans can be reached free at any hour on 116 123.

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BEFORE YOU START

Read this bit, even if you skip the rest

This book is for two people. One of you has ADHD, one of you doesn't, and both of you are tired in ways the other one can't quite see.

It isn't a book about fixing anybody. Nobody here is broken and nobody is the villain, which is annoying, because it would all be so much simpler if one of you were.

What usually happens is smaller and slower than that. One of you keeps meaning to do things that never quite arrive. The other keeps noticing, keeps picking it up, and after a few hundred times stops mentioning it. Neither of you decided on any of this. Both of you privately suspect you're the problem.

And then one evening you look up and realise you've become two people who live in the same house and coordinate quite well, which is not the same thing as being together.

That drift is what this book is about.

How it's built

Part One explains what's actually happening in an ADHD brain, in plain language, without the clinical hedging. Part Two is written for the partner who has ADHD. Part Three is written for the one who doesn't. Part Four is for both of you. Part Five is for when things are genuinely bad.

Read your own part first. Then read the other one, not to check whether it's fair, but because most of the damage in these relationships is done by two people who have never once seen the same evening from the other side.

Two rules I've tried to hold to

Explaining is not excusing. Everything in here explains why something happens. None of it makes the impact any smaller. If you have ADHD, understanding your own wiring is not a defence you get to produce in an argument. If you don't, understanding it doesn't oblige you to put up with more.

Both of you are right. He did mean to do it. She has asked three times. Those aren't competing versions to be judged between. They're just both what happened, which is the awkward bit.

> **A note on the app.** Soft Focus is also an app, free to try, on the App Store and Google Play. Screenshots turn up throughout this book as worked examples: a day laid out in blocks, a shared calendar, a heat check before a hard conversation.
>
> You don't need it to use anything here. Every tool in this book works on paper, in your phone's own calendar, or in a conversation. The app just does the remembering for you. There's more about it at the end.

What this book isn't

It isn't therapy, and it isn't a diagnosis. Nothing here can tell you whether you or your partner has ADHD. That's a job for a clinician, and if you're wondering, the wondering is worth taking to your GP.

It also isn't a substitute for a therapist when you need one. There's a chapter near the end about how to know. Please read it even if you're fine.

Last thing. The chapters are short, deliberately. You can read the whole book in an evening, or three pages at a time on a Tuesday, and you can abandon one halfway through without losing the thread. That's not me being lazy. If you've handed this to someone who has never finished a non-fiction book in their life, I'd quite like them to finish this one.

PART ONE

What's actually happening

Six mechanisms that explain almost everything you've been arguing about.

SOFT FOCUS

Everyone else gets the performance.

You get what's left.

Masking all day empties the tank. So the flattest version of your partner shows up at home — and from where you're standing it looks exactly like indifference.

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A short, honest primer

Most of what you've absorbed about ADHD is either about children, or about not being able to sit still. Neither is much use here.

ADHD is a difference in how the brain manages itself. The technical phrase is executive function. The set of processes that let a person start things, stop things, hold information in mind, judge time, regulate feeling, and switch between tasks without losing the thread.

All of those are relationship skills. That's why a condition most people think of as a school problem turns up so forcefully in a marriage.

The bits that actually matter at home

Working memory. Smaller, and it doesn't prioritise. Important and trivial fall out at the same rate.

Time perception. Weak. Ten minutes and two hours feel similar from inside.

Activation. Starting is disproportionately hard, especially for anything dull, even when the person desperately wants it done.

Emotional regulation. Feelings arrive fast, at full volume, with very little gap between having one and showing it.

Attention allocation. Not a deficit of attention. A difficulty directing it. Interest gets it. Importance doesn't.

What it isn't

It isn't a lack of intelligence, effort or care. It isn't laziness with a diagnosis attached. And it isn't a modern invention: it's one of the more thoroughly researched conditions in psychiatry, with a substantial genetic component, which is why so many people get diagnosed shortly after their child does.

Why adults get missed

Because bright people compensate. They build workarounds, over-prepare, choose jobs that suit them, and mask hard. The compensation holds until life gets heavier. A demanding role, small children, a bereavement, and then the scaffolding comes down all at once.

Which is why so many diagnoses land in the middle of adulthood, and therefore in the middle of a relationship. It arrives into a couple who have already spent years constructing a story about why one of them is like this. Usually a harsher story than the truth.

The gap between meaning it and doing it

Almost every argument in an ADHD relationship is a version of the same argument. One person did not do the thing. The other person cannot understand how, if it mattered, it did not happen.

Here's the part that's hard to believe until you understand it: agreeing and remembering run on different systems, and only one of them is working reliably.

When your partner said they'd ring the dentist, the intention was real. There was no moment where they weighed it up, considered how much it mattered to you, and decided against. Nothing was rejected. The intention simply didn't survive the next interruption. The phone buzzing, someone asking a question, a thought arriving sideways.

This is working memory, and in ADHD it is genuinely, measurably smaller. It doesn't sort by importance. Your birthday and the bin collection drop out at roughly the same rate, which is exactly why forgetting the birthday hurts so much and exactly why it isn't the message it appears to be.

Why "just try harder" fails

Because effort was never the missing ingredient. The person forgetting is usually trying enormously hard, often harder than the person who remembers effortlessly, which is the bit that stings on both sides.

What actually works is external. Capture the thing at the moment of agreement, while you're both standing there. A phone reminder, a note, a shared calendar entry. The moment of agreement is the only reliable moment, because after that the thing is competing with everything else in a very loud room.

If you're the ADHD partner reading this: writing things down in front of your partner is not an admission of failure. It's the single most reassuring thing you can do, because it tells them the thing has been made real outside your head.

And say the impact anyway

Here's the bit people get wrong once they've understood the mechanism. They stop mentioning it. The explanation swallows the complaint, and the person who was let down decides it would be unkind to bring it up.

Don't do that. "I know you meant to, and I was still stuck waiting an hour" is a complete sentence, and both halves belong in it.

Time doesn't work the same way

"In a minute" is one of the most corrosive phrases in these relationships, and it's almost always said in good faith.

Time blindness is the ADHD tendency to have a poor internal sense of duration. Not a habit of underestimating, often no estimate at all. Ten minutes and two hours feel similar from the inside, particularly when something absorbing is happening.

So when your partner says "in a minute", they usually believe it. They are not managing you with a soft answer. But from where you're standing, "in a minute" that turns into two hours is indistinguishable from being fobbed off, and after the hundredth time you stop believing anything with a timeframe attached.

What helps

Swap the vague for the anchored. "Before dinner" is better than "in a minute". "By nine" is better still. Anchoring to an event or a clock time gives a brain with no internal stopwatch something external to hang on.

Timers are not childish. A visible countdown is one of the most effective tools available for this, and plenty of adults with ADHD run their entire day on them. If your partner sets one in front of you, that's them taking you seriously.

And a note for the non-ADHD partner: asking "can you set a timer for that?" works. Saying "you always say that" does not, however true it is.

The other side of time blindness

It cuts both ways. The same brain that loses two hours to a task can also produce astonishing bursts of focus. The whole cupboard reorganised, the entire trip planned in one sitting, the problem you'd both given up on solved at eleven at night.

That's the same wiring. You don't get one without the other.

Interest, not importance

Most people can do a boring task because it matters. An ADHD brain often can't, and this is the single most misunderstood thing about the condition.

Attention in ADHD is largely interest-based rather than importance-based. Novelty, urgency, competition, personal fascination, these generate the engagement that makes a task startable. Being told something is important does not, no matter how true it is or how much both of you wish it did.

This is why a person can complete a complex piece of work under deadline and be genuinely unable to open an envelope that has sat on the table for a fortnight. It looks like a choice. From inside, it isn't one.

What this means for your evenings

Screens win because they pay out immediately. A phone delivers a small reward every few seconds; a conversation delivers one eventually, maybe, if it goes well. That isn't a verdict on you or on your marriage. It's a mismatch between how the reward works and how the brain is built.

Knowing that doesn't fix it. But it changes what you say next, and "can you put the phone face down for five minutes?" gets somewhere that "you never listen to me" doesn't.

Using it deliberately

If interest is the fuel, then interest is also the lever. Somewhere new beats somewhere nice. An unfamiliar activity beats the restaurant you always go to. Doing a dull job side by side with the radio on beats doing it alone, because company supplies stakes that the brain won't generate on its own.

This is not a trick. It's simply working with the machinery rather than against it, and it usually gets you the engaged, funny, attentive version of your partner that you've been missing.

A word on dopamine

You will read a lot online about dopamine, most of it wrong. It is not a fuel gauge you top up with cold showers and supplements. It's closer to a signal about what's worth doing. Which is why novelty, movement and stakes change what a person can start, and why willpower doesn't.

The interventions that actually hold up are dull: sleep, exercise, daylight, structure, and making the important thing more interesting. No detox required.

Sleep matters more here than people expect, and there's a chapter in Part Five on why. In short, a badly slept brain gets less out of the same reward, which is a problem for anyone and a considerably bigger one for a brain that already runs on interest.

Hyperfocus, and why it confuses everyone

Nothing undermines the credibility of ADHD in a partner's eyes quite like watching someone who can't answer an email spend nine uninterrupted hours building a shed.

Hyperfocus is the other face of the same attention problem. When the interest is high enough, attention doesn't just arrive. It locks. Time disappears, food is forgotten, and the outside world including you stops registering.

It is not a superpower you can summon. That's the crucial bit. It can't be pointed at the tax return by wanting it hard enough. It happens when it happens, and one of the genuinely difficult things about living with ADHD is having a capability you can't reliably access.

Why it hurts the other partner

Because it looks like proof. If they can concentrate on that, they could concentrate on me, and the fact that they don't must mean something.

It doesn't mean that. But it does have real costs that are worth naming rather than tolerating: being spoken to and not heard, plans quietly overrun, evenings lost.

Living with it

Agree how to interrupt. Being yanked out of a locked-in state produces a flare that has almost nothing to do with the person doing the yanking. A hand on the shoulder and thirty seconds' grace works far better than a question from the doorway.

Agree an end time before it starts. "I'm going to get into this until nine" gives both of you something to hold.

And if you're the ADHD partner: notice when the shed is getting the version of you that your partner hasn't seen in a fortnight. That's the thing to fix, and noticing it is most of the fix.

The volume knob is missing

Emotional dysregulation isn't in most people's mental picture of ADHD, and it causes more damage in relationships than the forgetting does.

Emotions in ADHD arrive at full strength almost instantly. There is very little gap between feeling something and showing it, no pause where it gets weighed, sized and packaged into something proportionate.

So a lost set of keys can sound like a catastrophe. A mild criticism can produce a reaction that seems wildly out of scale. The feeling is entirely real. The size of it — that's not a measure of how serious the problem is, and learning to separate those two things is one of the more useful skills available to the other partner.

Fast up, fast down

Here's the mismatch that quietly wounds people. Twenty minutes after something that levelled you, they're fine. Genuinely fine, and often baffled that you're not.

It reads as callous. It usually isn't. But it leaves one person alone with the aftermath of something you both took part in, and if that keeps happening, resentment builds in the gap.

Say it plainly: "you've finished with this, I haven't." Most ADHD partners have no idea this is happening, because from inside it just feels like having moved on.

When they go quiet mid-argument

This is flooding. Once an ADHD brain is overwhelmed, nothing more is going in. Continuing costs you energy for absolutely no return, because the person you're talking to has effectively gone offline.

From outside it looks like stonewalling and feels like punishment. It's usually capacity running out.

The fix is not to accept silence. It's to agree, in advance and while calm, what a pause means: a word either of you can use, and a time you'll come back to it. **A pause with a return time is fair. A pause that means the subject quietly dies isn't.**

Why small feedback lands like a verdict

You said one sentence. They heard a judgment on their entire character. This is rejection sensitivity, and it derails more conversations than any other single feature of ADHD.

Rejection sensitivity is an intense, physical response to perceived criticism or rejection, out of all proportion to the trigger, and often faster than thought. The defensiveness that comes back at you is a flinch, not an argument.

Underneath it, almost always, is history. Most adults with ADHD have spent decades being told they're careless, lazy, disorganised, too much, not applying themselves. Your ordinary Tuesday-evening complaint lands on top of that pile, and the pile is what they're reacting to.

This does not mean saying nothing

It's tempting, once you understand this, to raise nothing at all. That's how people end up in silent, resentful marriages where nobody has done anything obviously wrong.

What works instead:

Lead with the specific. "I was left waiting an hour" is answerable. "You never think about anyone but yourself" is a character verdict, and it will get a character-verdict response.

Say the impact, not the identity. Describe what happened and how it landed. Skip the adjectives about who they are.

Give it ten minutes. The spike passes. A conversation that's unsalvageable at minute two is often perfectly possible at minute fifteen.

Pick the moment. Almost nothing said at eleven at night is heard properly. Tired, hungry, mid-task, all bad conditions.

And for the ADHD partner

When you feel the flare, say "give me a minute" instead of firing back. That's it. That's the skill. It takes about ten minutes to pass, and what you say in those ten minutes is usually what you'll spend the next fortnight apologising for.

Managing your shame is not your partner's job while they're asking for something they need.

The person who comes home isn't the real them either

This is the chapter I'd most want the non-ADHD partner to read, because it explains something that looks exactly like indifference and isn't.

Masking is the effort of appearing fine. Holding the thread in meetings. Not interrupting. Remembering names. Sitting still. Seeming organised. Being the funny, capable version everyone else gets. It costs enormously, and it runs all day.

Home is where it stops.

Which means the flattest, quietest, least impressive version of your partner turns up in the one relationship where they feel safe enough to stop performing. Everyone else got the show. You get what's left after it.

Why this is so hard to hear

Because it's often presented as a compliment, and it doesn't feel like one. "You're my safe place" is lovely in principle and lonely in practice when it means you get monosyllables on the sofa while their colleagues get the charming one.

Both things are true. It *is* trust. It's also a real loss, and you're allowed to name it.

Here's the sentence worth having: "I know I get the unmasked version, and I'm glad you can be unguarded with me. I need some of the other one too."

What neither of you has met

There's a third version, and most couples in a hard season have never properly seen it: the person who shows up when the load is actually managed. Slept, supported, systems working, not running on fumes.

That person exists. Making room for them is more or less the whole project.

The boring foundations

Everything else in this book works better or worse depending on four unglamorous things. It's tempting to skip them for the interesting psychological material. Don't.

Sleep

ADHD and sleep have a miserable relationship. Delayed body clocks are common, the brain often gets interesting exactly when the lights go off, and phones make it worse.

The effect on your relationship is direct: tomorrow's patience is decided tonight. An under-slept ADHD brain has less working memory, shorter emotional fuse and worse impulse control, which is to say, all the things that hurt when they're missing.

Protecting sleep is not self-care in the fluffy sense. It's the highest-leverage relationship intervention available.

Movement

Exercise is one of the few interventions with genuinely good evidence for ADHD symptoms. It doesn't have to be a programme. Twenty minutes of walking before a difficult conversation makes sitting still and listening measurably easier.

Medication, if it's on the table

Not everyone can take it, wants it, or can get hold of it. Waiting lists in the UK are long, and that's a real barrier rather than a failure of will. But if it's an option, it belongs in the conversation, and it changes the odds rather than

the effort.

Two things about medication. It doesn't teach skills, so the systems in this book still matter. And if something that was working stops working, that's a prescriber conversation, not a character development.

Daylight, food, alcohol

Morning light steadies the body clock. Skipping meals wrecks regulation, and ADHD is very good at forgetting to eat. Alcohol makes the next day worse in every dimension that matters here.

None of this is inspiring. All of it moves the needle further than another conversation about trying harder.

PART TWO

If you're the one with ADHD

Not a self-improvement programme. Small things that survive a bad day.

WHY THE PHONE WINS

It isn't more interesting than you.

It just pays out faster.

An ADHD brain chases the reward it can already see. A conversation pays out slowly. That's a wiring problem, not a verdict on you.

PART TWO · IF YOU'RE THE ONE WITH ADHD

Four small things, every day

You do not need a self-improvement programme. You need four things that take ten minutes between them and make your partner feel like a person rather than a logistics problem.

One. Ask how they're feeling. Then stay quiet long enough to hear the whole answer. Not the first sentence. The whole thing. The first answer is almost never the real one, so ask a second question.

Two. Ten proper minutes. Phones face down where they can see you put them down. Both sitting. Ten actual minutes. Set a timer if that helps, and it probably will.

Three. Take one thing off their plate. Something they'd otherwise have to do. Do it, then mention that you've done it, not for credit, but because invisible help is genuinely invisible.

Four. One specific thank you. "Thanks for sorting the car" lands. "Thanks for everything you do" is wallpaper.

Why four and not twelve

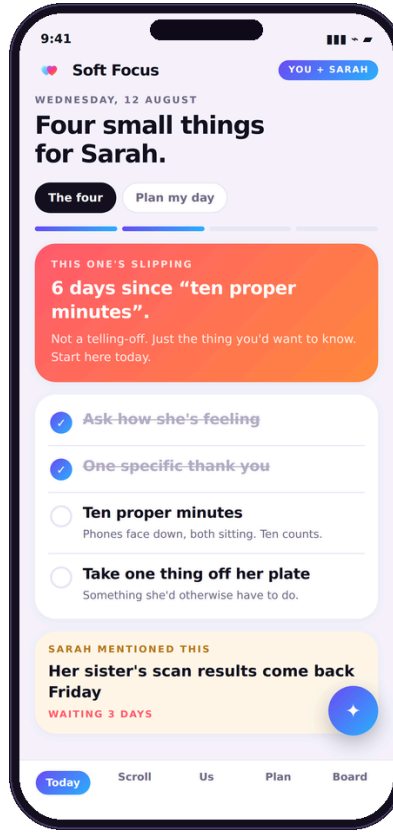
Because you will not do twelve, and a list you abandon by Wednesday is worse than three things you actually do. Every previous system you've tried probably failed for exactly this reason: it was designed by someone imagining an ideal week.

Four is small enough to survive a bad day.

The one that slips first

It'll be the ten minutes. It's the only one that requires sustained attention rather than a single action, and it's the one that matters most.

Keep an eye on how long it's been. Not as a streak to break. There's nothing to break here, and missing a day costs you nothing. But "six days since we properly talked" is a fact you'd want to know before it becomes six weeks.



Soft Focus, free to try on the App Store and Google Play. Four daily prompts, and how long it's been since each one.

Capture it in the ten seconds you've got

Your partner mentions their sister's scan results. Or a date. Or something they're dreading. You care about all of it, and in ninety seconds it will be gone.

This is the highest-leverage habit in this book, and it takes ten seconds.

Write it down while they're still talking. Phone note, reminder, whatever. Not later. Later does not arrive.

Tell them why you're doing it. "Hang on, I'm putting this in my phone so I don't lose it" is not rude. It's the opposite. It says the thing they just told you is important enough to be made real outside your head.

What to capture

Names. Dates. Anything they're worried about. Anything they're looking forward to. Anything that would wound them if you forgot it. Anything you've just agreed to do.

Then, and this is the part people miss, **look at it again.** A note you never reopen is a diary of your good intentions. Pick a moment: the commute, the kettle, before bed.

The follow-up is the whole point

Asking "how did your sister's scan go?" four days later does something disproportionate. It tells your partner they were held in mind by someone who they know struggles to hold things in mind.

That is worth more than any grand gesture you could plan, and it costs you a note and a glance.

Give the day a shape

An ADHD brain doesn't generate its own structure. This is not a moral failing and it doesn't improve by being told off. It just means the structure has to come from outside.

Writing the day down in blocks does two things. It removes decisions from the moment when deciding is hardest, usually late afternoon, when you're depleted. And it tells you where you are, which is more often the missing piece than the list itself.

Something like:

> **06:30** Wake up, feet on the floor
> **06:45** Move. Walk, gym, anything
> **08:00** Breakfast, phone in another room
> **09:00** Plan the day, ten minutes, written down
> **09:15** Hardest thing first, timer on
> **11:00** Outside for ten minutes
> **12:30** Lunch, away from the desk
> **18:30** Dinner, phones down
> **20:30** Ten proper minutes with her
> **22:00** Screens off, tomorrow written down

Four rules that keep it working

Six blocks, not sixteen. Over-planning is the classic trap. A day plan you've abandoned by ten in the morning teaches you that plans don't work for you, which isn't true and is expensive to believe.

Anchor to times, not order. "After I've done the emails" is not a time. 11:00 is a time.

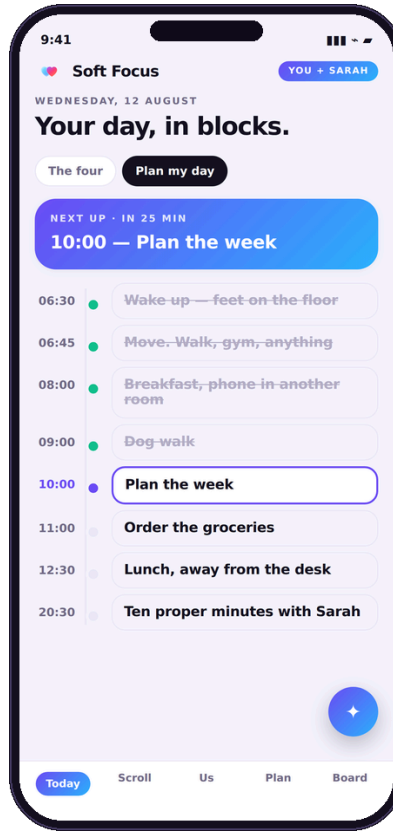
Nothing carries over. Tomorrow starts empty. No arrears, no guilt pile. Undone things go back on tomorrow's list only if they still matter.

Save the version that works. Most days repeat. Get it right once and reuse it, rather than rebuilding from scratch every morning with a brain that hates rebuilding things.

Hardest thing first

Not because of discipline. Because your capacity is highest early and the avoided task grows heavier every hour you leave it. Set a fifteen-minute timer, start badly, and you'll usually carry on past the bell.

"Do it now, badly" beats "do it properly later" every single time, because later doesn't come.



The Soft Focus app. The day in blocks, with the next thing always visible.

Systems, not promises

You have apologised a lot. You have meant every one of them. And your partner has stopped finding them reassuring, which feels unfair until you see what an apology looks like from the other side.

An apology is emotional and immediate. Change is structural and boring. Most of us are fluent in one and not the other, and if you only ever offer the first, your partner learns that apologies are the event rather than the beginning of one.

So the question to answer, out loud, is: **what will make this different next time?**

If the answer is "I'll try harder", it isn't an answer yet. Trying harder is what you were already doing.

What a real answer sounds like

"I've put a recurring alarm on for Thursday mornings."
"It's in the shared calendar with a reminder a week before."
"I've asked them to email me rather than tell me on the phone."
"I'm doing it now instead, badly, while we're both here."

These are unglamorous. That's the point. Your partner does not want more feeling from you. They have plenty of evidence you feel things. They want fewer occasions to need it.

Tell them the system

Say out loud what you're bad at remembering, and what you're using to handle it. They've been guessing for years, and most of their guesses have been harsher than the truth.

Then let them see it work. Praise matters here too, oddly enough. If you set something up and it holds, say so. It's much easier to keep a system running when someone has noticed it running.

Money, admin and the pile

The letters on the side. The renewal you didn't cancel. The thing that cost forty pounds more because you did it late. This is one of the most common flashpoints and one of the least discussed.

Admin is the perfect storm: boring, deadline-driven, unrewarding, and punished when missed. Everything an interest-based brain finds hardest, with financial consequences attached.

And the consequences are what make it a relationship problem rather than a personal one. Your partner isn't upset about the envelope. They're upset that the household is exposed to something they can't control and didn't cause.

What works

Automate everything that can be automated. Direct debits, standing orders, auto-renewals you actually want. Every decision removed is one that can't be missed.

One admin slot a week, in the diary, with company. Thirty minutes, side by side, radio on. Body doubling turns the impossible into the merely dull.

Open things the moment they arrive. The pile is made of unopened decisions, and each day it sits there it gets heavier.

Alerts a week early, not the day of. "Due today" is already too late for a brain that needs a run-up.

Own an area completely. Not "help with the finances", own the car, or the utilities, or the insurance, including remembering they exist.

If it's already bad

If there's debt or arrears you haven't mentioned, tell your partner before they find out. That is a horrible sentence and it is still the right advice. The concealment does more damage than the number, every time.

In the UK, StepChange and Citizens Advice both offer free, non-judgmental debt help. Using them is not an admission of anything except arithmetic.

The shame underneath

This chapter is about the thing you probably haven't said out loud, possibly ever.

Most adults with ADHD arrive in their relationship carrying decades of evidence that they are, fundamentally, a disappointment. Careless. Lazy. So much potential. Not applying yourself. Why can't you just.

You may have stopped believing the words while keeping the conclusion.

So when your partner mentions the bins, they are not talking about the bins. They are, to you, reading out the next line of a document you've been carrying since you were nine.

Why this matters to them, not just to you

Because it makes ordinary feedback impossible. If every small request triggers a defence of your entire character, your partner learns that raising anything is expensive. So they stop. And then they're alone with it, and the silence does more damage than the original complaint ever would have.

Your shame, unmanaged, quietly becomes their problem. That's a hard sentence and it's worth sitting with.

It isn't only babies

Most advice about broken sleep assumes a newborn and a finish line. Plenty of parents are still going in at two in the morning to a seven-year-old, and get very little sympathy for it because everyone assumes that stopped years ago.

If that's you, the practical suggestions below still apply, and the case for outside help is stronger rather than weaker. Persistent night waking in an older child is worth raising with a GP or the school rather than absorbing indefinitely, particularly if there's ADHD or autism in the picture.

What actually helps

Name it, once, calmly. "When you mention something I've missed, it lands much bigger than you mean it to. I'm working on that." That single sentence changes how the next hundred conversations go.

Buy the ten minutes. "Give me a minute" instead of firing back. The spike passes, and what you say inside it is what you'll spend a fortnight apologising for.

Separate the act from the identity. You forgot a thing. You are not a person who ruins everything. Those are different sentences, and the second one is doing all the damage.

Don't outsource the reassurance. It's fair to say this is hard. It's not fair to require your partner to manage your feelings every time they ask for something they need.

And if the shame is old, deep and constant, that's therapy, not a book. It's one of the most treatable parts of all this.

Turning towards them, on purpose

Novelty generates attention for free. Familiarity doesn't. That is the whole reason home can feel flat while everything new feels vivid, and it is not a statement about how much you love anyone.

Which means connection at home has to be built deliberately, in a way that people with quieter brains never quite have to bother with. Slightly unfair. Also just true.

Point the hyperfocus at them

The thing you can do that most people can't: take one thing and do it properly, start to finish, with everything you've got. Plan the whole trip. Organise the whole surprise. Learn the thing they love well enough to talk about it.

That capacity for total absorption is probably part of why they fell for you in the first place. Early on it was aimed at them. It's allowed to be again. It just has to be chosen now, rather than arriving on its own.

Small things that work

Somewhere new beats somewhere nice. Walk a different route after dinner. Book the slightly daft class. Sit down when they're talking, because standing up means leaving. Text them at lunchtime. Two lines, costs nothing, lands anyway. Repeat their last sentence back before you reply, which forces the listening to actually happen.

And when you interrupt, which you will, say "sorry, go on" and mean it. Don't finish your thought first.

Being the fun one isn't enough, and it's not nothing

There's a role that's easy to fall into: the spontaneous one, the ideas one, the one who makes life interesting, while someone else quietly runs the operation.

It works for a while. It's genuinely part of what your partner loves. And over a few years it curdles, because being the fun one is only charming if you're also occasionally the reliable one.

The most common thing a worn-out partner says isn't "I wish you were more exciting". It's "I wish I could stop being the adult for a week".

The fix isn't to stop being fun

Please don't. That energy is a real contribution and your household would be poorer without it.

The fix is to add one boring reliability to it. One area you own completely, forever, without reminders. That single thing does more for your partner's sense of the relationship than a dozen surprises, because it changes the category they file you in.

Let them be the unreliable one occasionally

Here's a move that works. Take the whole operation for a weekend. All of it. The meals, the kids, the logistics, the noticing. Tell them the plan is handled and mean it.

It'll be hard. That's rather the point: it's an experience of what they're carrying, and it's more instructive than any conversation about fairness.

And it lets them be, for two days, the person who gets looked after. Some partners haven't had that in years.

PART THREE

If you're the partner

For the person who has been told to be more understanding a thousand times.

FOR THE OTHER PARTNER

You can love someone and still be exhausted by them.

Both things are true. Understanding why it happens doesn't mean you have to absorb more of it.

Your patience was never infinite

You have probably been told to be more understanding roughly a thousand times, by friends, by the internet, and by yourself at three in the morning.

So let's start here: understanding it and being worn out by it are not opposites. You can know exactly why it happens, have complete sympathy for the brain it happens in, and still be furious. Both of those are allowed to be true in the same body at the same time.

Your patience running low is not a character flaw. It was never infinite. It was never supposed to be.

What you're actually carrying

Not the tasks. The noticing.

Being the one who knows when the car tax is due, which child needs what on Thursday, that the milk is nearly out, that someone has to ring the dentist. Not doing all of it, *holding* all of it. That's executive function performed on behalf of two people, and it is genuinely exhausting in a way that is almost impossible to point at.

Write it down. Not as ammunition — as evidence. A list of what only you are holding turns a vague, unwinnable feeling into something specific enough to hand over.

Hand over whole jobs, not tasks

If you assign tasks, you're still the manager. The noticing stays with you, which was the heavy part.

So hand over an entire area. Bins, forever. Car, forever. Mia's swimming, forever, including remembering it exists.

It will be done worse at first. That is the price of it not being yours, and it's cheaper than the alternative. Resist the rescue. One missed bin collection teaches more than fifty reminders.

How to ask so it survives the day

You have asked. You have asked nicely, and clearly, and repeatedly. Here is why some asks land and others evaporate, and what actually makes the difference.

One thing at a time

A list of six gets heard as "you're failing", and once that lands, none of the six get done. This is the single most common mistake, and it's completely understandable. You've been storing them up because raising things is expensive.

One ask. Then the next one, later.

Attach a deadline

"Sometime this week" is not a deadline for a brain without an internal clock. "By Thursday" is. Vague requests don't survive contact with a busy day.

Make it capturable

Ask in a way that can be recorded. Better still, ask them to record it in front of you: "can you put that in your phone now?" That single question does more than any amount of emphasis.

And if it matters enormously, send it as a message rather than saying it in passing. Written beats spoken, every time, for a brain that loses spoken things.

Say how you'll both know it's done

"Tell me when it's booked" closes the loop. Otherwise you spend four days quietly wondering, which costs you more than the task ever would.

Pick the moment

Not tired. Not hungry. Not mid-task, and not while they're absorbed in something, because pulling attention out of a locked-in state produces a flare that has nothing to do with your request.

> **A template that works**
>
> "Can you ring the dentist and book Mia in, by Thursday? Could you put it in your phone now, and tell me when it's done?"
>
> One thing. A deadline. A capture prompt. A confirmation. Thirty seconds, and it survives.

Don't become the parent

This is the dynamic that quietly ends these relationships, and almost nobody sets out to build it.

It happens by accident. You step in because it's faster. They step back because you've got it. You step in again. Within a couple of years you're managing an adult, and they're behaving like someone being managed, and both of you resent it.

The cost isn't just fairness. It's desire. It is extremely difficult to want someone you supervise. That's not a moral failing on your part; it's just how it works, and pretending otherwise doesn't help either of you.

How to stop

Do fewer things for them, not more. Every rescue confirms the arrangement.

Let consequences land. Not punitively, just don't intercept them. Missed appointments teach. Reminders don't.

Stop supervising handed-over jobs. If it's theirs, it's theirs, including the standard it's done to.

Say what's happening. "I don't want to be your manager" is a fair thing to put on the table, and most ADHD partners hate the arrangement as much as you do. They're usually not aware how completely they've stepped back.

The thing you're allowed to want

To be looked after. Not as a treat, not as a reward for good behaviour, as an ordinary feature of being in a couple.

Say it out loud. "I'd like to be the one who gets looked after this weekend" is a reasonable sentence, and you may have gone years without saying it.

Things you haven't said

Resentment grows in silence and shrinks in specifics. That is the whole chapter, really, but it's worth a few hundred more words because the silence is so easy to justify.

You don't say it because they've had a hard day. Because it seems petty. Because you've already raised something this week and you don't want to be the person who's always raising things. Because the reaction costs more than the thing itself.

So you swallow it. And it doesn't dissolve, swallowed things never do. It turns into contempt, which is far harder to come back from than any argument.

Park it, then say one a week

Keep a list. Not a case file, not evidence, just a place to put things so they stop rattling.

Then pick one a week and actually say it. Most will look smaller in writing than they felt at the time, and a few will turn out to be the real thing wearing a disguise.

Unspoken standards can't be met

Here's the bit that's genuinely on you. If you've never said it, they can't fix it, and quietly resenting someone for failing a test they didn't know they were sitting isn't fair, however justified the feeling is.

Give them the chance to get it right before you decide they can't.

When you've stopped bringing things up entirely

If you notice you've gone quiet. That raising anything feels pointless and you've settled into managing your own disappointment. That isn't peace. That's usually the last stage before someone gives up.

It's the point at which this stops being something to handle between the two of you. There's a chapter about that near the end.

Sometimes you'll be wrong too

A book that only ever explains one partner to the other is a book with a thumb on the scale. So: some things the non-ADHD partner does that make everything worse.

Storing things up. Six grievances delivered at once is not fairness, it's an ambush, and none of the six will be actioned.

Raising it at eleven at night. Understandable, because that's when the house is finally quiet. Also the worst possible moment.

Character sentences. "You always", "you never", "you're just like your father". These end conversations rather than starting them.

Rescuing, then resenting. Stepping in because it's faster, then being angry that you always have to. If you take the job back, you've taken the job back.

Supervising handed-over tasks. If it's theirs, the standard is theirs too. Doing it again afterwards is a message.

Assuming intent. The single most damaging habit. "He knew that would upset me" is usually false, and it turns a memory problem into a moral one.

Making it your identity. If every conversation with friends is about what he did this week, something has shifted that will be hard to shift back.

Why this chapter is here

Not to balance the books, and not to suggest the load is even. It isn't.

It's because the only things you actually control are your own. Understanding their brain is useful. Changing how you ask, when you raise it, and what you assume about why. That's where your leverage is, and it's considerably more than nothing.

The first year after a diagnosis

If your partner has just been diagnosed, the next year is going to be stranger than either of you expects, and almost nobody prepares you for your half of it.

What happens to them

Relief first, usually. Then grief, for the school years, the jobs that went wrong, the version of themselves they might have been with support. Then, often, a period of intense reading and self-explanation where everything becomes ADHD.

That phase is normal and it does pass. It's what happens when someone gets a working explanation for thirty years of confusing evidence.

What happens to you, which nobody mentions

Something more complicated, and often unspeakable.

Relief that there's a reason. Guilt about every time you thought they simply couldn't be bothered. And, quietly, a kind of anger, because the diagnosis explains the past without repaying it, and you're the one who carried the past.

Some partners also feel a specific fear: that everything is now medical, and there's no longer any legitimate way to be annoyed about anything.

All of that is normal. None of it makes you unsupportive.

The trap

The trap is that a diagnosis becomes a full explanation for every disappointment, and every request gets met with "that's my ADHD".

It probably is their ADHD. And the impact is still real, and things still need to be different.

A useful sentence, kindly delivered: "I believe it's the ADHD. I still need this to change. What's the system going to be?"

What to hope for

Not a transformation. A shift in the story. You stop being two people who can't understand each other and become two people managing a shared, named thing. That's a considerably better position, even on the bad days.

What's actually good

A book like this spends a lot of pages on what's hard, which risks leaving you with a picture of your partner as a set of deficits with a person attached. That isn't the deal you made, and it isn't accurate.

Hyperfocus aimed at you is unmatched. Nobody plans a surprise like an ADHD brain that has decided you are the project.

They're extraordinary in a crisis. When everything is on fire, the person who can't plan a Tuesday is frequently the calmest one in the room, urgency is the fuel they've been missing all along.

Forgiveness comes easily. Grudges require sustained attention, and that isn't their strength. You will rarely be punished for weeks over something small.

They notice what everyone walks past. The same wandering attention that maddens you on a Wednesday finds the thing nobody else saw.

Ideas connect that shouldn't. Which is why the daft suggestion is occasionally the right one.

Enthusiasm is real and contagious. When they're delighted by something, so is everyone in the room. It is completely unfaked.

Rejection sensitivity has a flip side. Unusual attunement to other people's hurt. They often spot a friend struggling before anyone else does.

You will not be bored. Say yes to the eleven-o'clock drive occasionally. That impulse is the same one you fell for.

And the practical version

When the systems click, change in ADHD can be fast and dramatic. This isn't a slow grind forever. It responds well to structure once it's the right structure, and couples who work this out together often end up communicating better than couples who never had to learn how.

That's not a consolation prize. That's the actual upside.

PART FOUR

Together

The things neither of you can do alone.

DO THIS TOGETHER

Somewhere new beats somewhere nice.

Novelty generates attention for free. It's the closest thing there is to a switch for the version of them you miss.

PART FOUR · TOGETHER

One calendar, visible to both

Most of the logistical arguments in these relationships come down to information living in one person's head.

If it's in your head, it's yours. You'll be the one who remembers it, the one who's blamed when it's missed, and the one who quietly resents being the only person who knew.

So put the household somewhere you can both see. Not a list of chores. The actual shape of your lives. Who's working late. Which day the kids need something. When the appointments are. When you're both free, which you may not have realised you were.

Four things that make it work

Enter shift patterns once, as a repeat. Not week by week.

Block whole trips and holidays as spans, not a single date that reads as one afternoon.

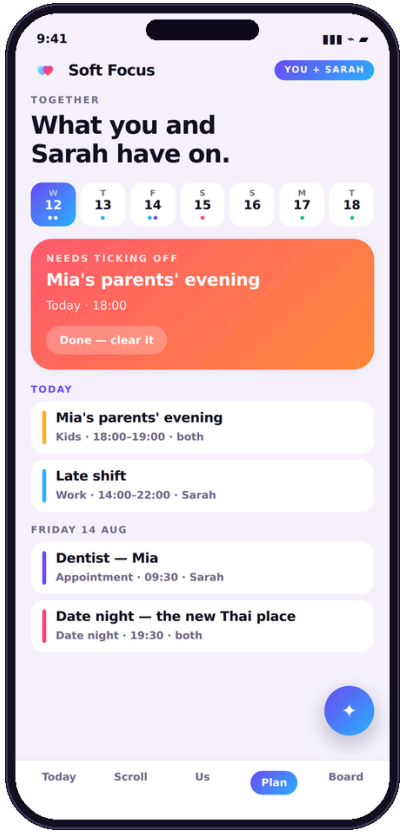
Put date night in like it's a dentist appointment. Unscheduled time doesn't survive a busy season, and the couples who keep seeing each other are almost always the ones who booked it.

Alarms on anything that would hurt to miss. A week ahead, not the morning of. And put them on both phones. A reminder only one of you can see is just the old arrangement with extra steps.

Why this isn't lowering the bar

Because you're not making the ADHD partner less responsible. You're moving the information out of one person's head and into a place where both of you are equally responsible for looking.

That's a redistribution of the invisible work, which is exactly what needs to happen.



The shared calendar in Soft Focus. Shifts, appointments, who has the kids, date night, in one place.

PART FOUR · TOGETHER

Dividing the house without a spreadsheet

Most couples divide chores. Very few divide the noticing, which is the part that actually exhausts people.

If one person holds every deadline, every restock, every appointment and every birthday, then no amount of task-sharing fixes it. They're still the manager, and management is the heavy job.

Divide by area, not by task

Write down every area of the household. Not tasks, areas. Meals. Laundry. Bins and recycling. The car. Bills and insurance. School and childcare admin. Birthdays and gifts. Repairs. Holidays. Pets. Extended family.

Then assign each one to a person, completely, including remembering it exists.

Pick to your strengths, not to fairness

An ADHD brain handles some of these far better than others. Anything with urgency, novelty or a visible result is a good fit. Anything invisible and recurring is a bad one.

Bins are fine. There's a day and a consequence. Noticing that the shampoo is running low is genuinely hard. Assigning by strength isn't letting anyone off; it's how you get a household that actually functions.

Then automate what's left

Repeat orders, standing appointments, recurring calendar entries with alarms on both phones. Anything a system can hold shouldn't be held by a person.

Review it once a season

Twenty minutes, four times a year. What's not working? What's crept back? Areas drift, and the drift is always in the same direction.

PART FOUR · TOGETHER

Ten minutes, and one bigger conversation

You do not need a weekly summit. You need ten unglamorous minutes most days, and one longer conversation a week that isn't about logistics.

The daily ten is not for admin. If you spend it on the boiler and the school forms, you've had a meeting, not a conversation. Admin has its own slot.

Questions that get past "fine"

The first answer is rarely the real one, so the trick is a second question. Some that work:

What's taken up the most space in your head this week?
Is there anything you've been waiting for me to notice?
What do you need more of from me, help, or company?
Is there something you've decided not to bother me with?
What have you done recently that I didn't thank you for?
Have I been getting anything wrong lately?
What would make tomorrow easier for you?

That last one is deceptively good, because it's answerable.

The weekly one

Once a week, the same question, answered separately and then compared. Rotate through something like:

What's one thing that worked between us this week?
What did you need that you didn't ask for?
Where did we feel like a team?
How connected did this week feel, one to ten, and why that number?

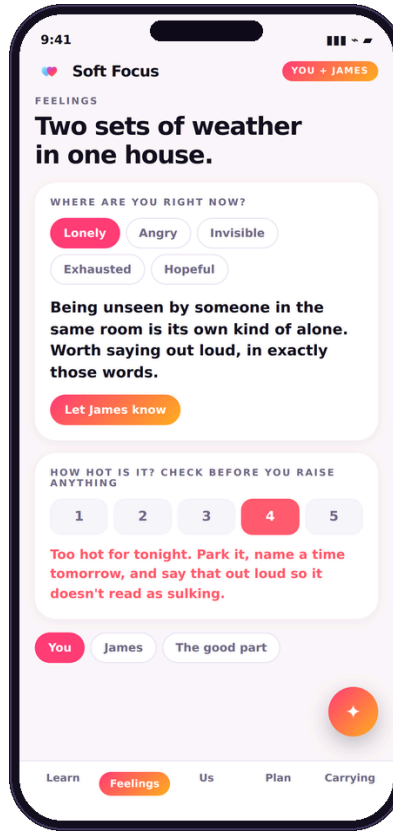
Answering separately matters. It stops the more fluent talker setting the frame, and it surfaces the gap between two people's weeks, which is usually where the useful conversation is.

Check the temperature first

Before raising anything difficult, rate where you are, one to five.

1–2, Fine. This is the level where things actually get heard.
3, Warm. One item only, and leave the history out of it.
4–5, Not tonight. Park it, name a time tomorrow, and say that out loud so it doesn't read as sulking.

Nothing said at a five survives contact. Not because your point is wrong — neither of you can hear anything at that temperature.



The heat check in Soft Focus. Where you are, before you raise something difficult.

PART FOUR · TOGETHER

Repair

You will get this wrong. Both of you, repeatedly. What separates couples who survive it isn't how often things go wrong. It's what happens in the twenty minutes afterwards.

Apology isn't repair

"I didn't mean to" is an explanation. It's usually true, and it isn't repair.

Repair has three parts: naming the impact, taking the weight of it, and changing the mechanism. Skip the third and you'll be back here next month with the same conversation and less goodwill.

What each of you needs to hear

The ADHD partner usually needs to hear that they aren't fundamentally a disappointment, because that's the story rejection sensitivity is telling them right now, and it's louder than anything you're actually saying.

The other partner usually needs to hear that the impact was real. Not that it was understandable. That it landed, and that it mattered.

These are different needs, and you can give them both in about two sentences.

Rituals that help

A word either of you can say that means "I'm flooded, not leaving", plus the time you'll come back.

A standing agreement that anything raised at eleven at night gets deferred to the morning without either of you treating that as avoidance.

Something small and physical afterwards. A cup of tea, a hand on a shoulder. It sounds trivial. It resets more than the conversation does.

Then mark what went right

Couples in a hard season stop noticing anything good, and the good becomes invisible even when it's happening.

Say it out loud when a system holds, when a hard conversation goes well, when someone does the thing they said. Reinforcement moves ADHD behaviour further than criticism ever has, and it works on the other partner too, who is usually starving for evidence that any of this is landing.

PART FOUR · TOGETHER

Sex, and what gets in the way

This is the chapter people skip and then quietly wish they hadn't. ADHD affects intimacy in specific ways, and almost nobody names them.

The parent problem

The biggest one. If you spend the day managing someone, desire is very hard to locate in the evening. That's not a moral failing, and it doesn't mean the attraction has gone. It means the role you've been put in is incompatible with the role you're being asked to switch into at ten o'clock.

The fix is not in the bedroom. It's in the division of the noticing.

The distraction problem

Attention wandering during sex is common with ADHD, and it is devastating to be on the receiving end of without an explanation. Told about in advance, calmly, it becomes a quirk. Discovered, it feels like rejection.

Talk about it outside the moment. Novelty, unhurried time and fewer competing inputs all help.

The initiation problem

ADHD can make starting anything difficult, including this. A partner who has stopped initiating may not have stopped wanting. And rejection sensitivity makes a single "not tonight" land far harder than intended, so after a few of those, people stop asking.

The resentment problem

Unsaid things don't stay in their box. If there's a fortnight of swallowed irritation, it will be in the room.

What helps

Schedule it. Unromantic, yes, but spontaneity is not a strong suit here and unscheduled things get lost. Take the pressure off by agreeing that closeness doesn't have to lead anywhere. And say what's happening, because in the absence of an explanation people always write a worse one.

PART FOUR · TOGETHER

When you're parents too

Children raise the stakes on everything in this book, and there's a decent chance at least one of them has ADHD as well.

The load doubles, and so does the invisible part

School forms, kit days, parties, appointments, the endless small deadlines of family life. If one of you was already holding all the noticing, this is where it becomes unsustainable.

The area-division in the last chapter matters more here, not less.

Don't let one parent become the police

The pattern to watch for: one parent enforcing everything while the other is the fun one. It's corrosive for the marriage and confusing for the children, and it maps a bit too neatly onto the parent-child dynamic you're already trying to avoid.

Agree the rules together when things are calm, then both hold them.

If your child has ADHD too

Two things happen. The ADHD parent often becomes an extraordinary advocate, because they recognise everything and remember what it felt like to be misread. That's genuinely valuable.

And it can reopen old wounds. Watching your child struggle with something you were punished for is heavy, and it deserves proper support rather than being absorbed.

What children actually need to see

Not perfect parents. Two adults who repair well.

Children learn far more from watching a conflict get resolved than from never witnessing one. Say sorry in front of them occasionally. Let them see the systems. The calendar, the alarms, the lists, because it teaches them that needing structure is ordinary rather than shameful.

Children, and broken nights

If your sleep is being broken by a child, you are running the hardest possible version of everything in this book, and running it on a brain that has not had a full night in a very long time.

It's worth saying plainly, because most couples in this phase assume the problem is them. Two people who were managing perfectly well suddenly can't, and they conclude something has gone wrong with the marriage. Usually nothing has gone wrong with the marriage. Something has gone wrong with the sleep.

The previous part of this book explains what broken sleep does to a brain that already runs on interest rather than importance. Everything gets flatter, harder to start, and slower to recover from. Now add a child who wakes at half past four, and do that night after night for as long as it goes on.

Why parenting is uniquely hard on an ADHD brain

It isn't only the tiredness. Small children ask for precisely the things ADHD makes difficult, more or less constantly.

Interruption. Working memory gets wiped every ninety seconds. You cannot hold a thought, finish a task, or complete a sequence without someone needing something halfway through. For a brain with a small mental notepad, this is close to a designed torture.

No recovery time. ADHD needs gaps. Small children remove them entirely, and the gap that used to be the commute or the shower is now also being used for something.

Sensory load. Noise, mess, being climbed on, three conversations at once. Many adults with ADHD are more sensitive to this than they let on, and by six in the evening the system is simply full.

Transitions, endlessly. Getting four people out of the house involves a dozen switches between tasks, each one of which costs an ADHD brain more than it costs yours.

Regulating someone else while dysregulated. This is the hardest one. Toddlers have no emotional brakes, and neither, on a bad day, does your partner. Two dysregulated people in a small kitchen at bathtime is how ordinary evenings turn into shouting nobody meant.

What actually helps

Split the nights properly, in writing. Not "whoever hears them first", which reliably means the same person every time and quietly poisons everything. Alternate whole nights if you can, so each of you gets one unbroken stretch. One properly slept night is worth considerably more than two half ones, and this works whether the child in question is two or ten.

Protect one lie-in each, every week, as a fixture. In the diary, non-negotiable, not conditional on how the week has gone. This is the single highest-value thing most couples with small children aren't doing.

Lower the standard on purpose. Fish fingers. Same clothes twice. A house that would embarrass you. Nobody has ever looked back and wished the kitchen had been tidier during a bad stretch.

Give the ADHD partner a decompression gap. Twenty minutes alone between work and the evening shift. It looks like the last thing you can spare. It is usually what stands between a normal bedtime and a bad one.

Take the whole thing off each other occasionally. Two hours, no phone contact, no checking in. Both of you need this, and the one carrying the invisible load usually needs it more and asks for it less.

The bit about ADHD and children being inherited

Worth naming, because it changes the maths. If a child has ADHD too, your household now needs executive function for three people rather than two, and the person supplying it is running on broken sleep.

That is not something goodwill fixes. It's the point at which school support, a proper assessment, family who can take a Saturday, or paid help stop being extravagant and start being structural.

One thing to hold on to

Sleep is a phase for some families and a long-running feature for others. Plenty of people are told it'll be sorted by two, and are still being woken at eight or nine, sometimes for reasons that have nothing to do with anything they've done. Children with ADHD or autism are considerably more likely to be poor sleepers, which is worth knowing if that's your house, because it means the shortage isn't temporary and can't be waited out.

So the point isn't that it will pass. It might, and it might not. The point is narrower and more useful: be careful about the conclusions you draw at three in the morning.

Almost nothing you decide about your marriage while chronically underslept is reliable. Fix what can be fixed about the sleep first, get help with the rest, and judge the relationship on a week where you have both had some. If that week never seems to arrive, that is itself the thing to take to a GP, rather than evidence about how you feel about each other.

Do something together that isn't admin

If interest is the fuel for an ADHD brain, then shared novelty is the closest thing you have to a switch, and it happens to be one of the better-evidenced ways any couple raises how satisfied they feel.

The nice restaurant you always go to asks their brain to manufacture interest from nothing. The slightly odd thing neither of you has done before doesn't have to.

Things that work

Go somewhere neither of you has been. Walk a different route after dinner, movement, novelty and talking in half an hour, and side by side is easier than face to face for the hard subjects.

Do the boring admin side by side with the radio on. That's body doubling: company supplies stakes the brain won't generate alone, and it stops one of you doing all of it.

Book something slightly out of character. Cook something neither of you can cook. Play something competitive. Take a day out with no plan past the first stop. Learn something together for six weeks. A fixed run with an end date suits an ADHD brain far better than an open-ended commitment.

Get outside together before ten in the morning. Unglamorous, and it works.

Swap two jobs for a fortnight. You'll each find out what the other has been carrying, usually more instructively than talking about it.

Twenty minutes beats one grand gesture

Ten short, repeatable things will do more for you than one expensive weekend. Partly because they're achievable in a difficult season, and partly because the thing you're rebuilding is a habit of turning towards each other, not a memory of a nice hotel.

PART FIVE

When it's bad

Burnout, honesty, and knowing when a book isn't enough.

THE HARD BIT

You can both be burnt out at the same time.

THEM

Nothing left after holding it together all day.

YOU

Nothing left after holding everything else.

Two empty tanks and no fuel between you. This is the point where couples stop talking — and the point where outside help stops being optional.

PART FIVE · WHEN IT'S BAD

Burnout, on both sides

Two people can be burnt out at once, in different directions, and completely fail to recognise it in each other.

ADHD burnout doesn't look like exhaustion

It looks like not caring.

The mask stays on for work and comes off at the door, so what you get isn't a person visibly struggling. It's a person on the sofa, on their phone, unable to start anything, including the conversation about why.

The signs: doing less at home than ever and hating themselves for it; snapping at small things and flat about big ones; even the fun stuff feeling like admin; sleep gone sideways in both directions; systems that were working suddenly abandoned.

That's what happens after months of running an unsupported brain at full effort. It isn't laziness arriving late.

And the burnout nobody names

If you're the other partner: you've stopped asking, because asking costs more than doing it yourself. You feel resentment where affection used to be. You're managing a partner instead of being with one. You can't remember the last thing you did purely for you. You've gone quiet, and everyone is calling it peace.

Nobody warns you that loving someone can become a full-time job. Holding the diary, doing the noticing, managing the fallout, being told to be more understanding. That's a workload, and workloads burn people out,

even when the person is entirely worth it. Especially then, because you never let yourself put it down.

When you're both empty

Lower the bar on purpose. Cut the list to one thing a day and mean it. Hand over a whole job rather than a task. Protect sleep before anything else, because tomorrow's patience is decided tonight. Say "I've got nothing tonight" out loud and early, rather than discovering it mid-argument. Book one thing that isn't admin.

Recovery isn't a fresh start or a grand gesture. It's a fortnight of doing less, badly, without apologising for it.

You haven't run out of love

You've run out of capacity. They're not the same thing and they don't need the same solution. One asks whether you still want this, the other only asks what has to come off the pile.

Most people in a hard season are answering the second question while quietly terrified it's the first.

PART FIVE · WHEN IT'S BAD

The spiral, and what's actually going on in it

Burnout doesn't just make an ADHD partner tired. It makes them measurably worse at the exact things they were already struggling with, and that turns a bad month into a bad year.

You will have noticed this without having words for it. The systems that were holding suddenly stop holding. The alarms get dismissed without being read. Things that were merely difficult become impossible, and the person doing them looks less like someone who is struggling and more like someone who has stopped caring.

They haven't stopped caring. The machinery has got worse, and here is roughly why.

What actually happens, and what doesn't

You'll read a great deal online about burnout "draining your dopamine", as though there were a tank somewhere running low. It's a tidy story and it isn't really what the evidence shows.

What is well established is narrower and more interesting. Lose enough sleep and the brain's reward system changes. Imaging work from Nora Volkow's group at the National Institutes of Health found that after a single night of sleep deprivation, D2/D3 receptor availability in the ventral striatum dropped. Notably, when they measured the actual amount of dopamine floating about, it hadn't fallen. The receptors had become less available, not the chemical.

The practical effect is the one that matters to you. Fewer available receptors means the same reward produces a weaker signal. Things that were mildly motivating become flat. And a brain that already runs on interest rather than importance has just had its supply of interest quietly reduced.

That's one night. Now stretch it across the months of poor sleep that burnout reliably produces.

How the loop closes

It goes something like this, and once it's running it feeds itself.

Sleep goes first, because it always does. Either they can't get to bed, which is the classic ADHD problem of finally having the house quiet and not wanting to give it up, or they can't stay asleep because of everything undone. If you have small children, that decision has already been made for you, and there's a chapter in Part Four about what that does to a household.

Tired, the reward system is less responsive, so starting anything is harder than it was last month.

Less gets started, so more sits undone. The pile is visible from the sofa.

The pile generates shame, and shame in ADHD is not a mild feeling. It's the thing that makes people avoid the room the pile is in.

Avoidance costs energy. Late at night they finally get some peace and take it out of tomorrow's sleep.

Round it goes. Nobody in the house decided on any of it.

Why willpower is the wrong tool here

Because none of the steps in that loop respond to being told to try harder. You cannot decide to have more available receptors. You can't push through a flattened reward response by wanting to.

What does move it is unglamorous and mostly physical. Sleep, protected properly rather than aspirationally. Daylight in the first part of the day. Movement, which does more for available motivation than any productivity system. Fewer commitments, so the pile stops growing while you dig.

None of that is inspiring. All of it works better than another conversation about being more organised.

If you're the other partner

Two things to take from this.

The first is that the flatness genuinely isn't a verdict on you. When someone in this state doesn't respond to a nice evening or a thoughtful gesture, it isn't because they've stopped finding you worth responding to. The signal is turned down on everything, and unfortunately you're included in everything.

The second is less comfortable. Understanding the loop doesn't oblige you to sit inside it indefinitely. You can know exactly why the sleep is bad and still say that the current arrangement isn't survivable for you. Both of those are allowed, and the second one is often what starts things moving.

And it's worth saying plainly: the same spiral runs on your side too. You're sleeping badly, carrying more, and finding that things which used to feel manageable now don't. That isn't you becoming a worse person. That's the same machinery, under a different load.

If you're thinking about leaving

Some people reading this are further along than the rest of the book assumes. If that's you, this chapter is written for you and it won't try to talk you into anything.

Questions to sit with

Is this the relationship, or is it an unmanaged condition? They can feel identical from inside, and they need completely different answers. A couple in year eight of untreated, unsupported ADHD is in a different situation from a couple who have tried everything with support in place.

What would need to be true in six months? Specific things. Not "he'd have to change".

Have you actually said it? Not hinted. Said, plainly, that you are considering leaving. A surprising number of people have never once said it out loud, and it changes what happens next.

Are you being asked to accept something, or to absorb something? Accepting a partner's wiring is reasonable. Absorbing the entire cost of it indefinitely is not.

Where this book stops

If you're at this point, the tools here are the wrong size. What you need is a person in a room, ideally an ADHD-informed couples therapist, and your own therapist alongside.

Going to therapy is not a commitment to staying. It's a way of finding out what's actually true, with someone who isn't inside it.

And plainly

If there is control, intimidation, or you are frightened of your partner, that is not ADHD and this is not the right book. In the UK, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline is free and open at any hour on 0808 2000 247, and Respect runs a line for men on 0808 8010 327.

Nothing in these pages should be read as a reason to stay somewhere that isn't safe.

When you need more than a book

This is the most important chapter here, and the one most likely to be skipped. Please don't.

Everything in this book helps at the margins. None of it is treatment, and none of it replaces a person in a room.

Signs it's time

You've both been genuinely trying for months and nothing has shifted. The same argument arrives every week wearing different clothes. One of you has stopped bringing things up at all. Contempt has crept in, eye-rolling, sarcasm, a sense of talking to someone beneath you. You're staying together mainly out of logistics. Someone has become someone they don't recognise.

None of these mean the relationship is over. All of them mean the tools in this book are no longer the right size for the problem.

What to ask for

An ADHD-informed couples therapist. The qualifier matters. A therapist who doesn't understand ADHD may spend months treating the forgetting as a symptom of not caring, which will make things measurably worse.

Your own therapist, separately. Particularly if you're the non-ADHD partner. Your side of this deserves attention in its own right, not only as part of a joint project.

A medical review. If the ADHD partner is undiagnosed, or diagnosed and untreated, or on medication that stopped working. That's a GP conversation, and it can change what's possible far more than any communication

technique.

Please read this bit

If either of you has been low for weeks with no lift, is drinking more than you'd like to admit, or has had thoughts of harming yourself, that needs a doctor rather than a book. Ring your GP. In the UK you can call Samaritans free at any hour on 116 123.

Asking for help is not the point at which you've failed. It's the point at which you've correctly identified the size of the thing.

Where this leaves you

If you've read this far, you are probably not the couple you're worried you are.

The couples who end up in real trouble aren't the ones reading books about their relationship at half past ten on a Tuesday. They're the ones who've stopped bothering. That you're still here, irritated, tired, hoping, is itself information.

Three things to keep

Forgetting isn't a measure of love, but it is a measure of impact. Both halves. Drop the first and one of you drowns in shame for something they didn't choose. Drop the second and the other is told, again, that their exhaustion is a misunderstanding.

Explaining is not excusing. Every mechanism in this book is an explanation. None of them are a defence, and none of them oblige anybody to accept more than they can carry.

The small thing is the thing. Emotional disconnection is rarely one big event. It's a hundred small moments nobody marked. Which means it's rebuilt the same way, ten proper minutes, a question asked twice, one job taken off a pile, a thing remembered that nobody expected you to remember.

Start with one

Not a programme. Not a new system for everything. One thing, tomorrow.

If you have ADHD: ask them how they're feeling, then ask a second question and actually wait.

If you don't: tell them one specific thing you've been carrying, and hand it over whole.

That's it. That's the beginning.

Forgetting isn't a measure of love.
But it is a measure of impact.

Work on the second one.

There's an app that does all of this with you.

The same idea, built to sit in your pocket and nudge you. One app, two sides.

IF YOU HAVE ADHD

Four daily prompts. A day planner with a live next up. Ten-second capture for anything your partner just said, and it tells you what has slipped.

IF YOU'RE THE PARTNER

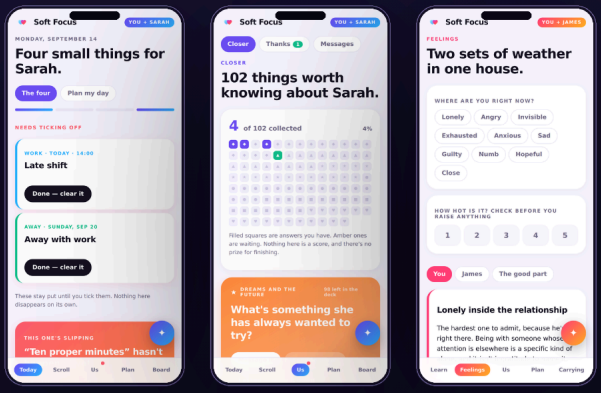
Decode what just happened. A heat check before you raise something. A place for the invisible load and the things you haven't said.

SAY IT, DON'T TYPE IT

Adding to a calendar means seven fields, which is exactly the kind of job that doesn't get done. Say “dentist for the kids next Thursday at half nine” and it fills all of them in, then shows you what it heard before anything is saved.

AND A TAB CALLED US, FOR THE PAIR OF YOU

Closer — 102 questions about the person you live with. Draw one, ask it over dinner or send it across, and keep the answer. Thanks — somewhere to say the specific thing you noticed, and to keep what they noticed about you.



Free to try

On the App Store and Google Play

SOFTFOCUSADHD.COM

Free to use on your own side, for good. No streaks, and no score your partner can see.