

When ADHD Shows Up in Your Relationship: Why the Same Conflicts Keep Happening

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Many couples reach a point where they can predict their own arguments before they happen. The same disagreement, about who forgot what, who wasn't really listening, why the kitchen counter is covered in mail again, resurfaces in different forms but with the same underlying shape. After enough rounds of this, couples often conclude it comes down to communication styles, mismatched expectations, or simply being "different people." But there is often a more complete explanation, one that has nothing to do with how much two people love each other or how hard they are trying.

Across more than three decades of clinical work, I have found that the missing piece for most people is not better communication techniques. It is a clearer understanding of how their brain takes in and processes information, particularly auditory and visual information, day to day. These processing differences are often present for years, sometimes a lifetime, before anyone names them. And when two people who process information differently build a life together, those differences do not disappear. They show up in the relationship.

Picture a conversation happening with the television on, or in a busy kitchen with kids talking and a phone buzzing. For some people, that background noise does not just compete for attention, it actively interferes with the ability to take in what is being said. One partner finishes a sentence, looks up, and realizes the other person was nodding along but did not register half of it. From the outside, it can look like someone was not listening or did not care enough to pay attention. From the inside, it often feels like the words simply did not land.

The same thing can happen with multi-step requests. "Can you call the insurance company, then swing by the pharmacy, and grab something for dinner on the way home?" sounds simple enough. But for someone whose brain processes auditory information differently, holding three sequential steps in mind while also driving, talking, or managing other thoughts can mean one or two of those steps quietly drop out. The task that comes back partly done is not a sign of not caring. It is a sign that the information did not fully make it in, in the order it was given.

Visual processing differences show up just as often, and just as invisibly. A partner who cannot seem to keep a closet, a car, or a kitchen counter from accumulating clutter, no matter how many systems they try, is not necessarily being careless. Visually organizing physical space draws on some of the same processing skills as organizing information mentally. When that pattern is part of how someone's brain works, "just be more organized" does not address what is actually happening.

Some partners also notice a delay before the other responds to a question or comment, almost as if there is a beat where the information is still being processed. In the

moment, that pause can read as distance, disinterest, or even passive resistance. More often, it is simply how long it takes for that person's brain to fully receive and respond to what was said.

None of this means a relationship is broken, or that one partner is more at fault than the other. What it often means is that two people have been interpreting each other's behavior through the wrong lens, attributing forgetfulness, distraction, or distance to character or effort, when the real explanation is about how information moves through the brain. Once that becomes visible, something shifts. The same behaviors are still there, but they stop being read as a referendum on the relationship.

This is something I spoke about in more depth on **Create with Franz “The ADHD marriage reset: from conflict to growth”** released July 11, 2026.

If these patterns sound familiar in your own relationship, they may be worth looking at more closely. The **ADHD and Couples Checklist** is a brief self-reflection tool designed to help you notice whether repeated conflicts, follow-through struggles, emotional overwhelm, or communication breakdowns may be part of a larger pattern that has gone unrecognized.