

— A PRACTICAL GUIDE —

ADHD *or* Toxic Relationship?

5 QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU
TELL THE DIFFERENCE



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ADHD or Toxic Relationship?

5 Questions to Help You Tell the Difference

ADHD can make a relationship challenging: missed plans, forgotten promises, interrupting, losing track of time. Sometimes partners wonder if behaviors are connected to ADHD, or if they are signs of toxic behavior. Toxic behavior is meant to gain power and control over you. ADHD can be weaponized against someone by their partner. Pay attention to what happens after your partner has done something that is upsetting to you. Use these questions to look at the pattern to help you determine if it is ADHD or toxic behavior.

1 When the behavior is pointed out, do they take responsibility?

MORE CONSISTENT WITH ADHD

"You're right, I forgot. I'm sorry." The lapse may happen again, but they own it without turning it back on you.

A PATTERN TO TAKE SERIOUSLY

Denial, blame-shifting, or counterattack: "You're too sensitive," "You made me do it." You end up apologizing for raising it.

2 Does the behavior change depending on who is watching?

MORE CONSISTENT WITH ADHD

The struggles show up across settings: at work, with friends, with family, and with you. Lateness and forgetfulness aren't reserved for one person.

A PATTERN TO TAKE SERIOUSLY

Charming and attentive in public, different behind closed doors. The "forgetting" lands mostly on you, or on things that matter to you.

3 Do they question your memory or your perception of reality?

MORE CONSISTENT WITH ADHD

They may genuinely not remember, but they can say, "I don't remember that, but I believe you." Your account of events is allowed to stand.

A PATTERN TO TAKE SERIOUSLY

Insisting it never happened, rewriting events, or suggesting you're confused or "losing it." Over time you start doubting yourself. That is gaslighting.

4 Do they show empathy for how their behavior affects you?

MORE CONSISTENT WITH ADHD

Genuine remorse, often mixed with frustration at themselves. They can acknowledge your disappointment without needing you to manage their feelings about it.

A PATTERN TO TAKE SERIOUSLY

Indifference to your hurt, or a quick pivot so the conversation becomes about their pain. Your distress gets treated as the real problem.

5 Do they make repair, and try to do something differently?

MORE CONSISTENT WITH ADHD

They look for workarounds: reminders, shared calendars, treatment, coaching. Follow-through is imperfect, but the effort is real and visible.

A PATTERN TO TAKE SERIOUSLY

Apologies with no change, a cycle of promises and repeats, or blaming you for their behavior: "I'm just reacting to you. This is your fault."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Toxic behavior is about power and control.

Accountability, empathy, and repair are essential for a healthy relationship. A partner who owns their behavior and how it affects you, cares how you feel, and keeps working on change is a partner you can build with. A partner who denies, deflects, pits people against you, and leaves you doubting your own memory by gaslighting is showing you toxic behavior.

Weaponizing ADHD

ADHD can be weaponized by a toxic person. They may tell their partner, "If it wasn't for your ADHD, everything would be fine." They may also say that they need to take over their partner's finances "because you're so bad with money." Know this is an attempt to control and is abusive behavior.

Trust what you've seen over time

Write down incidents and what behavior followed. Keep this information in a password-protected file or app. When you have a written record, it's harder for a toxic person to convince you that your reality is wrong, and it makes the toxic pattern easier for you to see.

This guide is for education and reflection; it is not a diagnostic tool. A licensed mental health professional can help you sort out what's happening. If you feel unsafe, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233, or text START to 88788.