

Supporting NEURODIVERGENCE

Series



An evidence-based workbook on
understanding and supporting **rejection
sensitivity** in neurodivergent people

What is Rejection Sensitivity?



Rejection sensitivity means being especially sensitive or “tuned in” to the possibility of being rejected, criticised, or excluded by others (Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024).

Those who experience rejection sensitivity have a tendency to:

Quickly perceive signs of rejection or criticism, sometimes even when none are intended

Anxiously expect rejection or criticism, even in neutral situations

React intensely—emotionally, physically, and behaviourally—to real or perceived rejection

Not everyone experiences the same degree of rejection sensitivity - it occurs on a spectrum. Each person's position on the rejection sensitivity spectrum influences how they interpret social cues, with those higher on the spectrum perceiving more neutral signals as signs of rejection.



Rejection sensitivity can be an intense, often overwhelming emotional and physical reaction to real or perceived rejection or criticism. For individuals with high rejection sensitivity, even ambiguous or minor cues can be interpreted as signs of rejection, leading to strong emotional and sometimes physical responses.

It is shaped by both neurodevelopmental traits and life experiences, and can significantly impact mental health, relationships, and daily functioning. Rejection sensitivity is not exclusive to any one group, but it is particularly prominent among autistics and ADHDers (Müller et al., 2024).





Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

Rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD) is a term used to describe an extreme and debilitating emotional response to perceived or actual rejection, criticism, or failure. RSD refers to a much more intense and disruptive experience. It is most commonly discussed in the context of ADHD, but is also reported by autistic individuals, (Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024).



RSD is not an official diagnosis, but a descriptive term for a specific, severe presentation of rejection sensitivity. RSD is increasingly recognised in clinical practice, particularly in neurodivergent individuals.

(Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024)

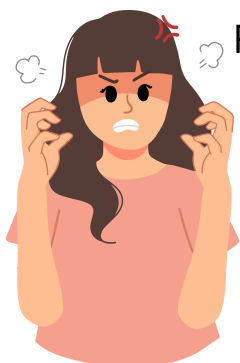


RSD is characterised by **extreme emotional episodes** in response to rejection. Individuals with RSD often experience **sudden and intense mood shifts**, with emotional reactions that are immediate and 'disproportionate' to the triggering event.

These responses can involve **intense feelings** of insecurity, fear, anger, frustration, shame, humiliation, hurt, powerlessness, stress, paralysis, and guilt. Persistent negative thoughts such as "I've done something terrible" or "I'm not good enough" are also common.

Physical reactions or pain often accompany these emotional reactions, including muscle tension or pain that may feel like being "wounded" or "stabbed in the heart."

While our response may be observed by others as being 'disproportionate' to the situation...
...it may feel completely appropriate in relation to our internal experience



Responses may be **internalised or externalised**. Some individuals internalise the pain, leading to depression and self-criticism, while others may externalise it as anger or rage towards others (Gao et al., 2021).



Factors that impact Rejection Sensitivity?



There are a number of factors that can impact our experiences of RSD.

Neurodevelopmental and personality factors

- Autistic individuals and ADHDers are at greater risk of experiencing RSD. Inherent traits such as heightened sense of justice, perfectionism, rumination, alexithymia, and differences in emotional processing can predispose them to RSD (Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024)
- Rejection sensitivity is a personality disposition that can be influenced by both genetic and environmental factors (Gao et al., 2021)



Life experiences and social environment

- Lifelong experiences of being rejected, bullied, unsupported, or misunderstood reinforce and heighten RSD (Asselt et al., 2025)
- These experiences can lower self-esteem and make individuals more vigilant and reactive to perceived rejection, sometimes resulting in trauma-like responses eg. flashbacks and reliving past rejections
- Neurodivergent people often face marginalisation due to neurotypical social norms, leading to frequent social rejection (Asselt et al., 2025)



Self-criticism and negative self-talk

- Individuals with RSD often engage in relentless self-criticism and negative self-talk, believing they have failed or fallen short of their own or others' standards (Dodson et al., 2024)
- This can lead to internalised episodes of dysphoria, sometimes with suicidal ideation, or externalised rage towards others



Intensity and impact

- The intensity of RSD can be influenced by baseline mood, context of the rejection, the relationship with the person involved, and the individual's coping resources
 - It can also vary depending on the topic of rejection or criticism (e.g., personal appearance, work performance) and the setting (work, home, unfamiliar environments)



Common Triggers of Rejection Sensitivity

There are a number of **triggers** identified in the research that contribute to rejection sensitivity in neurodivergent individuals, including:

Direct rejection - Being explicitly rejected, excluded, or dismissed by others, for example, by being told you are not wanted, being left out of a group, or not receiving an invitation

Negative comments, criticisms or teasing - Being criticised for who you are or something you have done can feel like personal attacks. Teasing, ridicule, or being made the butt of a joke, regardless of intent, can be highly triggering



Constructive feedback - Even well-intentioned feedback can be experienced as deeply personal criticism and trigger an RSD episode



Change in relationship dynamics - Perceived withdrawal of affection, respect, or approval from significant others (family, friends, colleagues, partners) can trigger intense emotional pain

Close relationships - Rejection or criticism from loved ones or close friends is particularly impactful

Fear of future rejection - The expectation or fear that rejection or criticism will occur can be enough to trigger an episode, even before anything happens

Not meeting one's own standards - Failing to achieve personal goals or standards, or making mistakes, can lead to self-rejection and trigger RSD

Negative self-talk - Internal criticism or negative self-judgement can be as powerful a trigger as external rejection



Vicarious rejection (witnessing others being rejected) - Seeing someone else experience rejection or criticism can trigger similar emotional responses in individuals with RSD

Authority figures - Criticism or rejection from those in positions of authority (e.g., bosses, teachers, parents) is often more painful and triggering

Unfamiliar or stressful settings - Environments or situations where social norms are unclear can heighten sensitivity and the likelihood of perceiving rejection



(Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024;
Gao et al., 2021; Müller et al., 2024)



Believe and Become

Rejection Sensitivity Triggers



For you or your loved one, think about each of the triggers below and write down what comes to mind. This might be times that you/they may have experienced the trigger, the impact it had on you/them, or your/their reaction to it

Direct rejection _____



Negative comments, criticisms or teasing _____

Constructive feedback _____

Change in relationship dynamics _____



Close relationships _____

Fear of future rejection _____

Not meeting one's own standards _____

Negative self-talk _____

Vicarious rejection (witnessing others being rejected) _____

Authority figures _____

Unfamiliar or stressful settings _____





Rejection Sensitivity Triggers

Are there other factors you can think of that trigger your/your loved one's RSD?



Did you notice any specific triggers (or combination of) that stood out for you/your loved one?



Were there any patterns in the impacts the triggers had on you/your loved one?

Were there any patterns in the reactions you/your loved one had to the triggers?



Rejection Sensitivity & Perceived Rejection



RSD is triggered by real and anticipated situations or events that signals rejection, criticism, or withdrawal of approval, however, it can also be triggered by **perceived rejection**.

Perceived rejection refers to the subjective experience or interpretation that one is being rejected, criticised, or excluded—even if the intention or reality is ambiguous or absent. For individuals with RSD, the threshold for perceiving rejection is often much lower, and their reactions are more intense and immediate.



Perceived rejection reminds us that rejection isn't always intentional—it can come from misunderstandings, small mistakes, unintended behaviour, neutral or imagined signals. We don't just respond to clear acts of rejection; often, we react to what feels like, or what we *perceive* as rejection, even when it's not really there.

Ambiguous or subtle cues

Individuals with RSD may interpret ambiguous social cues (such as a neutral facial expression, a delayed reply, or someone looking away) as signs of rejection or disapproval

Anticipatory rejection

The expectation of rejection is often as powerful as actual rejection. Many are hypervigilant, constantly scanning for signs that they are about to be criticised or excluded

Flashbacks and confirmation bias

Past experiences of rejection can colour current perceptions, leading to flashbacks or the belief that rejection is inevitable.

Individuals may seek confirmation of their negative self-image, interpreting neutral events as further evidence of being unwanted or inadequate



(Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024;
Gao et al., 2021; Müller et al., 2024)



Impacts and Outcomes of Rejection Sensitivity

RSD can have significant impacts and longer term outcomes in all aspects of our life. Consider how RSD impacts you or others around you.

Psychological

- low self-esteem
- fear of failure
- self-criticism
- persistent negative thoughts
- profound loneliness
- anxiety
- depression
- low quality of life
- PTSD-like symptoms
- suicidal ideation in severe cases

Social

- social avoidance
- people-pleasing
- difficulties maintaining relationships
- reduced participation
- fear of judgement
- social challenges at school or work
- difficulties with boundaries
- masking
- social camouflage
- social isolation

Outcomes of Rejection Sensitivity

Behavioural

- aggression
- acting out
- hyperactivity
- perfectionism
- disruptions to daily life
- impaired academic performance
- difficulties with daily functioning

Physical

- pain and tension
- somatic symptoms:
 - nausea or stomach discomfort
 - shortness of breath
 - rapid heartbeat
 - sweating, trembling
 - feeling flushed
 - sense of paralysis or feeling 'frozen'
- fatigue and exhaustion
- sleep disturbances
- heightened stress response
- burnout



Impacts and Outcomes of Rejection Sensitivity

Reflect how RSD impacts you/your loved one. What impacts and outcomes have you noticed?

Psychological

Social

Outcomes of
Rejection
Sensitivity

Behavioural

Physical

Responses to Rejection Sensitivity



Responses to RSD are intense and can vary widely. The responses described below capture the main ways people tend to respond, and while we may use any or all of them at different times, most people tend to favour to one or two. This is usually because we learned at a young age that it was a coping strategy that allowed us to avoid or escape the pain of rejection.

Avoidance

Many individuals avoid or withdraw from situations where rejection or criticism may occur—such as social interactions, job applications, relationships, or seeking healthcare—due to fear of emotional pain and potential failure (Asselt et al., 2025)



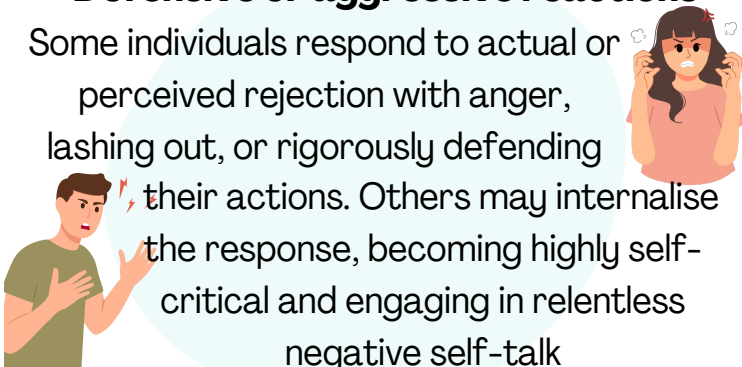
People-pleasing and perfectionism

Excessive apologising, striving for perfection, and being overly loyal and accommodating are common, all in an effort to avoid criticism or disapproval (Asselt et al., 2025; Dodson et al., 2024)



Defensive or aggressive reactions

Some individuals respond to actual or perceived rejection with anger, lashing out, or rigorously defending their actions. Others may internalise the response, becoming highly self-critical and engaging in relentless negative self-talk



Validation-seeking

There may be a strong drive to seek validation from others, such as repeatedly asking if they have done something wrong or if others are upset with them. Some people may go to great lengths to gain approval, often at the expense of their own needs or boundaries



Masking

Individuals often engage in masking (hiding their true feelings or autistic traits) to minimise the risk of rejection. This includes presenting a calm exterior while feeling distressed inside



Hypervigilance and over-preparation

Individuals may become hypervigilant, over-analysing and constantly monitoring interactions for signs of disapproval or criticism (Asselt et al., 2025). Some may over-prepare for social situations or tasks to avoid any possibility of making mistakes that could lead to criticism




Responses to Rejection Sensitivity



Think about some specific times you/your loved one have responded to rejection, criticism or failure. Are there particular responses (or combinations of) you/your loved one tend to fall back on? Does this differ for different triggers, environments, people, or specific situations?

Avoidance



People-pleasing and perfectionism



Defensive or aggressive reactions



Validation-seeking



Masking



Hypervigilance and over-preparation



Is there a response (or combination) that you/your loved one tend to use most?

- ☐ Avoidance
- ☐ People-pleasing
- ☐ Masking

- ☐ Validation-seeking
- ☐ Hypervigilance
- ☐ Defensive

Signs of Rejection Sensitivity



Signs of rejection sensitivity checklist

Tick all the signs of rejection sensitivity you/your loved one experience. This checklist provides a snapshot of rejection sensitivity experiences - the more signs you identify, the more likely you experience rejection sensitivity.

| | Significant impact | Some impact |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Sudden intense emotional outburst following real or perceived rejection or criticism | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feelings of worthlessness or shame | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Withdrawal from social situations | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Negative self-talk | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Thoughts of self-harm | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoidance of social settings in which criticism or failure might occur | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Low self-esteem | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Rumination - repeatedly thinking the same thoughts, usually negative or distressing | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Perseveration - getting stuck on a thought, idea, word, or action | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Relationship difficulties (eg. feeling constantly attacked and responding defensively) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Thinking they are in "trouble" every time a teacher or adult asks to speak with them | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Striving to achieve perfectionist standards | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Spending excessive time on projects or assignment to ensure there are no mistakes | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoiding starting projects, activities or assignments because of fear of failure | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Isolation and loneliness | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Assuming no one likes them | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Bending over backward to get on someone's good side | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Rapid shifts in mood based on interactions with others | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fear of rejection is often a deterrent trying new things or taking risks | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Frequently apologising unnecessarily to evade potential conflict or disapproval | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Difficulties expressing emotions and boundaries due to fear of rejection | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Identify the top three factors that are currently having the biggest negative impact on you/your loved one.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

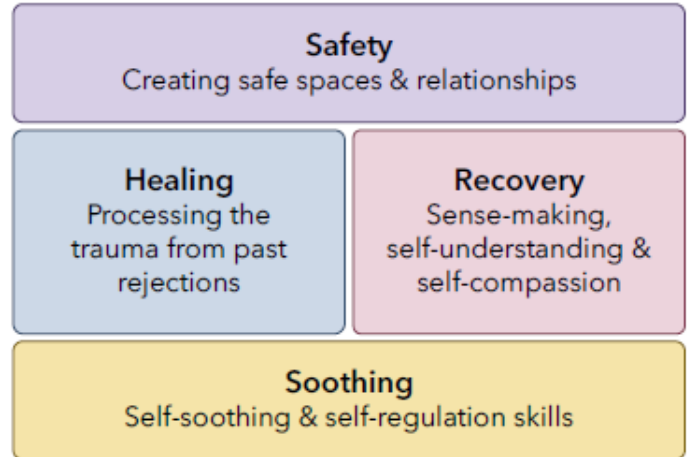
For a more in-depth screener: <https://www.adult-autism-assessment.com/rejection-sensitivity-dysphoria-assessment>



Strategies to Support Rejection Sensitivity

Jennifer Kemp, clinical psychologist and autistic ADHDer, identifies safety, healing, recovery and soothing as key areas in supporting RSD

Kemp (2025) emphasises that all four areas need to be addressed to effectively support RSD



Safety
Creating safe spaces & relationships

Safe relationships – Building connections with understanding, non-judgmental people can buffer the impact of perceived rejection and improve self-worth

Prioritise psychological safety – Encourage relationships, school and workplaces, and care settings that emphasize respect, inclusion, and compassion, where mistakes or misunderstandings are treated as learning opportunities rather than failures

Safe environments – Creating supportive, predictable, and accepting spaces can reduce the fear of rejection, foster emotional safety, and allow individuals to express themselves authentically without fear of criticism or misunderstanding

Interpersonal safety – Practicing skills, such as setting and upholding healthy boundaries and saying “no”, is vital to ensure you are maintaining interpersonal safety

Healing
Processing the trauma from past rejections

Healing from trauma – Addressing the trauma of past experiences may help alleviate the distress from further rejections

RSD often builds from a lifetime of feeling misunderstood or judged - especially for neurodivergent individuals - thus, therapeutic approaches such as trauma-informed, neurodiversity-affirming therapy can support individuals to process painful memories and develop gentler internal narratives



Strategies to Support Rejection Sensitivity

Recovery

Sense-making,
self-understanding &
self-compassion

Foster self-understanding - Learning about RSD and the impacts it has in your life is the first step in effectively supporting RSD. Additionally, understanding your neurotype (e.g., ADHD, autism), and how your brain processes emotion and social threat can build self-acceptance and reduce shame

Self-compassion practices - Encourage gentle self-talk and self-acceptance to reduce the shame and self-blame often linked to rejection sensitivity

Encourage self-compassion and identity pride - Promote self-affirming practices, such as connecting with neurodivergent communities, using affirming language, and rejecting deficit-based narratives

Soothing

Self-soothing & self-regulation skills

Validate emotional experiences - Acknowledge that the pain of rejection or criticism is real and often amplified by lived experiences of misunderstanding or marginalization. Avoid dismissing emotions as “overreactions.”

Supporting emotional regulation and self-soothing - creating predictable, low-stress environments that reduce sensory overload, utilising or providing co-regulation (offering calm presence and empathy until the person feels safe), and using/encouraging the use of individualised regulation tools such as weighted items, stimming, music, or movement.

Emotional awareness and regulation difficulties - Approximately 74% of autistic people have differences in interoceptive awareness, including emotional awareness, and approximately 50% of autistic people exhibit alexithymia (Klein et al., 2025). Interoception is our 8th sense and is related to our internal sensations, including our emotions. Alexithymia the term used to describe difficulties with noticing and labelling emotions.

Increasing interoceptive awareness and thus emotional awareness can support our ability to self-regulate and self-soothing. Engaging in stimming, special interests, self-care, and exercise and healthy behaviours can also support regulation.

Resources and references



Rejection sensitivity resources

Reframing Autism – The Unbearable Heartache of Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria –
<https://reframingautism.org.au/the-unbearable-heartache-of-rejection-sensitive-dysphoria/>

Neurodivergent Insights – Rejection Sensitivity Demystified: 10 Key Differences between Dysphoria and Normal Sensitivity – https://neurodivergentinsights.com/10-key-differences-between-rsd-and-normal-sensitivity/?srsId=AfmBOooruA2GIh2A_C_k6m2zeM-c2T2EVSETyGEHtwPlz0fWORUtagi8

Barb Cook – Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) – Understanding Intense Emotions –
<https://barbcook.com.au/2024/09/03/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria-rsd-understanding-intense-emotions/>

ADDitude – How ADHD Ignites RSD: Meaning & Medication Solutions –
https://www.additudemag.com/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria-and-adhd/?srsId=AfmBOoqU2PFO-hnqLhu76rPLKltEgHwms-DzpaMCyF6i_LryBqcQcOqB

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