

## Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)

*“It hurts a lot more when I don’t feel wanted and liked”*

RSD is part of having ADHD, just like most other things, us ADHD’ers also hyperfocus on rejection and feelings. RSD presents differently in everyone. I’ve heard some ADHD’ers say they don’t live with it, but research indicates it’s a part of ADHD in all people, but it presents very differently in each person and the individual’s coping mechanism can cover the signs of it. In a nutshell, RSD is a heightened hypersensitivity to what people think of you.

As simple as that sounds, it rarely looks like weakness. RSD can look like:

- ❶ Someone who acts extremely tough and manipulative and targets and actively attacks people who he thinks don’t like him. Often perceived as a bully, this child/adult is actually secretly and fundamentally scared of not being liked and has created some strong walls and self-protection strategies.
- ❷ That little twice exceptional person who wants to desperately ‘get it right’ and have the teacher happy with him, that he focuses so much on his work and has extreme levels of anxiety about getting things right. Even constructive feedback feels like a brutal kick in the guts to this person and he/she experiences excessive depression following feedback which is not glowing.
- ❸ That child who only perceives “love” from those people whose love language is words and affectionate touch and who feels detached and separate from anyone who doesn’t go over the top in providing them positive emotional validation in an extremely heightened way.
- ❹ That child who loves playing with other kids, but as soon as one of the children exclude him/her or say something to make the child feel like they aren’t wanted/part of the group, the child has a raging meltdown or total emotional breakdown, or some type of overly dramatic reaction.
- ❺ That person who makes strong connections (friends / partners) super-fast and is really close to people very quickly. This same person will feel extremely gutted, sometimes

suicidal when there is a fight of any kind as they feel this connection is lost due to the slightest sign of unrest or disappointment.

- ❑ That child always needing to be told they are loved, and their mother isn't mad at them. Times when the child is corrected "*Jenny, please don't spill the milk like that*" results in a massive meltdown as this form of correction is **over felt** (high registration) and therefore they feel this correction as a brutal criticism and a sign they aren't liked.
- ❑ That teenager who pushes people away, has excessive anxiety regarding new people and/or emotional connections of any kind and displays lots of self-loathing behaviour, negative self-talk, possible self-harm, makes comments that people don't like them anyway, lives with ongoing depression and signs of feeling rejected.
- ❑ That person in a relationship who has a total meltdown at any fight with their partner and ends up in tears for hours until the partner assures them that they are ok. They are known for catastrophising and thinking their relationship is over due to minor fights.

**Or, with regard to relationships, it can even look like:**

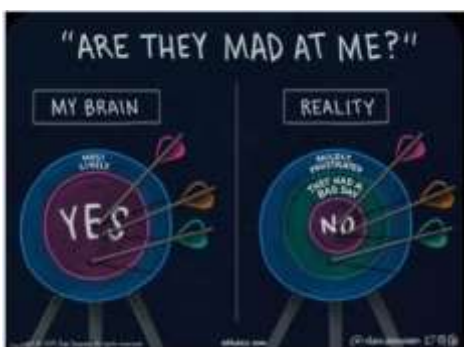
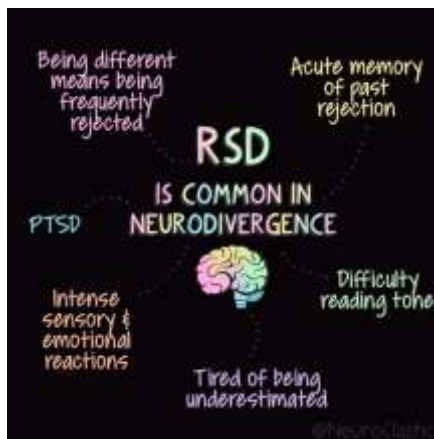
- ❑ That person who appears cold and detached at fights and refuses to show their emotions at all, becoming extremely distant and removed at any sign of an emotional exchange. This is often those who are aware of their profile and have trained themselves as they are aware of how painful letting themselves feel anything really is.
- ❑ That person who needs a lot more validation a lot more than their peers and constantly has negative self-talk, telling themselves they are crap and they can't do stuff and people don't like them. They are always worried they won't fit and are well known to mask around people.
- ❑ That person who is overly emotional and has ups and downs with their moods frequently. This person can be the one who hears from one person "*gee, you post a lot of pictures of your dog on Facebook*" and the next minute, they decide to take a break from Facebook all together, or make a dramatic post saying something like "*it seems everyone is sick of posts about my dog*" or "*If you are all sick of seeing my posts*"

about my dog, just unfriend me". This person is likely to become extremely emotional regarding any fights with friends and catastrophise frequently.

- that person who becomes 'naughty' every time their mother plays with their sibling or spends time with her husband. Often children with RSD struggle the most with their parents as this is the basis and foundation of their emotional bond. Parents of children with RSD are likely to be loaded with guilt as they are always made to feel that they are never enough for their child.

Warning - don't be deceived about RSD, it is essentially (in essence) a heightened registration of interpretive sensory input (feeling internal feelings to a much greater extent). Those with RSD feel a lot more than others, so their experience is heightened - as is the case with any sensory processing profile. Many people with RSD will present as overly emotional **and conversely** many people with RSD will appear cold, detached and very unemotional. This is the nature of the complexity of managing big emotions and the diversity in how we each choose to do this.

(Pics below by Neuroclastic, ADHDD.COM and Spaghetti Brained ADHD)

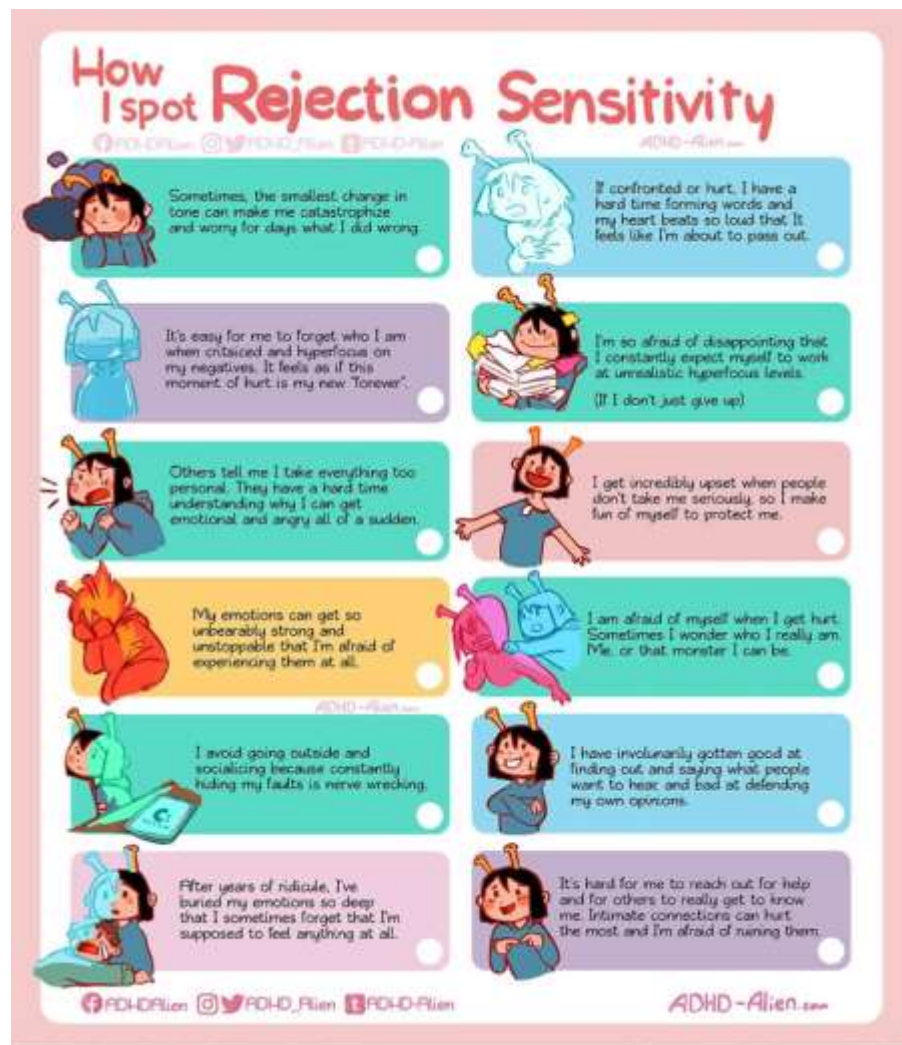


RSD is a component of ADHD and presents incredibly differently in people. In some, it may look like an overwhelming need for attention, a hypersensitivity to criticism, or even complete withdrawal from social interaction.

*“Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD) is an intense emotional response caused by the perception that you have disappointed others in your life and that, because of that disappointment, they have withdrawn their love, approval, or respect. The same painful reaction can occur when you fail or fall short of your rather*

*high goals and expectations. RSD commonly occurs with ADHD and causes extreme emotional pain that plagues both children and adults — even when no actual rejection has taken place.*

*Rejection sensitive dysphoria is difficult for people with ADHD to describe, but all who have it agree that it feels awful. Indeed, the term dysphoria is literally Greek for “unbearable.” Often*



*those with RSD hide these intense emotional reactions from other people and feel ashamed of their vulnerability. The condition often triggers a profound and wide-reaching sense of failure, as though the person with RSD hasn't measured up to personal or external expectations.<sup>1</sup>”*

People with RSD have the most difficulty with people they have strong connections to. The stronger the connection with a person, the more heavily impacted they are by any perceived

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.additudemag.com/rejection-sensitive.../amp/>

rejection. In some, this can result in meltdowns, aggression or self-harmful behaviour when they feel rejected by those close to them.

Feeling rejection as a person with RSD can completely overwhelm their entire body. When they experience this overwhelming amount of emotion (sometimes referred to as an RSD meltdown), they have little to no control over their actions. This could present as significant emotion, self-harm, or wild raging aggression. All they will be able to focus on is the severe hurt they feel. In the aftermath of an RSD meltdown, the person may not understand why they lost control, and feel that those around them are disappointed in them for doing so and having the meltdown. This is the cycle of RSD.

## Common Aspects/Presentations of RSD

There are many different presentations of RSD, as the extreme sensitivity affects people so



differently. Below are some of the more common aspects and ways it can present.

Attention & validation seeking – A person with RSD has an overwhelming need to seek validation and attention from others and will often feel little self-worth without it. In some this looks like looking for an excuse to continue a conversation (e.g., asking for help with things they know how to do).

Hypersensitivity to criticism – Someone with RSD will feel extreme anguish when they feel they are being criticised or have done something wrong. They will often be hyperaware of the behaviour of those close to them in any way they can (e.g., body

language, tone of voice, facial expression) to look for signs of the person being upset with them, which is what can lead to them perceiving rejection when there isn't any.

Many people with RSD will also get distressed at the possibility of others being informed of things they have perceived to have done wrong.

Seeking many 'acquaintance level' relationships, but little to no deeper relationships – The deeper the relationship with a person, the more hurt the person with RSD is by any perceived rejection from the person. This can then lead to a person experiencing severe trauma in meaningful relationships, which can cause these people to try to meet their need for social interaction by having a large number of shallow friendships in order to protect themselves from the pain they associate with meaningful relationships.

### Withdrawal from socialisation –

As mentioned above, some people with RSD experience severe trauma from the pain they



have experienced in previous relationships. This can cause a person to completely withdraw from socialisation as an act of self-preservation. However, it's important to note that if a person with RSD isn't getting their need for validation and acceptance met, this can lead to meltdowns, aggression and/or severe depression.

Hesitance to meet new people – Meeting a new person can be terrifying for someone with RSD. When someone with RSD knows a person, they know how much validation to expect, and generally where they stand with the person. None of that knowledge exists when meeting someone new, nor does knowing how to act in order to be liked. They feel they are opening themselves up to rejection.

Fixations on certain people – Someone with RSD will commonly fixate on a person that inconsistently provides them with validation. If a person were to offer a lot of warmth and validation one day and the following day seem preoccupied or distant, the person with RSD

may obsess over seeking out the amount of warmth and validation they were receiving the day prior.

Avoidance of activities – Some people with RSD will avoid some, or even all, activities due to a debilitating fear they may fail.

Rude or abrasive towards people – This is generally a defence someone with RSD will have in response to their need to be liked and accepted. A person with RSD is so affected by this overwhelming and uncontrollable need that some try to assert control by acting as though they don't care or even going to the extent of trying to ensure a person won't like them.

People pleasing – A person with RSD may work so tirelessly to please those around them that put their own goals/needs/wants aside, to please others. Some will even act like someone they aren't because that's what they feel will make them feel accepted by the people around them.



## Repeated failure & criticism

- I fail again because the root cause, ADHD, remains unaddressed
- I assume my achievements were just a fluke
- "Why don't you just do this?"  
I start twisting the truth, because what answer can I give other than "I don't know"?
- I give up or become an overachiever at the cost of my health
- I expect failure in everything I do
- I start incorrectly associating success with luck and failure with my wrongdoing

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## Ways to Manage RSD

Managing RSD is extremely difficult, as it completely overwhelms a person's body, often with little to no notice for the person, and leads to a total loss of control. In the middle of an RSD meltdown, the person may feel intense self-hatred, suicidal ideation, aggression towards those around them (even those that the person didn't initially feel rejected by, they may now direct aggression toward, as a way to assert control) and at time physically violent towards themselves and/or others. Below are some strategies which may be helpful when living with, loving, working, or helping to educate someone who has a strong RSD profile. Hopefully these strategies are also helpful if you are the one who has the strong RSD profile.

With difficult conversations, introduce ways to delay responses – Emotion takes over at times for people with RSD, not allowing their logical brain to respond. When their response is delayed, this gives them time to process the information and plan their response.

Where possible, have difficult conversations over text/email – Communicating through messages can be greatly beneficial for some people with RSD. This is due to them being able to process the emotion & message before responding, they can plan and carefully word their response and are unable to read into body language or tone of voice. It may be easier for people with RSD to have difficult conversations in text messages or Facebook Messenger as this takes away the face-to-face emotion and allows them time to process and think before responding. This enables them the ability to self-talk and remind themselves not to interpret everything as a threat, attack or as ridicule.

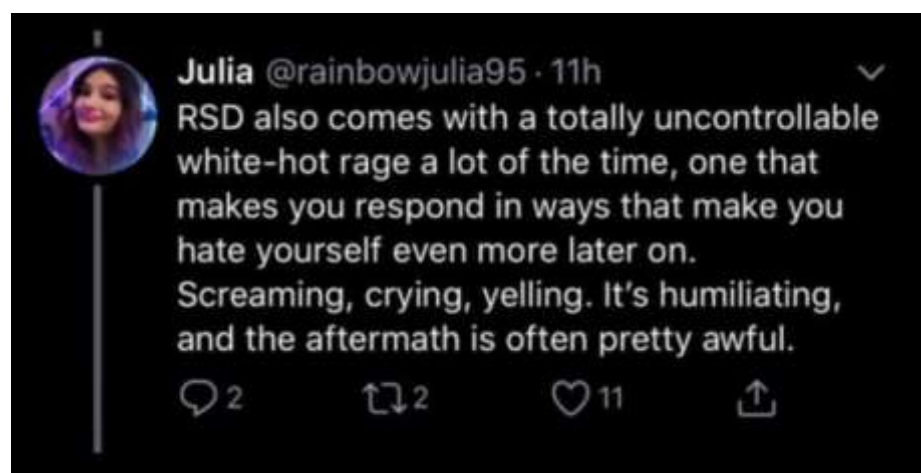
Be as consistent as possible with the amount of excitement and validation that is offered – When a person offers a lot of excitement and validation one day, then the following day is preoccupied and distant, the person with RSD is going to fixate on seeking out the validation and excitement they received the day prior. This can at times result in someone with RSD being obsessed with the person, either attaching themself to the person and wanting more from them or having a passionate hatred of the person as an act of self-preservation to protect themself from the unpredictability.



Provide genuine compliments and praise when truly appropriate – As much as people with RSD seek out validation and compliments, they are also hyperaware of the truth and honesty of the compliments. Don't provide baseless, standard compliments or you will be seen as being fake. Remember true signs of validation, or anything that enables someone to feel like they are successful is a pure dopamine hit to the ADHD brain and is intoxicating, addictive and immensely nourishing. Be careful with praise and compliments as it can be a life source for those with a strong RSD profile.

Don't ever mix praise or compliments with constructive criticism or 'issues' – If even the slightest issue is raised, then the person will not hear or pay attention to any of the praise or compliments also provided. If you need to have difficult conversations, provide constructive feedback, explain something that needs to be corrected or anything else which can be perceived as negative, then plan this carefully. Choose a time when the person is at their best and seems the most resilient. Provide this feedback clearly and minimally, remembering that the person will 'feel' it, or 'take it on' a **lot more than their peers who are not RSD**, even the slightest correction can be felt like a brutal slap. After this is done, it might be helpful to give it a few minutes, then do something like ask the person for help doing something they are good at or ask them to remind you how to make something that they are better at than you. Any way at all to remind them of the things that they are best at, is the best way to help their brain get out of the self-loathing spiral they may be in and back to more constructive and positive thoughts.

Offer overwhelming amounts of love and warmth after a meltdown – Remember those with RSD profiles need a lot more love, warmth, and emotional validation than those who don't have RSD. After the person has had a meltdown / experienced distress, make sure you take extra steps to remind them how much they are



appreciated (if not family), or loved and wanted (if family). Just saying it's ok or just agreeing to move on is not enough. The person will need a lot more emotional evidence that things are OK again and may seem uncertain for quite a period of time afterwards.



Take the time to explain what you mean and be mindful that the person is looking for evidence that they have stuffed things up – Communication with someone with a strong RSD profile should be considered (planned) and come from a place of affirmation, not condemnation. Highlight the positives more than you normally would and minimise the negatives more than you normally would. Any sign of rejection or blame will be amplified by the person with the strong RSD profile.