

Understanding and Coping with Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD)

Objective

To reduce the symptoms of Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria to feel more in control of your emotional responses and build resilience in the face of rejection, failure, or criticism.

What to Know

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD) is an extreme emotional reaction to perceived or actual rejection, criticism, or failure. If you experience RSD, you may feel overwhelming sadness, anger, or shame in response to situations where you believe you are being criticized or rejected—even if this belief is inaccurate. Everyday interactions and feedback can feel more intense and lead to avoidance of situations where rejection, failure, or criticism is possible.

RSD is often associated with ADHD, but it can affect anyone. For many, these feelings are connected to early trauma experiences. As a child, if you experienced ongoing rejection, neglect, or criticism, your brain can become wired to expect these experiences in the future. This is why RSD is often understood as a trauma response. These feelings may be triggered in current situations, even if the present event is not as threatening as it feels. Emotional pain from the past can create a heightened sensitivity in the present—as if the brain remembers past hurt and responds with heightened intensity to protect you from more pain.

Rejection, whether real or perceived, becomes a significant threat to your sense of self, and your body may react as though it is facing a dangerous situation: racing heart, sweating, anger, or deep sadness. This overreaction stems from a survival instinct—the brain and body are trying to avoid reliving the past trauma.

Check off any of the signs of RSD that apply to you:

- Intense emotional pain when you feel rejected, criticized, or unaccepted.
- Avoiding situations where rejection, failure, or criticism is possible.
- Overreacting to small slights or negative feedback.
- Feeling ashamed, embarrassed, or furious at the idea of letting someone down.
- Constantly seeking approval or validation from others.
- Difficulty moving on from situations where you felt rejected or criticized.
- Feeling like you are “too sensitive.”
- Constantly criticizing yourself.

Although RSD can be intense, there are ways to manage it, reduce its impact, and retrain your brain to respond in a more balanced way.

1. Pause and Breathe. RSD feels like an emotional fire alarm going off in your brain. Create space between the trigger and your reaction. When you notice that you are reacting, pause for a moment and take a few deep breaths. Focus on slow, deep breaths for at least a minute to calm your nervous system and reduce your emotional intensity.

2. Challenge Negative Thoughts. RSD may cause you to distort situations, assuming the worst or jumping to conclusions. To challenge these thoughts, ask yourself the following:

- What evidence is for and against my belief that I'm being rejected?
- Am I mind-reading or assuming something without evidence?
- Could there be another explanation for what happened?

3. Self-Compassion Practice. RSD often involves self-criticism, feeling like you're "too sensitive" or "not good enough." Instead of judging yourself, practice self-compassion. Remind yourself that everyone experiences rejection or criticism and that your sensitivity is a normal part of being human.

4. Reframe Criticism. Instead of viewing criticism or feedback as a personal rejection, practice viewing it as an opportunity for growth. Not all criticism is meant to harm you—sometimes, it is constructive. Reframing how you see it can reduce the emotional charge around it.

5. Communicate Your Needs. Expressing hurt or rejection can be difficult, but doing so can help others understand your perspective and reduce misunderstandings. Use "I" statements to communicate how you feel without blaming others.

Living with RSD can feel overwhelming, but with the right tools, you can learn to manage and reduce its impact. RSD is a trauma response, but by building awareness, practicing self-compassion, and challenging negative thoughts, you can reduce its hold on your life. Over time, you will develop healthier ways to cope with failure, rejection, and criticism, allowing you to feel more grounded and in control of your emotions.

This worksheet will help you understand and manage RSD by exploring its connection to trauma, identifying how it impacts your emotions and thoughts, and providing practical coping strategies.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Can you identify past experiences of rejection, failure, or trauma that may have contributed to your RSD? Write them down below.

How can you pause and soothe yourself when your emotions feel too intense? Write down some ways that might help.

How can you practice self-compassion when you feel rejected or criticized?

What would it look like to turn a recent criticism, failure, or rejection into an opportunity for growth? Be specific.

What to Do

Next, choose any of the following activities and practice at least one each day. Record your experiences in the following chart for at least two weeks.

1. Practice the 4-7-8 Breathing Technique

- Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 7 seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds.
- Repeat for 4-5 cycles.

This technique can help slow down your body's stress response, giving you a moment to calmly reflect on the situation.

2. Thought Journal. The next time you feel rejected or criticized, write down what happened, how you interpreted it, and what you felt. Use a notebook or journal to record your experiences. Then, challenge your thoughts by looking for evidence and alternative explanations.

Example:

- **Situation:** My friend didn't text me back right away.

- **Thought:** They're mad at me or don't want to talk to me anymore.
- **Evidence For:** They haven't replied in several hours.
- **Evidence Against:** We talked yesterday because they've been busy at work.
- **Alternative Explanation:** They may be overwhelmed or distracted but not upset with me.

3. Self-Compassion Script. When you're feeling hurt, say these statements to yourself:

- "It's okay to feel upset. This is an intense emotion, but I'm strong enough to get through it."
- "Other people experience rejection too—this doesn't make me weak or flawed."
- "I am learning and growing. This pain won't last forever."

What else can you say? Write down some examples:

4. Turn Criticism into a Growth Opportunity

- Write about a time when someone gave you feedback or criticized you.
- Ask yourself, "What can I learn from this?"
- Reframe the feedback into a helpful statement.

Example:

- **Feedback:** "You didn't complete this project by the deadline, and I'm not pleased with the results."
- **Reframe:** "I have areas where I can improve, and this feedback can help me grow."

5. Practice Assertive Communication. Write down a scenario where you felt rejected and practice how you might communicate your feelings assertively.

Example: "I felt hurt when you didn't respond to my message. I understand you may have been busy, but it would help if you could let me know when you can't respond immediately."

6. Reframe Failure as a Learning Experience. Failure can often trigger feelings of inadequacy, especially for those with RSD. Instead of seeing failure as a reflection of your worth, try to view it as a natural part of growth and learning.

- Think of a time when you felt you failed or didn't meet your expectations.
- Write down at least three things you learned from the experience.

- Instead of focusing on what went wrong, write how this failure could help you improve or grow in the future.

Example:

- Failure: "I didn't get the job I applied for."
- Lessons Learned:
 - I learned more about the interview process.
 - I identified areas where I can strengthen my skills.
 - I realized this job may not have been the best fit for me.
- Growth Focus: "I can use this experience to prepare better for future interviews and apply for roles that align more with my strengths."

Choose at least one of the above activities to complete each day for the next two weeks. In the chart, record the date and activities, explain how you felt before and after the activity, and describe the outcome. For example, if you used assertive communication, how did the other person respond if you followed through and had a conversation with them?

Date	Activities to manage RSD	Feelings	Outcome

Date	Activities to manage RSD	Feelings	Outcome

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
