

Supporting Staff with Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)

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Understanding Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is a common emotional response often seen in individuals with ADHD or other neurodivergent conditions. It is characterized by extreme emotional sensitivity to perceived or actual rejection, criticism, or failure.

Key Features of RSD

- Intense emotional pain triggered by rejection or criticism
- Strong anticipatory anxiety related to potential rejection
- Quick onset of emotional responses, including anger, sadness, or withdrawal
- Long-lasting emotional distress after an event perceived as rejection
- Tendency to interpret neutral or ambiguous interactions negatively

Impact on the Individual with RSD in the Workplace

- Reduced self-esteem and self-worth: Individuals experiencing RSD may feel inadequate or undervalued, significantly impacting their confidence and ability to perform effectively.
- Avoidance of tasks due to fear of failure or criticism: Staff may procrastinate or altogether avoid tasks perceived as challenging or likely to attract negative feedback, hindering their overall performance.
- Difficulty accepting constructive feedback: Employees with RSD might interpret constructive criticism as personal attacks, which can lead to emotional distress and defensiveness.
- Strained interpersonal relationships: Frequent misunderstandings or perceived slights may cause tension or breakdowns in communication, impacting teamwork and cooperation.
- Lower productivity due to anxiety and stress: Anxiety triggered by potential criticism or rejection can lead to decreased focus, efficiency, and motivation.
- Overthinking and burnout: Continuous worrying and overanalyzing interactions or performance can lead to mental exhaustion, chronic stress, and eventually burnout,

significantly impairing both mental health and productivity.

Practical Strategies for Leaders

Communication and Feedback

- Provide clear, consistent, and compassionate feedback privately. For example, schedule private one-on-one meetings rather than providing feedback in group settings.
- Use affirming language and acknowledge strengths before addressing areas for improvement. Example: "You've done an excellent job organizing this project, and I'd love to discuss ways we can enhance the reporting aspect."
- Clarify intentions explicitly to avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations. For instance, saying, "I appreciate your effort and am pointing this out to help us achieve our shared goals, not because your work isn't valued."
- Use neutral or positive body language, maintain eye contact, and speak in a calm and reassuring tone.
- Follow-up after delivering feedback to ensure understanding and to offer additional support if needed.

Creating Psychological Safety

- Foster an inclusive workplace where staff feel valued and supported.
- Encourage open dialogue and validate employees' feelings and experiences.
- Address conflicts swiftly and constructively to reduce emotional distress.

Empowerment and Strength-Based Approaches

- Highlight and regularly acknowledge individual contributions and strengths. Example: Publicly celebrate achievements during team meetings or through company newsletters to boost morale and motivation.
- Involve staff in goal-setting and decision-making processes to enhance confidence and ownership. For example, invite team members to participate in planning sessions or provide input on projects relevant to their roles.
- Support skill development and professional growth with appropriate resources and training. Example: Offer access to courses, workshops, or coaching sessions tailored to employee interests and career goals.
- Encourage staff to share their unique perspectives and ideas, fostering an environment where diverse viewpoints are valued and integrated into workplace initiatives.

Emotional and Mental Health Support

- Offer access to mental health resources, counseling services, or employee assistance programs (EAPs).
- Provide training for managers on emotional intelligence and sensitivity awareness.
- Encourage regular check-ins that are supportive rather than evaluative.

Workplace Accommodations

- Allow flexible deadlines or additional preparation time for stressful tasks.
- Create quiet, supportive spaces for staff to decompress if feeling overwhelmed.
- Explore adjustments in workload distribution or responsibilities temporarily, if necessary.

Leadership Daily/Weekly Reference Checklist

Use this checklist regularly to ensure continuous and effective support for staff experiencing RSD:

Creating a supportive, understanding, and accommodating environment is crucial for staff experiencing RSD, enhancing workplace harmony, productivity, and well-being.

Further Resources

"Driven to Distraction" by Dr. Edward Hallowell & Dr. John Ratey

ADDitude Magazine (www.additudemag.com): Articles and resources on ADHD and RSD

CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder): www.chadd.org

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