Supporting Yourself When You Have RSD

A practical guide to rejection sensitive dysphoria for neurodivergent adults

A short reply to a message. A colleague's raised eyebrow. A friend who forgot to invite you. For some of us, moments like these land like a punch. The feeling is instant, it is huge, and it can take hours or days to settle. If that sounds familiar, you may be living with what many people call rejection sensitive dysphoria, or RSD.

This guide is for you. It explains what RSD is, what we know and do not yet know about it, and what you can do to look after yourself before, during and after a wave. Take what is useful and leave the rest. You know yourself best.

> **Before you start**
>
> Reading about rejection can stir things up. Go gently. You can dip in and out, and you can skip straight to **My RSD plan** near the end whenever you like.

What is RSD?

RSD describes intense emotional pain set off by rejection, criticism, or the sense of having failed or let someone down. The rejection can be real, or it can be something you have picked up on that others might not notice or intend. Either way, the pain is real.

The word dysphoria comes from a Greek word meaning hard to bear. That is the difference between RSD and ordinary disappointment. Nobody enjoys being criticised. With RSD, the reaction is far bigger and faster than the situation seems to call for, and it can feel impossible to think your way out of it in the moment.

A few things are worth knowing:

- **RSD is not a formal diagnosis.** You will not find it in the diagnostic manuals, and it is not part of the criteria for ADHD or autism. It is a description of an experience, made widely known by the American psychiatrist Dr William Dodson.
- **It is most often talked about alongside ADHD**, where difficulty regulating emotions is common. Autistic people and people with other neurodivergent profiles describe it too.
- **It is not a character flaw.** It does not mean you are dramatic, needy or "too sensitive".

Why does it happen?

No one knows for certain. Two explanations come up most often, and both may be true at once.

First, many neurodivergent people feel emotions more strongly and find it harder to turn the volume down once a feeling has started.

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Second, many of us have simply had more criticism than most. Years of being told off, corrected, left out or misunderstood teach the brain to expect rejection and to watch closely for it. Seen that way, RSD is an understandable response to what you have lived through.

What the research says, and what it does not say yet

We want to be honest with you. Research on RSD is at an early stage.

- **Difficulty regulating emotions is well documented in ADHD.** A major review found it affects roughly 30 to 70 per cent of adults with ADHD (Shaw and colleagues, 2014). The European Consensus Statement on adult ADHD also recognises it as a common feature (Kooij and colleagues, 2019).
- **Studies of RSD itself are small and based on interviews.** In one study of 43 young adults with ADHD, around three quarters said they struggled with it (Ginapp and colleagues, 2023). A UK study from Brighton and Sussex Medical School found that students with ADHD described withdrawing, masking their distress and feeling rejection physically (Rowney-Smith and colleagues, 2026). A study with neurodivergent adults, including autistic adults, found that RSD touched every part of life and that the environments people were in played a big part (Sandland, 2025).
- **Rejection sensitivity is not unique to ADHD.** A review of 75 studies linked it with depression, anxiety and loneliness across many groups of people (Gao and colleagues, 2017).
- **There are gaps.** There is no agreed way to measure RSD yet, and no trials have tested which strategies work best for it.

The ideas in this guide come from lived experience and from wider research on regulating emotions, on being kind to yourself, and on how adults with ADHD cope with criticism (Beaton and colleagues, 2020 and 2022). Treat them as things to try, and keep what works for you.

What RSD can feel like

RSD looks different from person to person. Some people explode outwards. Others collapse inwards and no one around them has any idea. You may recognise some of these.

In your feelings	A sudden drop into shame, hurt, panic or rage. Feeling worthless or unlovable. A sense that the friendship, the relationship or the job is over.
In your body	Feeling sick, a tight chest, heat or burning, shaking, tears, feeling frozen. In the words of the Brighton study, "It hurts in your body."
In your thoughts	"They hate me." "I have ruined everything." "I always get it wrong." Replaying the moment again and again.
In what you do	Snapping or firing off a reply. Going quiet and pulling away. Apologising over and over. Quitting before you can be pushed. Hiding how upset you are.

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Living with RSD can shape the bigger picture too. You might recognise people pleasing, perfectionism, saying yes when you mean no, not applying for things, or holding back in relationships so that no one gets the chance to reject you. In the Brighton study, students said the dread of being rejected was often worse than the rejection itself.

Common triggers

- Feedback at work or in education, even when it is kind and fair
- A message left unanswered, or a change in someone's tone
- Being left out, cancelled on or forgotten
- Making a mistake, missing a deadline or forgetting something important
- Being teased, joked about or compared with other people
- Sensing that you have disappointed someone
- Falling short of your own very high standards

Understanding your RSD wave

It can help to think of RSD as a wave with a shape. Once you know the shape, you can spot where you are in it and what you need at that point.

Stage	What happens	What helps most
1. Spark	Something happens. A comment, a silence, a look.	Noticing it. "That stung."
2. Flood	Feelings and body sensations surge within seconds. Thinking clearly is hard.	Calming your body. Not solving anything yet.
3. Story	Your mind fills in the gaps. "They think I am useless."	Checking the story against the facts.
4. Urge	A strong pull to act. Lash out, run, quit, apologise or shut down.	Buying time before you do anything.
5. Aftermath	Exhaustion, embarrassment and going over it all again.	Rest, kindness, and repair if it is needed.

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In the moment: five steps for riding the wave

You will not need every step every time. On a bad day, the first two are enough.

Step 1: Name it

Say it to yourself, out loud if you can: **"This is RSD. It is a wave. It will pass."**

Putting a feeling into words has been shown to quieten the brain's alarm response (Lieberman and colleagues, 2007). Many people also say that simply having a name for RSD takes away some of the shame.

Step 2: Look after your body first

You cannot reason with a flooded nervous system, so start with your body.

- **Breathe out for longer than you breathe in.** Try in for four and out for six, a few times over.
- **Cool down.** Cold water on your wrists or face, a cold drink, or a step outside.
- **Move.** Walk, stretch, shake out your hands or push against a wall.
- **Ground yourself.** Put your feet flat on the floor and name five things you can see.
- **Step away if you can.** "I just need five minutes" is a complete sentence.

Step 3: Buy yourself time

The urge to act straight away is strong, and what we do in the flood is rarely what we would choose later. Give yourself a gap.

- **Do not reply yet.** If you need to get the words out, write them in your notes app and leave them there.
- **Use a holding phrase.** "Thanks for telling me. Let me think about that and come back to you."
- **Sleep on the big decisions.** Resigning, ending a relationship or sending the long email can all wait until tomorrow.

Step 4: Check the story

When the wave has dropped a little, look at what your mind has told you.

- What do I actually know? What exactly was said or done?
- What am I guessing?
- What are three other explanations? They may be busy, tired, distracted or dealing with something of their own.
- What would I say to a friend who told me this had happened to them?
- Has this fear come true before with this person?

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Step 5: Ask, do not assume

If the worry will not go, check it out with the person. It can feel exposing, and it is nearly always kinder to yourself than days of guessing.

- "When you said that, I was not sure how to take it. Can you tell me what you meant?"
- "I noticed I have not heard back. Is everything okay between us?"
- "My brain is telling me you are annoyed with me. Is that right, or have I misread it?"

> **Sometimes the rejection is real**
>
> Having RSD does not mean every hurt is imagined. Sometimes people are unkind, feedback is unfair, or a relationship is not good for you. Your feelings are information. These steps are there to help you respond in a way you will feel good about later, whatever the facts turn out to be.

After the wave

An RSD episode is tiring. Many people feel drained, tearful or embarrassed afterwards. That is the tail of the wave, and it needs looking after too.

- **Rest and refuel.** Eat something, drink some water and do something soothing and familiar.
- **Go easy on the replay.** Going over it at 2am rarely brings answers. If your mind keeps circling, write it down and come back to it in daylight.
- **Repair if you need to.** If you snapped or withdrew, a short and honest message is enough. "I am sorry I went quiet earlier. I felt hurt and needed some time. Can we talk?" You do not need to apologise ten times.
- **Talk to yourself as you would to someone you love.** "That was really hard. It makes sense that it hurt. I got through it."
- **Notice what helped.** Add it to your plan at the end of this guide.

Building steadier ground

The five steps are for the storm. These are for the weather in between.

Learn your pattern

Keep a brief note of what set off each wave, the first signs you noticed and what helped. You do not need a detailed diary. A few words on your phone will do, and patterns tend to show up quickly.

Look after the basics

Most people find RSD bites harder when they are tired, hungry, overloaded or unwell. Some people also notice a link with their hormonal cycle. Sleep, food, movement and time to decompress are part of how you manage RSD. They are maintenance, and you are allowed to protect them.

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Keep a file of good things

Save kind messages, thank you cards, good feedback and things you are proud of. RSD has a habit of wiping these from memory at the exact moment you need them, so keep them somewhere you can find them fast.

Practise being kind to yourself

Research at the University of Sheffield with more than 1,200 adults found that adults with ADHD tend to be harder on themselves than other adults, partly because of how much criticism they experience (Beaton and colleagues, 2020). Later work by the same researcher found that learning to be kinder to yourself can improve mental health in adults with ADHD (Beaton, 2022).

Kindness towards yourself is a skill, and it grows with practice. A good place to start is to notice your inner critic and ask whose voice it really is.

Spend time with people who get it

Adults with ADHD have told researchers that being understood by others changes how criticism feels (Beaton and colleagues, 2022). Students in the Brighton study said the same about understanding, reassurance and acceptance. Peer groups, online communities and neurodivergent friends can all offer this. ADHD UK and the National Autistic Society can point you towards peer support.

Loosen the mask where it is safe

Hiding your distress can get you through the moment. Over time it is lonely and exhausting, and students in the Brighton study said it left them feeling cut off from who they really are. Choose one or two people you trust and let them see a little more.

Practise saying no in small ways

People pleasing keeps rejection away for now and wears you out over time. Start with something small and low risk, such as "I can't do Thursday, but I could do Friday." Each time the relationship survives a no, your brain gathers a little evidence that it is safe.

Understand your neurodivergence as a whole

The Brighton researchers suggest that a deeper understanding of ADHD and emotions may itself ease rejection sensitivity. Learning how your brain works, and having the right support in place for it, often makes RSD easier to live with.

Helping other people help you

You do not owe anyone an explanation. Even so, telling the people close to you what RSD is and what helps can change a great deal. You could say something like this:

> *"Sometimes I react strongly when I think someone is upset with me or I have got something wrong. It is called rejection sensitivity, and it is common in people with ADHD. It passes, and there are a few things that really help."*

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Things you might ask for:

- "Please be clear and direct with me. Hints and silence are harder for me than plain words."
- "Tell me what is going well as well as what needs to change."
- "A message that just says 'Can we talk?' sends me spiralling. Tell me what it is about."
- "If I go quiet, I am not punishing you. Give me a little time and then ask how I am."
- "Reassurance helps. 'We are okay' goes a long way."

RSD at work

Work is where many people feel RSD most, because feedback, appraisals and unclear messages come with the job.

Your rights

Under the Equality Act 2010, which applies in England, Scotland and Wales, a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial negative effect on their ability to carry out normal daily activities, and that effect has lasted or is likely to last 12 months or more. ADHD, autism and other neurodivergent conditions can meet this definition. The law looks at the effect on your daily life, so you do not need a formal diagnosis to ask for support, although one can help.

If you are covered, your employer has a duty to make reasonable adjustments. In Northern Ireland, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 gives similar protection.

Adjustments that can help with RSD

- Feedback that is specific, balanced and given in private
- Feedback in writing first, or time to take it in before you are expected to respond
- An agenda or a line of context before meetings, so you are not left guessing
- Regular short meetings with your manager, so small things do not build up
- Clear priorities and expectations in writing
- A named person you can ask when you are unsure how something landed

Access to Work is a government scheme that can pay for support at work beyond reasonable adjustments, such as specialist coaching, if you have a disability or health condition. A workplace needs assessment can help you and your employer work out what would make the biggest difference. **ACAS** offers free guidance on neurodiversity at work and a helpline if things are not going well.

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When to get more support

Looking after yourself has limits, and asking for help is a strength. Speak to your GP or another professional if:

- RSD is affecting your work, your relationships or your health most weeks
- you are avoiding more and more of life to stay safe from rejection
- low mood or anxiety is not lifting
- you are relying on alcohol or anything else to cope in a way that worries you

Support that may help

- **Talking therapy.** In England you can refer yourself to NHS Talking Therapies without seeing your GP first. People with RSD often mention cognitive behavioural therapy adapted for ADHD, dialectical behaviour therapy skills for managing strong emotions, and compassion focused therapy. None of these has been tested for RSD specifically yet, so look for a therapist who understands neurodivergence and is willing to adapt.
- **A review of your ADHD support.** NICE guideline NG87 says adults with ADHD should have a treatment plan that covers their psychological, behavioural and work or education needs. If you take ADHD medication, tell your prescriber about RSD. Some people find that the right treatment helps with emotions too, and that is a conversation for you and your clinician.
- **Coaching** with someone who understands neurodivergence, to build strategies that fit your life.

If you are in crisis

RSD can bring very dark thoughts very quickly. If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, please reach out now.

- Call **999** or go to A&E if your life is at risk.
- Call **NHS 111** and choose the mental health option, at any time of day or night. This is how it works in England. In Scotland and Wales, call 111. In Northern Ireland, call Lifeline on **0808 808 8000**.
- Call **Samaritans** free on **116 123**, at any time.
- Text **SHOUT** to **85258** for free support by text, at any time.

The feeling will pass. You deserve support while it does.

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My RSD plan

Fill this in on a calm day and keep it somewhere easy to find. A photo on your phone works well.

My early warning signs	
My most common triggers	
What calms my body	
My holding phrase	
Questions that help me check the story	
People I can reach out to	
What I want other people to know	
A kind thing I can say to myself	

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Where to find support in the UK

Organisation	What they offer	Contact
ADHD UK	Information and peer support for people with ADHD	adhduk.co.uk
ADHD Foundation	Information, training and resources on ADHD and neurodiversity	adhdfoundation.org.uk
National Autistic Society	Information, advice and community for autistic people and families	autism.org.uk
Mind	Mental health information and local services	mind.org.uk
NHS Talking Therapies	Free talking therapy in England. You can refer yourself.	Search "NHS Talking Therapies" at nhs.uk
Samaritans	Someone to talk to, day or night	Call 116 123 samaritans.org
Shout	Free support by text, day or night	Text SHOUT to 85258
ACAS	Free advice on rights at work and reasonable adjustments	Helpline 0300 123 1100 acas.org.uk
Access to Work	Government funding for support at work	gov.uk/access-to-work
NeuroEmpower CIC	Training, coaching, workplace needs assessments and free resources	neuroempower.org/resources info@neuroempower.org

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About NeuroEmpower

NeuroEmpower CIC provides neurodiversity training, coaching, workplace needs assessments and free resources for workplaces, schools and families across the UK. Find more at **www.neuroempower.org/resources** or email **info@neuroempower.org**.

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