

Emotional Regulation, RSD & Overwhelm

When emotions feel big, fast or hard to settle

Big feelings need support, not shame.

All Feelings Are Valid Here

1 Why emotions can feel intense

ADHD can affect how the nervous system regulates emotions. The brain may notice and react to things more quickly, have a harder time with impulse control, find it difficult to shift attention away from upsetting thoughts, and take longer to recover from stress. This can make emotions feel bigger, faster and harder to settle, even when the situation seems small to others.



3 What is RSD?

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is the intense emotional pain that can happen with perceived rejection, criticism, disappointment or feeling like we are not good enough. It can feel deeply personal, even when it was not meant that way. Many people with ADHD relate to this experience.



5 What helps in the moment

Small steps can make a big difference.



Pause

Give yourself a moment before reacting.



Breathe

Try slow, deep breaths (e.g. 4 in, 6 out).



Cool your body

Use cold water, a cool cloth or step into fresh air.



Step away

Create space if you can. A short break can help.



Name what you feel

Try, "I feel angry, scared, overstimulated or sad right now."



Reduce stimulation

Lower noise, dim lights or use headphones.



Ask for time

It's okay to say, "I need a moment."



Move your body

Stretch, walk, shake it out or do a calming movement.



Use self-compassion

Speak to yourself like you would a close friend.

2 What is emotional dysregulation?

Emotional dysregulation means emotions can feel very intense and harder to manage. It might look like quick frustration, irritability, shutting down, tears, big reactions or feeling emotionally flooded. Emotions can come on fast, feel overwhelming, and take longer to calm down.



Everyone's experience is different. Here are some common signs:

4 Signs of overwhelm



Snapping

"I feel irritated or react quickly."



Withdrawing

"I want to be alone or shut down."



Racing thoughts

"My mind won't slow down."



Decision paralysis

"Even small choices feel overwhelming."



Feeling embarrassed afterward

"I replay what happened and feel bad."



Sensory overload

"Sounds, lights, spaces or touch can feel like too much."

6 After the wave passes

When your emotions start to settle, it can help to:



Repair

If needed, apologize, explain or reconnect. You can repair without shame.



Rest

Your brain and body need time to recover. Rest is productive, not lazy.



Reflect

Notice what might have contributed (e.g. stress, sensory input, hunger, lack of sleep). Curiosity helps you learn, not blame.



Problem-solve gently

Think about what might help next time. Small changes can make a big difference.

Progress over perfection. You've got this.