

ADHD FOUNDATIONS · 1.10

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria: What It Is, What It Is Not

Rejection sensitive dysphoria, or RSD, is one of the most discussed features of adult ADHD online. This summary explains the underlying emotional dysregulation, what the evidence supports, and what helps.

FOR

Adults investigating their own ADHD

AUDIENCE AGE

18+

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria: What It Is, What It Is Not

What RSD is

- **An intense response to perceived rejection or criticism.** Out-of-proportion emotional pain triggered by relatively minor social cues. A flat reply, an unanswered message, a slightly off-tone email. The intensity and the speed of onset are what stand out.
- **Part of broader ADHD emotional dysregulation.** The international consensus describes emotional dysregulation as a core associated feature of ADHD. RSD is one expression of that, in the domain of rejection and criticism.
- **Not a DSM-5-TR diagnosis.** The term is a clinical shorthand, popularised by William Dodson. The underlying phenomenon is well evidenced; the specific construct as a discrete syndrome is contested in the research.

What it looks like in real life

- **An intensity that often surprises people.** Many people describe the reaction as almost physically painful. The strength and speed of the response is usually what distinguishes it from ordinary sensitivity to criticism.
- **Rumination on perceived slights.** Replaying a conversation for hours, sometimes days. Holding onto negative feedback while struggling to trust positive feedback.
- **Avoidance of risk.** Not applying for jobs, not asking for things, not putting work into the world, because the possible cost of rejection feels too high.
- **Anger or shutdown as the visible response.** From the outside it can look like disproportionate anger or sudden withdrawal. From the inside it is an emotional response that has run ahead of the brain's ability to regulate it.

How we can help

- **Treat the underlying ADHD well.** Well-titrated ADHD medication reduces emotional dysregulation in many adults who respond. This is the most reliable starting point for the picture overall.
- **Psychological work helps.** CBT adapted for ADHD targets the way perceived rejection escalates in the mind. Affect-regulation approaches support the picture where the pattern is severe.
- **Be cautious with confident online claims.** Some online content promotes specific 'RSD treatments'. The current evidence supports treating ADHD well, rather than separate targeted RSD therapies.
- **Assessment and prescribing through NeuroFX.** Private adult ADHD assessment, with medication initiation and titration where appropriate, and shared care handover to your NHS GP where the local ICB accepts it.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP if emotional dysregulation or persistent rejection sensitivity is meaningfully affecting your daily life. NeuroFX offers private adult ADHD assessment where waiting is a barrier. Seek same-day help via 111 (or 999 in an emergency) for any mental health crisis, including thoughts of self-harm.

SOURCES

Faraone et al. 2021 (Neurosci Biobehav Rev); Shaw et al. 2014 (Am J Psychiatry); Reimherr et al. 2005 (Biol Psychiatry); Bunford et al. 2015; DSM-5-TR; NICE NG87

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

neurofx.co.uk · info@neurofx.co.uk · 0333 533 3303