



Trauma-informed support for survivors rebuilding after abuse

Understanding Rejection Sensitivity

Many people experience emotional reactions to rejection, criticism, conflict or disapproval very intensely.

This is often known as rejection sensitivity.

For some people, even small misunderstandings, changes in tone or perceived criticism can trigger strong emotional responses.

These reactions are not about being “dramatic” or weak.

They are often connected to:

- Trauma or emotional invalidation
- ADHD or neurodivergence
- Long-term criticism or rejection
- Emotional insecurity or instability
- Nervous system hypervigilance

Many people experiencing rejection sensitivity spend years feeling ashamed of how deeply things affect them emotionally.

1. What Rejection Sensitivity Can Feel Like

Rejection sensitivity can affect emotions, thoughts and nervous system responses.

This may include:

- Overthinking conversations afterwards
- Fear of disappointing others

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- Emotional spirals after criticism
- Feeling intensely embarrassed after mistakes
- Anxiety around conflict or confrontation
- Constantly seeking reassurance
- Fear of being “too much” emotionally
- Struggling to emotionally recover after rejection

Example:

A short message, delayed response or change in tone may trigger panic, shame or overthinking far beyond what others realise.

2. Emotional Overwhelm & The Nervous System

When the nervous system becomes overloaded, emotions can begin feeling extremely difficult to regulate.

Many people experiencing emotional overwhelm may:

- Cry easily or unexpectedly
- Feel emotionally flooded during stress
- Struggle to calm down after conflict
- Become mentally overloaded by simple tasks
- Shut down or withdraw after emotional stress
- Feel exhausted after social interaction
- Experience anxiety, irritability or emotional burnout

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- Emotional overwhelm is not always visible from the outside.
- Many people continue functioning while privately struggling.

3. ADHD, Trauma & Emotional Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity is commonly linked to ADHD and trauma.

People who have experienced:

- Chronic criticism
- Emotional invalidation
- Bullying or rejection
- Emotionally unsafe environments
- Unpredictable relationships

may become highly sensitive to emotional cues or signs of disapproval.

For some people, the nervous system learns to constantly scan for emotional danger.

This can create:

- Hypervigilance
- Anxiety around communication
- Fear of conflict
- Emotional exhaustion
- People pleasing or fawn responses

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4. Why Small Things Can Feel So Big

People experiencing rejection sensitivity often know their emotional reactions feel intense.

This can create additional shame and self-criticism.

However, strong emotional responses are often connected to nervous system activation rather than intentional overreaction.

When someone has spent years feeling emotionally unsafe, criticised or misunderstood, the nervous system may begin treating rejection as a significant emotional threat.

Example:

A small misunderstanding may emotionally feel much bigger because the nervous system is reacting to accumulated emotional experiences, not just the present moment.

5. Shame & Self-Criticism

Many people experiencing rejection sensitivity become extremely hard on themselves.

This may involve:

- Harsh internal criticism
- Feeling “too emotional” or “too sensitive”
- Embarrassment after emotional reactions
- Constant over-analysis of social interactions
- Fear of burdening others emotionally
- Difficulty trusting relationships or reassurance

Over time, this can lead to emotional burnout and exhaustion.

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6. Emotional Overwhelm & Shutdown

For some people, emotional overwhelm eventually leads to shutdown.

This may look like:

- Withdrawal or isolation
- Emotional numbness
- Avoiding communication
- Feeling mentally exhausted after stress
- Difficulty expressing feelings clearly
- Wanting to “disappear” emotionally after conflict

These reactions are often connected to nervous system overload.

7. Learning Emotional Safety

Healing rejection sensitivity is not about becoming emotionless.

It is often about helping the nervous system feel safer and reducing shame around emotional responses.

This may involve:

- Understanding emotional triggers
- Building self-compassion
- Reducing self-criticism
- Spending time with emotionally safe people

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- Learning emotional regulation skills gradually
- Allowing yourself rest after overwhelm
- Recognising that sensitivity is not weakness

Recovery takes time and patience.

8. Small Steps Still Matter

Some signs of emotional healing may include:

- Recovering more quickly after emotional triggers
- Reducing overthinking gradually
- Feeling safer expressing emotions
- Becoming less dependent on reassurance
- Setting healthier emotional boundaries
- Showing yourself more compassion after mistakes

Healing does not mean never feeling emotional again.

It means learning that emotions do not need to control your sense of safety or self-worth.

If This Feels Familiar

You are not weak, dramatic or “too much” because emotions affect you deeply.

Many people experiencing rejection sensitivity are carrying years of emotional pressure, hypervigilance or nervous system stress.

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Understanding these patterns can help reduce shame and support emotional healing.

Support & Further Resources

You deserve support that understands emotional overwhelm without judgement.

WeAreUnmuted

Turning silence into understanding through lived experience.

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