What Is Rejection Sensitivity in ADHD?

Some people with ADHD describe an unusually intense emotional response to criticism, disapproval, exclusion, or the possibility that someone is upset with them. This is often called **rejection sensitivity**.

Rejection sensitivity is a useful descriptive term, but it is not a formal ADHD diagnosis or DSM-5-TR symptom.

What It Can Feel Like

- a small criticism feels devastating
- you replay conversations looking for signs you did something wrong
- neutral messages feel like rejection
- you avoid asking for help because you fear being judged
- you become defensive, tearful, angry, or withdrawn very quickly

Why It May Show Up With ADHD

ADHD is often associated with difficulties regulating emotions. Repeated experiences of correction, misunderstanding, academic struggles, social conflict, or being called careless can also make a person more alert to signs of rejection.

That means the intensity may come from more than one place: emotional regulation, learning history, anxiety, trauma, or current relationships.

What Rejection Sensitivity Is Not

It should not be used to explain every painful reaction or every relationship conflict.

- proof that ADHD is the cause
- a reason to ignore real criticism
- evidence that another person is rejecting you
- a substitute for assessing anxiety, trauma, depression, or relationship patterns

Your reaction can be real and intense even when the meaning of the situation is still uncertain.

What Can Help

The aim is not to talk yourself out of every feeling. It is to create enough space to understand what happened before reacting.

In the Moment

- name the feeling before deciding what it means
- wait before sending a defensive message
- ask what facts you actually have
- separate ‘I feel rejected’ from ‘I was rejected’
- use grounding or sensory regulation if your body is highly activated

Over Time

- notice patterns and common triggers
- practice asking for clarification
- work on emotion regulation skills
- address shame from repeated criticism
- consider therapy when rejection fears are affecting relationships or daily life

If reactions are severe, frequent, or linked with trauma, depression, or anxiety, a broader assessment may be useful.

The Main Point

Rejection sensitivity describes an experience. It does not tell you by itself why the experience is happening. Understanding the pattern is more useful than forcing a single label onto it.

Sources: National Institute of Mental Health, “Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)”; NICE, *Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management* (NG87). Young et al. (2020), expert consensus on females with ADHD.

Prepared by Flourishing Women LLC.