

# Workplace Rejection Sensitivity

WHEN FEEDBACK, SILENCE OR A CHANGE IN TONE FEELS MUCH BIGGER THAN IT LOOKS

## When a small workplace moment lands like something enormous

A manager replies with a full stop instead of their usual friendly message. A colleague walks past without saying hello. Feedback begins with, 'Can we have a quick chat?' An email goes unanswered. For somebody who is highly sensitive to rejection, these ordinary workplace moments can trigger an immediate and powerful emotional response.

The person may suddenly feel certain that they have done something wrong, that somebody is angry with them, that they are about to lose their job or that they are no longer liked or respected. The intensity can feel disproportionate to the information available — but the emotional experience itself is real.

The term rejection sensitivity is often used to describe a heightened emotional response to perceived rejection, criticism or disapproval. 'Rejection sensitive dysphoria' or RSD is commonly discussed in ADHD communities, but it is not a standalone diagnosis in major diagnostic manuals. It is more useful here as a way of understanding an experience than as a label somebody must have.

**The feeling can be real even when the interpretation has not yet been confirmed.**

### Why work can trigger it so strongly

Work contains constant evaluation. Managers review performance, colleagues respond to ideas, clients react, emails are answered or ignored and decisions are made about opportunities. For someone with a history of criticism, bullying, exclusion or repeated experiences of 'getting things wrong,' the nervous system may become highly alert to signs that rejection is happening again.

### ADHD and emotional intensity

Many people with ADHD describe rapid, intense emotional reactions to criticism or perceived rejection. Difficulties with emotional regulation, previous negative feedback and years of being misunderstood can all contribute. Autism, anxiety, trauma and low confidence can also shape how ambiguous social information is interpreted.

### The change in tone

Human beings naturally read tone, facial expression and patterns of communication. The difficulty comes when uncertainty is immediately filled with the most threatening explanation. A shorter email may mean somebody is busy. A quiet colleague may be preoccupied. But when the alarm system activates first, alternative explanations can become hard to access.

## Creating Space Between the Trigger and the Meaning

The goal is not to tell somebody they are 'too sensitive.' Nor is it to assume every fear is inaccurate. Sometimes criticism is real. Sometimes exclusion is happening. Sometimes a manager's communication genuinely is harmful. The useful skill is learning to separate what has actually happened from what the anxious brain has predicted.

### What do I know, and what am I filling in?

Try dividing the experience into two parts. The observable fact might be: 'My manager sent a short reply.' The interpretation might be: 'They are angry with me and I am in trouble.' Both deserve attention, but they are not the same thing. This small distinction can create enough space to check what else might be possible.

### Pause before repairing something that may not be broken

Rejection fear can create an urgent need to apologise, over-explain, send another message or ask repeatedly whether everything is okay. That can temporarily reduce anxiety but may strengthen the cycle. Where there is no genuine urgency, allow some time before responding.

### Feedback without collapse

If criticism triggers intense shame, it can become difficult to hear the useful part of the feedback. Ask for specifics: What needs to change? What would good look like? Is this one piece of work or a wider concern? Written follow-up can help if emotional intensity makes it hard to retain the conversation.

### Managers can make feedback clearer

Vague feedback creates space for anxious interpretation. Be specific about what worked, what needs changing and what happens next. Avoid using unexplained phrases such as 'We need to talk' when a little context can be given. Clarity is not special treatment; it is good communication.

### Do not use reassurance as the only strategy

Reassurance can be kind, but repeatedly needing somebody else to confirm that nothing is wrong can leave confidence dependent on their response. Over time, the aim is to strengthen the ability to tolerate some uncertainty, check facts and decide what action is genuinely needed.

**Sensitivity is not the same as weakness. But feelings deserve enough space for facts to catch up.**

## Building Confidence Without Becoming Less Caring

People who experience rejection sensitivity are often deeply attentive to relationships. They notice changes, care about doing well and may work extremely hard to avoid disappointing others. The goal is not to remove that care. It is to stop every ambiguous interaction from becoming evidence that something is wrong with them.

### Look at the history underneath the reaction

Ask whether the intensity belongs entirely to this moment. Does feedback remind you of school, previous workplaces, bullying, a critical manager or repeated experiences of being misunderstood? Understanding the history can help explain why today's small trigger carries yesterday's emotional weight.

### When the workplace really is the problem

Not every uncomfortable feeling is rejection sensitivity. Repeated exclusion, humiliation, bullying, discriminatory behaviour, inconsistent management or threatening communication should not be reframed as somebody being overly sensitive. Keep records where appropriate, seek support and use relevant workplace processes or professional advice when there is a genuine pattern of harmful behaviour.

### A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

If one short email can change the whole shape of your day, I would not want to tell you simply to stop taking things personally. I would want to understand what your brain believes that email means and why that meaning arrives so quickly.

Perhaps you have spent years trying not to get things wrong. Perhaps criticism has previously meant humiliation. Perhaps being excluded has happened before. Perhaps your ADHD or autistic experience has included being corrected for things everybody else seemed to understand automatically.

Your emotional response deserves compassion. But compassion does not require us to believe every frightening thought the moment it appears. We can hold the feeling and still ask for evidence.

And workplaces can help enormously by communicating clearly. Employees should not have to decode vague messages, unexplained changes in tone or feedback that leaves them guessing whether they are doing their job well.

**You do not need to become less caring. The aim is to become less frightened by every moment of uncertainty.**

**A rejection-sensitivity check-in:** What actually happened? What meaning did my brain add? What evidence supports that meaning? What other explanations are possible? Do I need to act now, ask for clarification later, or simply allow the feeling to settle before deciding?

**Important:** This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not diagnose RSD or any mental-health or neurodevelopmental condition. Significant or persistent distress may benefit from appropriate professional support.