

What is rejection sensitivity?

Rejection sensitivity is a term sometimes used to describe an acute sensitivity to criticism, perceived criticism or rejection from others. Everyone can feel hurt by criticism or rejection, but some feel this more strongly. You may seek to avoid situations where you are at risk of feeling hurt and react strongly to any negative reactions of others. Rejection sensitivity may be more common in people with ADHD.

Take a look at the image below. **What do you think it conveys about anger?**



Answer **yes**, **no** or **sometimes** to these statements:

- **I can feel hurt easily by even mild negative comments or criticism.**
- **I react quickly and angrily if I perceive a comment to be critical or negative.**
- **I can become very affected by the comments or actions of others and may dwell on situations for too long.**

If you answered *yes* or *sometimes* to these statements, you may be very sensitive to how others perceive you. This may lead you to react strongly to perceived criticism or rejection.

Read this scene below. **Why do you think Ryan reacted angrily to Sarah? What might have been the underlying motivations for his reaction?**

Ryan and Sara are in the same class at school. They have a friendly relationship and get on well. This scene takes place in a busy school canteen.

Ryan has a tray with his food and is about to sit next to Sara.

Sara: Noooo, you can't sit here! I am saving this seat for George.

Ryan: So? You don't own this seat! I'm sitting down here.

Sara: Oi! Can you not??

Ryan: Oh, my days! His stuff isn't even there!! How can you save his seat, if he hasn't arrived yet?

Sara: Just sit somewhere else!! You are soooo annoying!

Ryan: Oh, shut up! You stupid xxxx!

Sara: Don't call me that! You are the most annoying person ever. Just because you have nowhere else to sit, you four-eyed xxxx!

Ryan: Don't talk to me like that, you xxxx. Who do you think you are?!

Sara: Oh, be quiet. No wonder nobody likes you!

Ryan throws Sara's food on the floor. Sara is furious, picks up someone's burger and throws this it at Ryan, covering him with ketchup. It is clear to see how this interaction will escalate further as Sara and Ryan become more enraged.

- **What do you think were the underlying feelings that triggered Ryan's anger?**
- **What do you think were the underlying feelings that triggered Sara's anger?**
- **How and why do you think this interaction escalated?**
- **What underlying thoughts and feelings do you think Ryan and Sara might have had during this altercation?** Draw thought bubbles for each of them and fill them in with your ideas.



Ryan may have felt that Sara asking him to move was personal, perceived it as a rejection and felt hurt.

What behaviours or actions by others provoke the strongest feelings in us and why?

Sara may have felt tense, knowing that George would be expecting to find a seat free for him as she had promised to save it.

Let's think about how the interaction could be different.

Sara: Hi Ryan! Sorry, but I promised George I'd save him a seat as he wanted to discuss something. Would you mind sitting somewhere else today?

Ryan: George is not here yet. When he arrives, I will definitely move. I eat quickly anyway. That OK?

Sara: Yes, that's fine. Thanks!

What was different about how Sara and Ryan spoke to each other?

Apart from the language and tone that was used, in this interaction, both Ryan and Sara were careful to explain the motivation or reason for making a request. This can often make a big difference in minimizing the opportunity for someone to perceive a criticism or rejection and therefore helps everyone stay in their Window of Tolerance.

If we explain why we have asked something or need it, the other person is more likely to understand and not be offended.

Saying that, while we can control and adjust how we communicate with others, we cannot predict or adjust for how others might speak.

Are there particular situations where you often have a strong or heightened feeling of stress or fear?

Read through the following statements. **Which do you think trigger the most anger?**

'I feel that I am being ridiculed or belittled.'

If you have had experiences in the past where you felt belittled, you may have felt shame about yourself (for example, if people responded badly to your excitement or goofing around or if they teased you for not knowing something). This will trigger a strong sense of being attacked when you feel it is happening – even if a comment was intended in a light-hearted way.

'I feel that I am being treated unfairly.'

Perhaps you have experienced being treated unfairly in the

past and feel resentful that this happened? This resentment can stay with you and be expressed in other situations.

Can you recall a time when you were much younger when you feel you were treated unfairly? Do you still feel angry about that situation?

'I feel like I was not in control and I am scared of feeling trapped.'

Sometimes, it can feel that things are happening to you that you have little active control over. You may feel fear that you are being frustrated in some way and cannot do what you need to do. As your attention is very interest-based, you may resent that you have to do more activities that are not interesting to you or are being asked to do something at the wrong time for you. You can quickly feel overwhelmed by too many tasks that are not inherently interesting to you and resent having to do these.

'I feel like I am not listened to and my opinion is dismissed.'

In the past you may have felt that your feelings were disregarded or easily dismissed. **Perhaps you felt your needs were buried to make others feel comfortable?** You may now have a sensitivity to this feeling and this triggers a response of anger even when this is not always the case.

Use the prompts below to help you explore how you might handle situations like this. You can write them out or say them.

When I have to do...I feel...

I worry that...

I feel that I will be...

This makes me...

I may feel like this because it reminds me of...

Now, think about how you might try different approaches in some situations.

Read through these examples. **What is the person doing in each example?**

- *‘You don’t need to understand the reasons, but I hate it when people call me... Can you please stop? Thanks.’*
- *‘I would really like it if you can ask me where we go.’*
- *‘I don’t think it is fair to ask me to do that at short notice. I’m very tired today.’*
- *‘I hear you, but you could have asked me in a more respectful and polite way.’*

If we communicate our needs and motivations clearly, others will understand our boundaries. Clearly communicating boundaries to others can prevent situations escalating when we feel ignored or dismissed.

If you trust someone, it can be helpful to explain why some situations trigger a strong response. For example, certain types of joke or words may hurt you more than people would expect. You might think that they have made a request in a way that is rude or offensive.