A NEURO-AFFIRMATIVE GUIDE

When Rejection Hurts

Understanding Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) for autistic and ADHD young people, adults and the people who care about them

Understanding RSD | Autism and ADHD | Every age | Toolkit | Support

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30 pages
2026 edition

WELCOME

Hello, and welcome

A guide for anyone who has felt a small moment of rejection land like a very big blow.



If you have ever replayed a message for hours, wondered what you did wrong when a friend went quiet, or felt your whole body react to a bit of feedback, you are in the right place. This guide is for autistic people, ADHDers and AuDHDers of every age, and for everyone who loves, teaches, works with or supports them.

How to use this guide

Dip in and out

You don't have to read it in order. Start with whichever page catches your eye.

Follow the colours

Each part has its own colour, so you always know where you are.

Go at your own pace

Some pages might stir up big feelings. It's fine to stop, move, have a drink and come back later.

Make it yours

Scribble, highlight and circle what fits. Cross out what doesn't. You are the expert on you.

Look out for these boxes

- **Try this**: a small, practical thing to do
- **Good to know**: facts and research, in plain words
- **Pause point**: a moment to reflect on you
- **For supporters**: ideas for parents, teachers, partners and managers
- **Remember**: the big messages worth keeping

This guide offers information and ideas. It is not a diagnosis and does not replace personalised advice from a professional who knows you.

WELCOME

What's inside

Five parts, thirty pages and one big message: you belong, exactly as you are.

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PART 1 · UNDERSTANDING RSD

First, a word about words

Names help us make sense of our experiences. You get to choose the ones that fit.

Rejection

Being, or feeling, left out, criticised, disliked, let down or 'not good enough'. It can be real, imagined or expected.

Sensitive

Noticing it fast and feeling it strongly. Your alarm system is finely tuned.

Dysphoria

From an ancient Greek word for distress that is very hard to bear. Here it has nothing to do with gender.

GOOD TO KNOW

RSD is not a diagnosis. You won't find it in the diagnostic manuals (DSM-5-TR or ICD-11). It's a name, popularised by the psychiatrist Dr William Dodson, for an experience many neurodivergent people recognise instantly.

Other words people use

Rejection sensitivity · **Rejection pain** · **Social pain** · **Just 'RSD'** · **My big feelings**

In one 2025 study, neurodivergent adults described RSD in different ways. Some found the word 'dysphoria' confusing, and some felt 'sensitivity' sounded like a weakness (Sandland, 2025). There's no wrong answer.

The language in this guide

This guide uses identity-first language (autistic person, ADHDer) because many people in the neurodivergent community prefer it. **AuDHD** means being both autistic and ADHD. If other words fit you better, swap them in.

REMEMBER

You are not 'too sensitive'. Your nervous system is reacting to something that matters deeply to every human being: belonging.

PART 1 · UNDERSTANDING RSD

What is RSD?

A clear, simple picture of what people mean when they talk about rejection sensitive dysphoria.

RSD describes a sudden, intense wave of emotional and often physical pain, set off by rejection, criticism or failure. The rejection can be real, imagined or expected.

Six things people often notice

Fast

It can hit in seconds, before you've had any time to think.

Big

The feeling seems far bigger than the moment that set it off.

Physical

Many people feel it in the body: chest, throat, stomach or face.

Triggered

It's sparked by a situation, then fades. It isn't a constant low mood.

Before, not only after

Expecting rejection can hurt as much as the real thing, or even more.

Lingering

It can last minutes, hours or days, and for some people weeks.

GOOD TO KNOW

Every human is wired to feel hurt by rejection, because belonging kept our ancestors safe. RSD isn't simply feeling hurt. It's about the speed, size and staying power of that hurt.

Drawn from lived experience research, including Rowney-Smith et al. (2026) and van Asselt et al. (2025). Full references on page 10.

Hurt, sensitivity or RSD?

How RSD differs from the ordinary sting of rejection that everyone feels.

	Everyday hurt	Rejection sensitivity	RSD, as people describe it
What sets it off	A clear knock-back	Small or unclear cues	Tiny, unclear or even imagined cues
How big it feels	Matches the moment	Bigger than expected	Overwhelming, like a physical blow
How long it lasts	Fades fairly quickly	Worry hangs around	Hours or days to settle
What it does	You feel sad, then move on	You worry, check and overthink	It takes over: shutdown, tears, anger or panic
A friend says 'can't make it tonight'	“Shame, next time then.”	“Did I do something?”	“They don't really like me. Nobody does.”

These aren't neat boxes. Think of them as points along a dial that can move with tiredness, stress and who you're with. Psychologists have studied rejection sensitivity, the anxious expectation of rejection, since the 1990s (Downey and Feldman, 1996).

Sometimes mistaken for...

Depression

Depression tends to be a more constant low. RSD usually comes in waves linked to a trigger.

Social anxiety

There's a lot of overlap, and many people experience both together.

Other diagnoses

Big emotions in neurodivergent people are sometimes misread as something else (Dodson et al., 2024).

FOR SUPPORTERS

A clinician who understands neurodivergence can help untangle what's going on.

What it can feel like

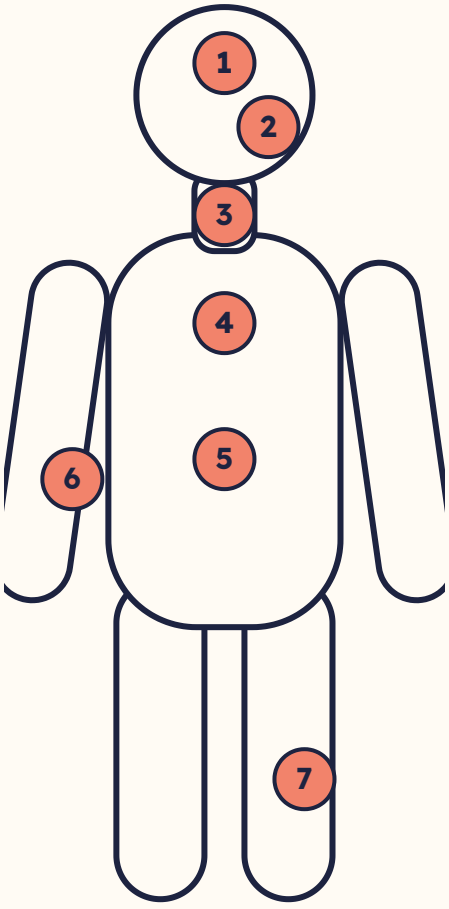
RSD often shows up in the body first, before you have the words for it.

1 Head
Racing thoughts, replaying conversations, or going completely blank.

2 Face
Hot, flushed cheeks, stinging eyes, tears that arrive from nowhere.

3 Throat
A lump, a tight jaw, or words that just won't come out.

4 Chest
Tight, heavy or aching. People often say it feels like being punched.



5 Stomach
A sudden drop, churning, or feeling sick.

6 Arms and legs
Shaky and needing to move, or frozen and heavy.

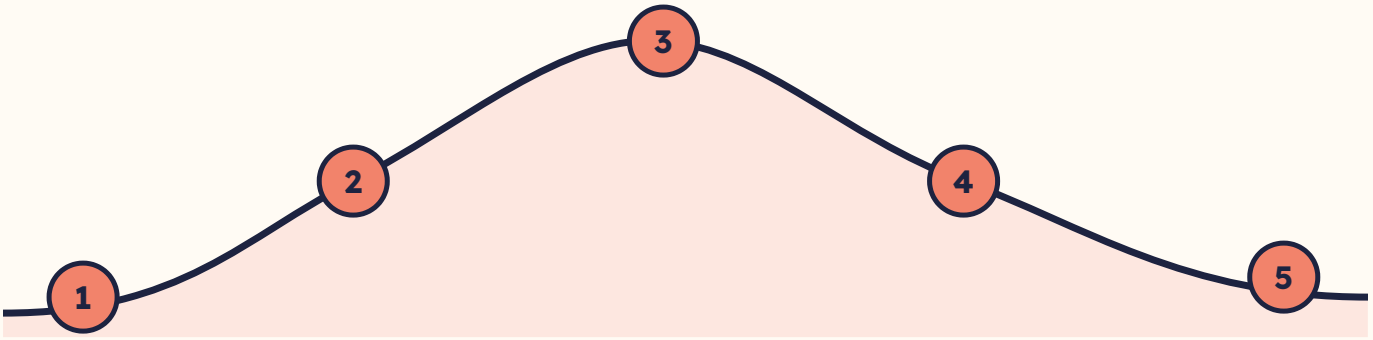
7 Whole body
Wiped out afterwards. Some people call this an 'RSD hangover'.

PAUSE POINT
Where do you notice it first? Circle or colour in the places on the body. Noticing early gives you more time to step in.

GOOD TO KNOW
Feeling rejection as physical pain is not 'all in your head'. Researchers have found overlaps in how the brain handles social and physical pain, which may be why rejection can hurt so physically.

The RSD wave

Most RSD moments follow a similar shape. Every stage is a place where you can step in.



	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT CAN HELP
1	**The trigger** A look, a pause, a short reply, some feedback. Sometimes just the thought of one.	Notice it: “Something just landed.”
2	**The spike** Your body's alarm goes off. Heart racing, face burning, fight, flight, freeze or fawn.	Body first: breathe out slowly, move, find comfort. Page 22
3	**The story** Your brain fills the gaps, fast: “They hate me.” “I've ruined everything.”	Check the story before you believe it. Page 23
4	**The response** You might shut down, cry, snap, over-apologise, people-please or want to leave.	Pause before sending, deciding or quitting. Page 23
5	**Recovery** The wave passes. You may feel tired, embarrassed or flat for a while.	Rest, repair if needed, and be kind to yourself. Page 24

Common triggers

Some of these might be huge for you. Others might not bother you at all. Both are fine.



Seen, no reply

Read receipts, typing dots that stop, a message left hanging.

Feedback

Even kind, helpful feedback can land as 'you're not good enough'.

"Can we chat?"

A vague request with no context. Your brain fills in the worst.

A change in tone

A shorter reply, a different face, no emoji, a sigh.

Plans changing

A cancelled meet-up can feel like being cancelled as a person.

Being left out

Not invited, not in the photo, not in the group chat.

Getting it wrong

A mistake in front of others, or being corrected in public.

Not being chosen

Missing out on a team, a job, a part or a date.

Being misunderstood

Not being believed, or being blamed unfairly.

Hidden triggers: the full cup

RSD hits harder when your cup is already full. These cup fillers can turn a small sting into a big wave:

Tiredness **Hunger** **Sensory overload** **Masking all day** **Hormones**

Illness or pain **Burnout** **Change and uncertainty** **Lots of demands**

PAUSE POINT

Circle your biggest triggers. Then star the cup fillers that make them worse for you.

What does the research say?

An honest look at what we know, what we don't, and why your experience still counts.

What we know

- Emotional dysregulation is common in ADHD at every age: around 25 to 45% of children and 30 to 70% of adults (Shaw et al., 2014).
- In a study of 43 young adults with ADHD, 33 (about 77%) said they struggled with RSD (Ginapp et al., 2023).
- Autistic adults describe intense, physical distress around rejection, lasting minutes to weeks (van Asselt et al., 2025).
- Environments such as schools and workplaces shape how strong RSD is (Sandland, 2025).

What we don't know yet

- RSD isn't an official diagnosis, and there's no validated test or questionnaire for it yet.
- Most RSD studies are small and based on interviews. That's a valuable start, but it's early days.
- A 2026 review found the evidence on RSD in autistic adults is still patchy (van Asselt, Reekers and Roke, 2026).
- Claims such as '99% of ADHDers have RSD' come from clinical observation, not research.

REMEMBER

Science is still catching up with lived experience. What you feel is real and valid, whether or not a study has measured it yet.

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ADHD and RSD

ADHD shapes how your brain manages attention, energy, interest and emotion. Feelings often arrive fast and at full volume.

Full-volume feelings

ADHD can make it harder to turn the dial down once a big feeling starts. Regulating emotion is part of executive functioning.

Now or not now

Time can feel like 'now' or 'not now'. Mid-wave, it's hard to remember you've felt this before and it passed.

A lifetime of corrections

Many ADHDers grow up hearing 'try harder', 'sit still' or 'you're so lazy'. Those messages add up and teach your brain to brace.

Quick reactions

The reply gets sent, the job gets quit or the friendship gets ended before your thinking brain catches up.

Caring deeply

When someone or something captures your interest, you care with your whole heart. That raises the stakes.

Losing the good bits

In the moment, it can be hard to hold on to the good memories, so one bad moment feels like the whole story.

GOOD TO KNOW

ADHD treatment, including medication, can ease emotional intensity for some people (Shaw et al., 2014). If you'd like to explore this, talk to your prescriber, and please don't change medication without advice.

The flip side: ADHD strengths that often travel with RSD

Passion **Warmth** **Creativity** **Energy** **Humour** **Big-hearted loyalty**

Autism and RSD

Autistic people often meet more rejection, in a social world that wasn't designed with them in mind.

The double empathy problem

Communication differences between autistic and non-autistic people go both ways (Milton, 2012). Yet autistic people are often the ones blamed and rejected.

Not knowing where you stand

Vague messages, unreadable tones and unwritten rules create uncertainty. For many autistic people, not knowing is the hardest part.

Masking

Hiding your natural self to fit in is exhausting. Rejection while masking can feel like proof that the real you isn't acceptable.

A strong sense of justice

Being misunderstood or blamed unfairly can hurt deeply and replay for a long time.

High standards

Wanting to get things exactly right can make any mistake feel enormous.

Delayed processing

Big feelings sometimes arrive hours later, once you're somewhere safe. That's often when the replaying starts.

GOOD TO KNOW

In a 2025 study of 19 autistic adults aged 21 to 71, people linked their rejection sensitivity to both autistic traits and lifelong rejection. Being dismissed, including by professionals, made it worse (van Asselt et al., 2025).

The flip side: autistic strengths that often travel with RSD

Honesty · **Loyalty** · **Deep focus** · **Fairness** · **Eye for detail** · **Authenticity**

When you're autistic and ADHD

Lots of people are both. AuDHD can feel like two different pulls happening at once.



More ADHD-flavoured

- Reacting fast, regretting later
- Craving connection and novelty
- Losing track of the good times
- Restlessness making it louder

Shared ground

- Big, physical feelings
- Masking
- Past experiences of rejection
- Sensory overload
- Replaying conversations

More autism-flavoured

- Needing to know where you stand
- A strong sense of fairness
- Feelings that arrive later
- Needing time alone to recover

The push and pull

Your ADHD side might fire off a message in seconds while your autistic side replays it for days. You might crave people and need space from them in the same afternoon. None of this makes you contradictory or 'too much'. It makes you you.

GOOD TO KNOW

Many AuDHDers are identified later in life, which can mean years of unexplained rejection before anyone understood why. In Sandland's 2025 study, three of the seven neurodivergent participants were both autistic and ADHD.

PAUSE POINT

Which column feels most like you? There's no right answer, and it might change from day to day.

It's not only your brain: the world matters too

RSD grows where a finely tuned nervous system meets the experiences life has handed you.

Many neurodivergent people collect years of corrections, exclusion and misunderstanding, often before anyone realises they're autistic or ADHD. One study used the image of **scar tissue**: old wounds that make new knocks hurt more (Sandland, 2025). Today's rejection can carry an echo of every one before it.

What deepens the wound

- Being told you're 'too sensitive' or 'overreacting'
- Public telling-off and shaming systems
- Bullying and exclusion
- Not being believed
- Having to mask all day
- Feedback that's vague or only negative

What helps it heal

- ✓ Being believed
- ✓ People who accept the real you
- ✓ Clear, kind and private feedback
- ✓ Finding your people and community
- ✓ Rest and sensory comfort
- ✓ Understanding your own neurotype

GOOD TO KNOW

RSD isn't a fixed setting. People often notice it's much quieter around safe, accepting people and much louder in unpredictable or critical places (Sandland, 2025).

REMEMBER

This is not a flaw inside you. It's an understandable response to a world that hasn't always made room for you. That also means it isn't all on you to fix. Changing environments helps too.

The shields we pick up

Over time, many of us find clever ways to avoid rejection. They made sense, and some of them cost a lot.

People-pleasing

Protects: Keeps everyone happy with you.

Can cost: Losing track of your own needs, resentment, exhaustion.

Perfectionism

Protects: No mistakes means no criticism.

Can cost: Burnout, putting things off, never feeling 'enough'.

Masking

Protects: Blending in and avoiding judgement.

Can cost: Exhaustion, burnout, feeling unknown.

Avoiding

Protects: You can't be rejected if you never try.

Can cost: Missed chances and a smaller life.

Getting in first

Protects: Leaving before they can leave you.

Can cost: Ending things that might have been good.

Armour of anger

Protects: Pushing hurt outwards can feel safer.

Can cost: Conflict, guilt, and people missing the hurt underneath.

PAUSE POINT

Which shields do you use most? You don't have to throw them all away. Notice which ones still help, and which you might gently put down, one small step at a time.

REMEMBER

These shields made sense. They helped you survive situations that felt unsafe. You were being clever, not weak.

PART 3 · RSD ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Little ones (under 7)

Young children can't tell us 'that felt like rejection'. Their behaviour does the talking, so the adults become the detectives.

What it can look like

- Huge meltdowns after being told 'no' or corrected
- Saying 'You don't love me' or 'I'm bad'
- Hiding, freezing or running off after a mistake
- Big upset over losing games or not being first
- Refusing to try new things in case they get it wrong

What might be going on underneath

Young nervous systems borrow calm from the adults around them. Feeling 'in trouble' can feel like losing the connection that keeps them safe. These children are sometimes labelled 'naughty' or 'defiant' when they are actually overwhelmed.

What helps

- ✓ Connection before correction: get down to their level and soften your voice
- ✓ Name the feeling: “That felt really big.”
- ✓ Repair afterwards: “We're still okay. I love you even when things go wrong.”
- ✓ Keep corrections short and private, and praise effort as well as results
- ✓ Use visuals and routines so there are fewer surprises
- ✓ Check the basics: tired, hungry, too noisy?

FOR SUPPORTERS

Your calm becomes their calm. You don't have to get it perfect. Repair matters more than never getting it wrong.

Primary years (7 to 11)

Friendships get more complicated, school gets more demanding, and children start comparing themselves with others.

What it can look like

- “Everyone hates me” after one falling out
- Tearing up work that isn't 'perfect'
- Avoiding reading aloud, answering questions or joining in
- Holding it together at school, then exploding at home
- Being deeply upset by unfairness or one cross word from a teacher

What might be going on underneath

Many neurodivergent children mask at school to stay safe, then let it all out at home, where they feel safe enough to fall apart. This is sometimes called 'restraint collapse'. When worry about school keeps building, it can lead to emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA).

What helps

- ✓ Home and school talking regularly, without blame
- ✓ A trusted adult at school and a safe space to go
- ✓ Feedback given privately, with clear next steps
- ✓ No public charts, sanctions or 'cloud' boards that shame
- ✓ Friendships built around shared interests
- ✓ Validating first, problem-solving later

IF YOU'RE READING THIS YOURSELF

When your body gets that big, hot feeling, try telling your grown-up, “My alarm is going off.” It's a quick way to say you need help.

Teenagers (11 to 18)

Friendships, group chats, crushes, exams and identity. The teenage years can turn the volume right up.



What it can look like

- Checking again and again whether a message has been read
- Feeling crushed when left out of a group chat or photo
- Comparing yourself with others on social media
- Saying 'I don't care' when you care a lot
- Big reactions to crushes, break-ups and friendship changes

Teenage brains are especially tuned in to belonging and what peers think. Add hormones, exams and pressure to fit in, and RSD can feel huge. Many teenagers hide it very well.

For you

- ✓ Turn off read receipts and 'last seen'
- ✓ Use a 24-hour rule before replying to anything that stings
- ✓ Have one person you can check your 'story' with
- ✓ Find your people through interests, clubs or safe neurodivergent communities
- ✓ A short reply usually just means busy

For supporters

- ✓ Don't dismiss it as 'just a text'
- ✓ Be the steady base they can come back to
- ✓ Ask first: “Do you want ideas, or just a listen?”
- ✓ Keep a gentle eye on mood, sleep and withdrawal

IF THINGS FEEL TOO MUCH

If you ever feel you can't cope, or have thoughts of not wanting to be here, please tell an adult you trust today. You can call Childline free on 0800 1111, any time. More support is on page 29.

PART 3 · RSD ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Young adults (18 to 25)

Leaving home, college, university, apprenticeships, first jobs and dating. Lots of new beginnings, and lots of new chances for rejection.



What it can look like

- Dreading tutorials, marks or supervision meetings
- Taking a rejected application very personally
- Being ghosted on a dating app and spiralling
- Avoiding emails in case they bring bad news
- Feeling left behind as friendship groups shift

What might be going on underneath

Independence brings freedom and fewer familiar safety nets. Marking, interviews and dating apps are full of judgement and silence, which RSD finds hard. Many people are diagnosed at this stage and look back with new understanding.

What helps

- ✓ Ask for feedback in writing so you can process it in your own time
- ✓ Ask about reasonable adjustments at college, university or work
- ✓ Students in England may be able to get Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), and Access to Work can fund support in jobs
- ✓ Applications are a numbers game: a 'no' is about fit and timing, not your worth
- ✓ When dating, say what helps: “I'd rather have a clear no than silence.”

GOOD TO KNOW

Under the Equality Act 2010, autism and ADHD can count as a disability if they have a substantial, long-term effect on day-to-day life. That can mean a right to reasonable adjustments in education and work.

PART 3 · RSD ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Adulthood: work, love and family

RSD doesn't disappear when you grow up. It often just finds new places to hide.

At work

- "Can you call me?" ruins your afternoon
- Appraisals feel like threats
- Overworking to avoid criticism
- Feeling like an imposter

In relationships

- Reading tiredness as anger
- Needing reassurance, then feeling ashamed
- Avoiding hard conversations
- Arguments escalating fast

As a parent

- Feeling judged at the school gate
- Your child's big feelings setting off yours
- Taking "I hate you" to heart
- Seeing yourself in your child

What helps

- ✓ Agree signals at home: "I'm quiet because I'm tired, not cross."
- ✓ Ask for meeting agendas, and for feedback with notice
- ✓ Notice your load. RSD hits harder when you're stretched
- ✓ Find neurodivergent friends who get it
- ✓ Keep a folder of kind messages and wins to look back on

TRY THIS

Agree a code word with the people closest to you, such as 'wave'. It means: I'm struggling, please be gentle, and we'll talk properly later.

PAUSE POINT

Where does RSD show up most in your adult life right now? What's one small thing that might help?

PART 3 · RSD ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Midlife, later life and late diagnosis

It's never too late to understand yourself. Many people are identified in their 40s, 50s, 60s and beyond.

Looking back with new eyes

A late diagnosis can bring relief and grief together. Years of feeling 'too much', or friendships and jobs that ended painfully, may suddenly make sense. Both feelings are valid.

Hormones and change

Many women describe their ADHD traits and emotional intensity growing during perimenopause and menopause. If you notice this, it's worth talking to your GP.

Shifting roles

Retirement, children leaving home, caring for parents or changes in health can shake your sense of identity and belonging, and stir RSD up.

A lifetime of masking

Some people have masked for decades. Unmasking, even a little, can feel risky. Go gently and at your own pace.

What helps

- ✓ Retell your life story with compassion: you were doing your best without the right information
- ✓ Join a late-diagnosed peer group, online or in person
- ✓ Give yourself permission to put down old shields
- ✓ Share what you've learned with people you trust

REMEMBER

Understanding yourself at 25, 55 or 85 is a gift. It can change how the rest of your story feels.

In the moment: your SOS steps

When the wave hits, your thinking brain goes offline. Start with your body, then your mind.



1. **Name it**
   Say it in your head or out loud: “This is RSD. It's a wave. Waves pass.” Naming a feeling can take some of the heat out of it.

2. **Body first**
   Breathe out for longer than you breathe in. Plant your feet. Move: walk, shake out your hands, push against a wall. Stimming is welcome.

3. **Find comfort**
   Headphones, a hoodie, a weighted blanket, a favourite smell, a pet or a quiet room. Whatever helps your senses settle.

4. **Don't decide yet**
   No sending, quitting, deleting or ending anything at the peak of the wave. Decisions can wait until you feel steadier.

5. **Ground yourself**
   Find 5 things you can see, 4 you can feel, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell and 1 you can taste.

6. **Reach out**
   Text your safe person: “Big wave. Can you remind me I'm okay?”

My SOS card

Cut out and keep, or snap a photo

I'm having a big feeling. Right now I need:

- ☐ some space
- ☐ a quiet room
- ☐ a hug
- ☐ someone nearby
- ☐ to talk later
- ☐ a drink or snack

Pause and check the story

Your brain is a brilliant storyteller, especially when it's scared. Stories aren't always facts.

Be a thought detective

Detective question	An example
What actually happened?	My friend replied “ok.” to my long message.
What story did my brain tell?	“They're annoyed with me. I've said too much.”
What else could be true?	They're busy, driving, at work or tired. They often send short replies.
What would I tell a friend?	“One word doesn't mean they're cross. Give it time.”
What do I need right now?	To put my phone down and do something calming.

Your turn

What actually happened?

What story did my brain tell?

What else could be true?

What do I need right now?

The 24-hour rule

If something stings, wait before you reply, quit or decide. Draft it if you like, but don't send it yet. Tomorrow-you will thank you.

Ask, don't assume

Clear questions beat guesswork. Try: “I might be reading this wrong, but are we okay?” Most people are glad to be asked.

GOOD TO KNOW

Many autistic people find direct questions really helpful, because they swap uncertainty for facts. Asking is a skill, not a weakness.

After the storm

When the wave passes you might feel tired, foggy, embarrassed or flat. That's normal, and it passes too.

Rest and refuel

Have a drink and something to eat. Rest, or spend time with a special interest or a comfort show.

Kindness, not a telling-off

Speak to yourself the way you'd speak to someone you love. Shame keeps the wave going. Kindness helps it settle.

Repair if you need to

If you snapped or withdrew, a short repair is enough: “I reacted strongly because I was hurting. I'm sorry I snapped.”

Reflect later

Once you're calm, and not before, ask: What set it off? What helped? What might I try next time?

A self-compassion script

Based on the three parts of self-compassion described by Kristin Neff (2003).

1. **Notice it:** “This is really hard right now.”
2. **Remember you're not alone:** “Lots of people feel like this.”
3. **Offer yourself kindness:** “May I be patient and gentle with myself.”

My own words:

TRY THIS

Make a 'wave kit' while you feel calm: a box or pouch with things that help you recover, such as a snack, a fidget, headphones and a kind note from someone who loves you.

PART 4 · YOUR RSD TOOLKIT

Building steadiness over time

You can't stop every wave. You can build a sturdier boat, and find good people to sail with.

Know your patterns

Keep a simple log for a few weeks: what happened, how big (1 to 10), what helped. Patterns start to appear.

Keep your cup emptier

Protect sleep, food, movement, downtime and sensory needs. A less full cup means smaller waves.

Find your people

Time with people who share your neurotype or interests can feel like a long breath out.

Know your values

Ask: what matters to me, whatever anyone else thinks? Values are an anchor when approval wobbles.

Collect evidence

Save kind messages, thank-yous and wins somewhere safe. Read them when your brain says nobody cares.

Practise small risks

Take tiny, safe steps towards things RSD makes you avoid. Each one shows your brain you can survive a 'no'.

The other side of sensitivity

The same nervous system that feels rejection so deeply often brings:

Deep empathy · **A strong sense of fairness** · **Loyalty** · **Creativity** · **Noticing who's left out** · **Caring hard**

Talking about RSD

You don't have to use the word RSD. Simply sharing what helps can change a lot.



Choose a calm moment, not mid-wave | **Keep it short** | **Focus on what helps**

To a friend

"Sometimes I take short messages really hard. If I check in, it's my brain filling gaps, not me thinking you've done something wrong."

To a partner

"When you go quiet, I can assume you're upset with me. Could you let me know if you're just tired?"

To a teacher or tutor

"I learn best from feedback when it's private, and when you tell me what's working as well as what to change."

To a manager

"Could I have feedback in writing first, with a bit of time to process it before we talk it through?"

To a parent or carer

"When I get really upset after being told off, I need some space first, then a hug or a chat."

To yourself

"This feeling is real, but it isn't the whole truth. I've got through this before."

FOR SUPPORTERS

If someone shares this with you, thank them. You don't need to fix it. "Thanks for telling me. What helps most?" is a brilliant reply.

PAUSE POINT

Who would you most like to share this with? What do you most want them to understand?

For families and educators

You can't remove every rejection. You can be a place where the wound heals rather than deepens.



Try

- ✓ Connection before correction
- ✓ Keep the relationship safe: “I'm unhappy about what happened, not with you.”
- ✓ Give feedback privately, specifically and kindly
- ✓ Warn about changes and give reasons
- ✓ Believe them when they tell you how it felt
- ✓ Notice masking: 'fine at school' can still mean struggling
- ✓ Repair after conflict, every time
- ✓ Learn the RSD wave together (page 8)
- ✓ Work with the SENCo on support, adjustments or an EHCP where needed

Try to avoid

- ✗ “You're overreacting” or “Toughen up”
- ✗ Public sanctions, behaviour charts and shaming
- ✗ Sarcasm and teasing, even when meant kindly
- ✗ Comparing them with siblings or classmates
- ✗ Long lectures in the heat of the moment
- ✗ Withdrawing warmth as a consequence

IN THE CLASSROOM

Small changes make a big difference: a quiet word instead of calling out, written next steps, a signal for 'I need a break', and a trusted adult for regular check-ins.

A SCRIPT FOR REPAIR

“That got really big, didn't it? I'm sorry I raised my voice. We're okay. Shall we work out what happened together?”

PAUSE POINT

Think of one child or young person you support. What would help them feel safe enough to make mistakes around you?

PART 5 · SUPPORT AND NEXT STEPS

For partners, friends and employers

How you give feedback, and how you handle silence, can make RSD quieter or louder.

The RSD-friendly feedback recipe

1 Give a heads-up

"Nothing's wrong. Can we chat about the report at 10?"

2 Start with the relationship

"I value working with you."

3 Be specific and brief

One or two clear points, not a long list.

4 Put it in writing

Notes to read back mean less replaying.

5 Agree next steps

A clear plan turns worry into action.

6 Close the loop

"We're good." Two words that save hours of worry.

In relationships and friendships

- ✓ Avoid "We need to talk" with no context
- ✓ Say if you're quiet because you're tired
- ✓ Never use silence as a punishment
- ✓ Reassure without frustration. Needing reassurance isn't a flaw

At work

- ✓ Offer reasonable adjustments, such as written instructions and agendas
- ✓ Consider Access to Work and occupational health
- ✓ Build in regular, predictable check-ins
- ✓ Celebrate strengths and wins out loud

REMEMBER

Silence is the hardest message for RSD to read. A quick "Busy today, I'll reply properly later" takes seconds and can save someone hours of worry.

Getting more support

Asking for help is a strength, not a failure. Here's where to start.

When to reach out

- RSD is stopping you doing things you care about
- It's affecting relationships, school or work
- You feel low, anxious or hopeless much of the time
- Your shields are starting to hurt you

Who can help

- Your GP
- School SENCo or pastoral team
- College or university disability service
- Occupational health at work
- A neurodiversity-affirming therapist or coach
- Peer support groups

Approaches people find helpful

There isn't yet research on therapies for RSD itself, so these are borrowed from wider evidence. The best support is adapted for neurodivergent people and keeps you in charge.

Compassion-focused therapy | **Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)** | **DBT emotion regulation skills** | **CBT adapted for ADHD or autism** | **Trauma-informed therapy** | **Peer support** | **ADHD medication review**

If you need help now

Emergency or immediate risk	Call 999 or go to A&E
NHS 111, option 2	Urgent mental health help, 24/7 (England and Wales)
Samaritans	Call free on 116 123, any time
Shout	Text SHOUT to 85258, free, 24/7
Childline (under 19s)	Call free on 0800 1111

My RSD plan

Fill this in when you feel calm. Keep it somewhere you can find it when a wave comes.



My biggest triggers are…

I notice it first in my body when…

The story my brain often tells is…

A kinder, truer story is…

In the moment, these help me…

My safe people are…

What I want others to know…

Something kind I can say to myself…



You belong, exactly as you are.

Waves come and waves pass. You have survived every one so far.