

# ADHD & Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

**The emotional response to perceived or real failure can debilitate people with ADHD. Learn why — and how to manage these difficult feelings.**

By William Dodson, M.D.



Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD) is extreme emotional sensitivity and pain triggered by the perception — not necessarily the reality — that a person with ADHD has been rejected or criticized by people in their life.

When the emotional response associated with RSD is internalized, it can imitate full, major depression complete with suicidal ideation that comes on so fast it is often misdiagnosed as rapid cycling bipolar disorder. When this emotional response is externalized, it looks like an impressive, instantaneous rage at the person or situation responsible for causing the pain. 50% of people who are assigned court-mandated anger-management treatment have previously unrecognized ADHD.

People with RSD tend to respond to feelings of rejection or failure in two ways:

- 1. They become people pleasers.** This goal can become so dominant that the person loses sight of his or her own ambitions and goals in life.
- 2. They stop trying.** Some very bright, capable people with ADHD and RSD stop exerting effort because doing so is so anxiety-provoking.

## RSD Treatment

What can be done? Often, patients are comforted just knowing there's a name for their feelings. These options also tend to help:

**Psychotherapy** is not a guaranteed solution, as RSD episodes tend to hit suddenly and without warning. It may be worth a try, however, especially if you're dealing with other symptoms of depression or anxiety.

**Medication** is sometimes used to treat RSD. The two best options are:

- The alpha agonists guanfacine and clonidine, prescribed together. When prescribed an adequate dosage of each medication, roughly one in three people feel relief from RSD.
- Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOI), prescribed off-label. This has traditionally been the treatment of choice for RSD among experienced clinicians. It can be dramatically effective for both the attention/impulsivity component of ADHD, as well as the emotional component of RSD.

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