

# The First Step Through the Wave

## A Practical Guide to Rejection Sensitivity and ADHD

by Dr Tracy King



## **Why Understanding RSD Matters**

If you live with ADHD, you may already know what it feels like when even the smallest rejection cuts deeply. A delayed text, a raised eyebrow, or a passing comment can feel like being hit by a wave you did not see coming. That sudden rush of shame, anger, or sadness can take over your whole body.

I know this not only as a clinical psychologist with more than twenty-five years of experience, but also as someone who has ADHD myself. I have lived those moments of feeling overwhelmed by rejection and criticism, even when those around me thought the reaction made no sense and also having to mask how I feel at other times. I have also sat across from countless clients who whispered their secret fear that they were “too sensitive” or “too much.”

You are not imagining how painful this is, and you are not weird or over sensitive. Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) is real. It explains why rejection feels less like a sting and more like a tidal wave, why criticism lingers long after the words have passed, and why so many people with ADHD carry heavy burdens of shame and self-doubt.

This guide is designed to help you take the first step through the wave. It is not a replacement for therapy or for the deeper work you may choose with my mini course or coaching programme, but it will give you clarity, a few practical tools, and most importantly, the understanding that what you are experiencing has a name. Naming it is the beginning of change.

## **What Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria Really Is**

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria, or RSD, is not a formal diagnosis you will find in a psychiatric manual, but it is a term that captures a very real experience. “Dysphoria” means intense emotional discomfort or pain.

When you have ADHD, rejection does not feel like a minor setback. It feels unbearable, as if your whole sense of self has been put on trial. It can be triggered by something as small as a comment about your work, silence in a conversation, or the belief that someone is disappointed in you.

For me, it has felt like suddenly being cross-examined in court, with no time to prepare, no time to breathe, and my entire credibility at stake. And that is how many clients describe it too: overwhelming, consuming, and impossible to ignore.

People experiencing RSD often report:

- Sudden waves of shame that flood the body
- Physical sensations like a stomach drop, chest tightness, or burning heat
- Thoughts that spiral quickly from a small incident to catastrophic conclusions

- The urge to cry, lash out, or withdraw completely

It is not about being dramatic. It is about how the ADHD brain and nervous system are wired.

## **Why It Matters**

Left unrecognised, RSD can quietly shape every area of life.

- Emotionally: RSD fuels anxiety, self-doubt, and shame. The emotional storms can dominate entire days, making it difficult to concentrate or bounce back.
- Socially: RSD makes relationships feel risky. Friendships may feel fragile, family dynamics strained, and romantic relationships difficult to trust.
- Academically and professionally: RSD paralyses performance. One critical comment from a teacher or manager can derail motivation for weeks. Perfectionism and procrastination often grow from the same root: fear of rejection.
- Identity: Over time, the fear of rejection reshapes identity itself. People come to see themselves as unworthy, too much, or fundamentally flawed.

But here is the key: RSD is not a flaw in who you are. It is the way your brain and nervous system process rejection. Once you can see this clearly, compassion can take the place of shame, and new choices become possible.

## **Hidden Patterns of RSD**

How do you know RSD might be influencing your life? Here are four common patterns I see in clients and in myself.

### **The People-Pleaser**

You work tirelessly to keep everyone happy. You say yes when you want to say no. You go out of your way to avoid disappointing others. People-pleasing is an attempt to prevent rejection before it happens.

### **The Perfectionist**

You hold yourself to impossible standards, believing that if you do everything flawlessly, no one can criticise you. Perfectionism feels like a shield, but it is a heavy one that leads to burnout.

### **The Avoider**

You shrink away from risks. You hold back from opportunities, reasoning that if you never

try, you can never fail. Avoidance feels safe, but it robs you of growth and connection.

**The Reactor** You respond to rejection with visible intensity. You may cry, lash out, or withdraw completely. It is not that you want to react this way, it is that your nervous system goes into survival mode.

Most people see themselves in more than one of these patterns. Which ones feel most familiar to you?

## Your Quick-Action Toolkit

You cannot prevent rejection, but you can work with your nervous system when it happens. Here are five tools you can try today.

### 1. Name It to Tame It

When you feel the flood of shame or anger, pause and say, “This is RSD.” Naming it creates a small gap between you and the reaction, allowing space to breathe before the spiral takes over.

### 2. Anchor in the Body

Place both feet firmly on the ground. Press down until you feel the support of the floor. Take a slow inhale, then a longer exhale. This signals to the body that you are safe and helps switch off the alarm system.

### 3. Reframe the Story

Ask yourself, “What else could this mean?” A delayed message might mean someone is busy. A critical comment might mean they want to help you improve. Reminding yourself there are multiple explanations can soften the sting.

### 4. Daily Gratitude

Starting the day with three small gratitudes shifts the brain’s focus. ADHD brains often scan for rejection. Gratitude helps redirect attention to what is supportive, nurturing, and safe.

### 5. Journaling Prompt Write: “When I fear rejection, what part of me is speaking?”

Often the voice of RSD belongs to younger parts of us who learned early that rejection was dangerous. Writing helps bring compassion to those parts.



## **Creating Self-Compassion**

One of the most painful parts of RSD is the way we often attack ourselves afterwards. We say, “Why can’t I get over this? Why am I so sensitive?”

But once you understand the neuroscience of RSD, you can see that your brain is reacting faster and more intensely than most. The amygdala fires quickly, the prefrontal cortex is slow to apply the brakes, dopamine drops sharply, and the nervous system interprets rejection as danger.

This knowledge gives you permission to meet yourself with compassion. Instead of shame, you can say, “My nervous system is protecting me, even though it feels overwhelming.”

It also allows you to explain this to others. You might say, “When I react strongly to criticism, it is not because I want to. My nervous system processes rejection differently. Your patience and understanding help me regulate.”

This shifts the story in relationships. It moves the focus from blame to empathy.

## **The First Step Through the Wave**

RSD does not just create painful moments. It shapes how people with ADHD move through the world. It can make us play small, overwork ourselves, or hide our authentic selves out of fear of rejection.

But impact is not destiny. Once you can name RSD and recognise your patterns, you begin to loosen its grip. Each time you pause, breathe, and offer yourself compassion, you take another step through the wave.

## **Your Next Step**

This ebook has given you a starting point, understanding what RSD is, recognising how it shows up in your life, and learning some simple tools to create space in the moment.

But if you are ready to go deeper, to explore the science, your triggers, and the daily practices that help you build resilience, then my course *Riding the RSD Wave: ADHD and Rejection Sensitivity* is the next step for you.

It includes four modules with twelve lessons with video recordings, and a full workbook for each module along with a meditation. It is designed to help you stop being ruled by rejection and start building steadiness and confidence - all for £47 and a lifetime of use.

The next few pages offer a mini toolkit to start your inner processing.

# Your RSD Mini Toolkit

## ✨ RSD Self-Reflection Worksheet

### 1. How RSD Shows Up in My Life

Tick or circle what applies to you:

- ☐ I feel sudden floods of shame or sadness when criticised
- ☐ I replay moments of rejection long after they happen
- ☐ I avoid opportunities because the risk feels too big
- ☐ I overwork to avoid criticism
- ☐ I people-please to keep others happy
- ☐ I withdraw or shut down when I feel hurt

Other patterns I notice:

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### 2. My Common Triggers

List 3–5 situations that often trigger rejection sensitivity

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

### 3. My Body's Response

What do I feel in my body when RSD is triggered?

- ☐ Tight chest
- ☐ Knot in stomach
- ☐ Heat or flushing
- ☐ Shaking or restlessness
- ☐ Urge to cry or lash out

Other signals:

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### 4. My Quick Tools

Which tools do I want to try first?

- ☐ Naming it - "This is RSD talking"
- ☐ Anchoring in the body -pressing feet down, long exhale (count to 8)
- ☐ Reframing the story - "What else could this mean?"
- ☐ Daily gratitude practice
- ☐ Journalling

Other tools I'd like to use:

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## 5. My Compassion Statement

Complete the sentence:

“When I feel rejected, instead of criticising myself I will remind myself that...”

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## **Guided Exercises**

Here are three short, practical exercises to help get you started in riding the wave:

### **1. Grounding Through the Wave (2 minutes)**

- Sit comfortably, place your feet flat on the floor.
- Press your feet down and notice the ground supporting you.
- Take a slow inhale through your nose, then exhale longer through your mouth.
- Whisper to yourself: “This is RSD. I am safe in this moment.”
- Repeat for 3–4 breaths, noticing your body settle.

### **2. The “What Else Could This Mean?” Reframe (3–5 minutes)**

- Recall a recent moment that triggered rejection sensitivity.
- Write down your first thought (e.g. “They don’t like me”).
- Now, challenge it by writing 3 alternative explanations e.g. “They were busy,” “They didn’t see my message,” “They were tired”).
- Notice how offering multiple possibilities softens the impact.

### **3. Morning Gratitude for the ADHD Brain (5 minutes)**

- Each morning, pause before your day begins.
- Write down 3 small things you feel grateful for - they can be as simple as your coffee, sunlight, or a supportive friend.
- Speak them aloud if you can. ADHD brains thrive on stimulation hearing your own voice reinforces the practice.
- Close by setting an intention: “Today I will notice support as much as notice rejection.”

## ★ About Me

I'm Dr Tracy. I'm a clinical psychologist with more than 25 years of experience and I also live with ADHD myself. That means I don't just speak about rejection sensitivity and overwhelm from theory, I've felt those waves too.

Over the years I've worked everywhere from prisons, forensic hospitals to private practice, supporting people who felt misunderstood, burnt out, or stuck in shame. Again and again I've seen the same pattern. Your nervous system simply works differently and with the right tools, that sensitivity can become one of your greatest strengths.

I know the ache of being "too much and not enough" at the same time. And I know the relief that comes when you learn to work with your brain instead of against it. That's why I do this work. To help you move from chaos and self-doubt into clarity and self-trust.

### **Your Next Step Forward**

You've already taken the first step by naming RSD and beginning to understand how it shows up in your life. Awareness is powerful, but awareness alone isn't enough. The real transformation comes when you learn the tools, practices, and strategies to ride the waves with steadiness and confidence.

That's where I'd love to walk or swim alongside you - avoiding any sinking in the process!



## Mini-Course: Riding the RSD Wave

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria doesn't have to rule your life. In this short, powerful course you'll discover:

- ✓ The science behind RSD explained simply
- ✓ How to spot your triggers before they hijack you
- ✓ Quick, practical coping strategies that actually work
- ✓ Guided exercises and a downloadable workbook
- ✓ Video recordings you can return to again and again

This isn't about pretending rejection doesn't hurt. It's about building the skills to steady yourself when it does. Click the link below to find out more:

[Yes, I'm ready to ride the wave](#)

### 1:1 Coaching for women: Chaos to Clarity

If ADHD has left you stuck in cycles of overwhelm, burnout, and self-doubt, this is for you. In my private coaching programme, I help women move from scattered chaos into grounded clarity.

Together we'll:

- ✓ Build systems that actually fit your brain
- ✓ Turn self-criticism into self-compassion
- ✓ Find focus and flow in daily life
- ✓ Create a life that feels steadier, calmer, and authentically yours

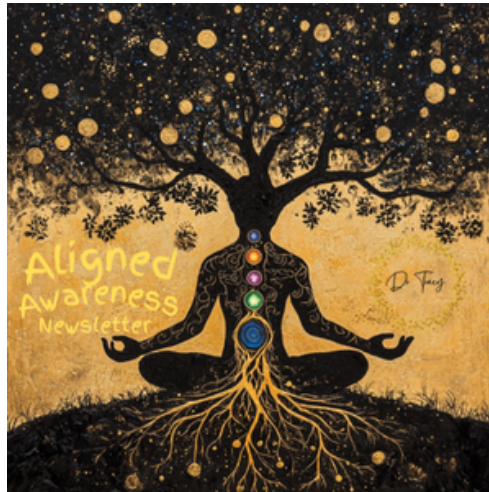
Spaces are limited. If you're ready to stop firefighting and start living with clarity, the time is now. Click the link below to find out more:

[Take me from Chaos to Clarity](#)

## Lets Stay Connected

Stepping into change can feel both exciting and vulnerable. That's why I share regular reflections, tools, and encouragement through my newsletter.

If you haven't yet, make sure you join me there it's the easiest way to stay supported and get first access to resources, workshops, and coaching spaces. Click the link below to get access to my Newsletter.



[Sign me up to receive 'Aligned Awareness'](#)

If you live with ADHD, you're 'wired to wonder', to question, to notice, to feel deeply. My blog is where I share that curiosity, weaving together lived experience, neuroscience, and practical tools for navigating ADHD. If you're ready for insights that validate your struggles and celebrate your strengths, join me. Subscribe (free or paid at £5 a month - offers extra posts, longer access and more resources) and let's explore what it means to turn sensitivity into strength, and chaos into clarity.



Click below to explore more:

[Let me in I'm Wired to Wonder](#)