

Rejection sensitivity
Therapeutic alliance
development and intervention

Workshop ESSPD Riga June 25

Prof. Dr. Babette Renneberg
Prof. Dr. Charlotte Rosenbach
Freie Universität Berlin
Health and Medical University Erfurt

Basic need for belonging

Need met:

- Safety
- Self-confidence
- Control
- Meaningful existence
- health

Need **not** met:

- Grief
- Pain
- Hopelessness
- Low self-esteem
- Isolation

Definition of Ostracism according to Kipling Williams (2007)

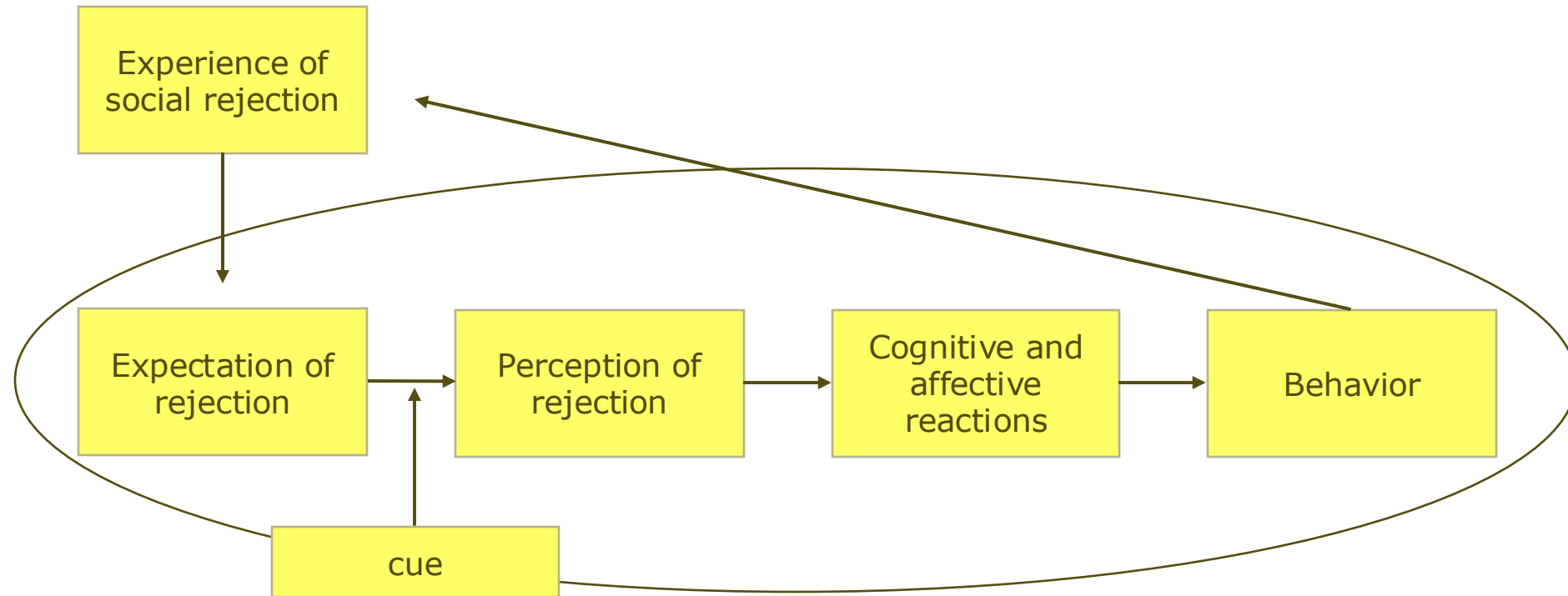
Intentional exclusion and/or ignoring of another person and/or group

or

Subjective perception and interpretation of such behavior by an individual, even if the exclusion was not intended



Rejection Sensitivity



Model by Levy, Ayduk, Downey, & Leary, 2001; p. 252

Rejection Sensitivity is...

- **Rejection sensitivity** is a cognitive–affective trait characterized by:
 - **Anxious expectation,**
 - **Readiness to perceive,** and
 - **Intense reaction** to potential rejection.
- People with high rejection sensitivity tend to **interpret ambiguous social cues as rejection**, even when none is intended.
- This can lead to heightened emotional responses (e.g., anger, sadness, withdrawal) and problematic behavior in relationships.

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ, RSQ9, CRSQ)

The items below describe situations in which people sometimes ask things of others.
For each item, **imagine that you are in the situation, and then answer the questions that follow it.**

1. You ask your parents or another family member for a loan to help you through a difficult financial time.

How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your family would want to help you?	very unconcerned					very concerned
	1	2	3	4	5	6
I would expect that they would agree to help as much as they can.	very unlikely					very likely
	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. You approach a close friend to talk after doing or saying something that seriously upset him/her.

How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would want to talk with you?	very unconcerned					very concerned
	1	2	3	4	5	6
I would expect that he/she would want to talk with me to try to work things out.	very unlikely					very likely
	1	2	3	4	5	6



Fear of rejection

Expectation of rejection

RSQ

Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy
Clin. Psychol. Psychother. 18, 275–283 (2011)
Published online 25 May 2010 in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com). DOI: 10.1002/cpp.705

Rejection Sensitivity and Borderline Personality Disorder

Katja Staebler,¹ Esther Helbing,² Charlotte Rosenbach³ and Babette Renneberg^{3*}

¹Department of Psychology, University of Heidelberg, Germany

²Department of Psychology, University of Frankfurt, Germany

³Department of Psychology, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

**Ein effizienterer Weg um Zurückweisungs-
empfindlichkeit zu erfassen –
Entwicklung einer Kurzversion des Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaires (RSQ)**

Autoren: Julian Schulze¹, Lea Gutz², Babette Renneberg¹

International Journal of Developmental Science 15 (2021) 29–37
DOI 10.3233/DEV-210312
IOS Press

Invited Paper

Psychometric Properties of the German Version of the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ)

Charlotte Rosenbach*

Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

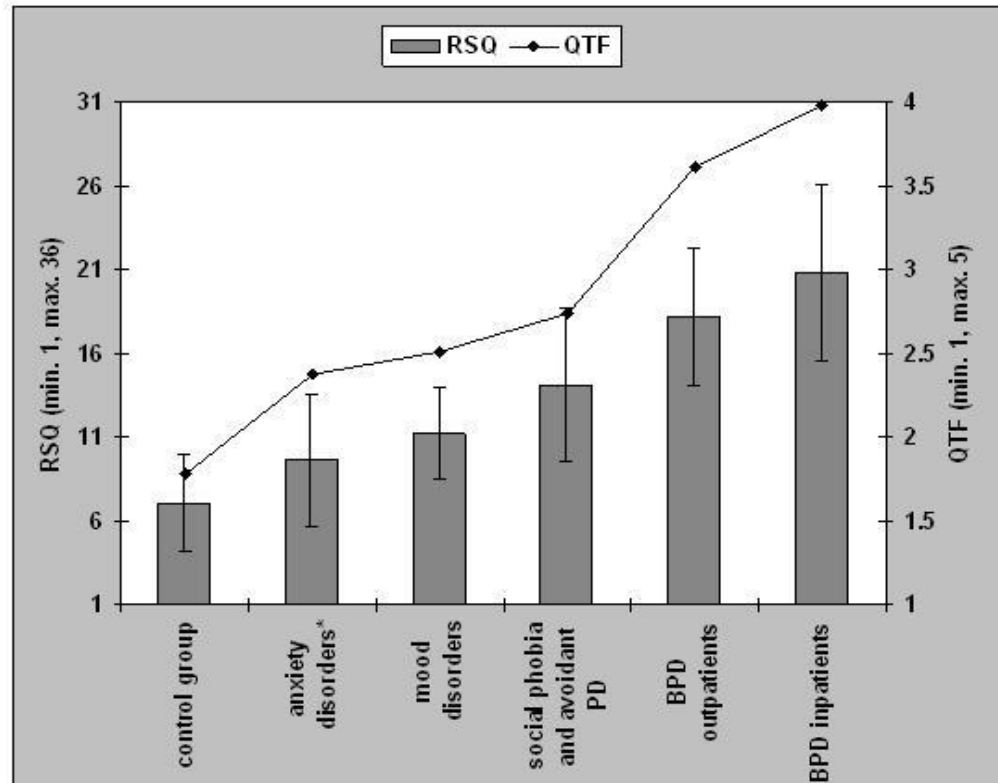
Babette Renneberg

Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Herbert Scheithauer

Department of Education and Psychology, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

RSQ in clinical samples



Staebler et al., 2011

- Anxiety
- Depression
- BPD
- Body dysmorphic disorder
- Aggression

Clinical Psychology Review 57 (2017) 59–74

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Clinical Psychology Review

ELSEVIER journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/clinppsychrev

Review

Associations between rejection sensitivity and mental health outcomes: A meta-analytic review

Shuling Gao^{a,b}, Mark Assink^c, Andrea Cipriani^d, Kangguang Lin^{a,b,*}

^a Department of Affective Disorders, The Affiliated Brain Hospital of Guangzhou Medical University, Guangzhou Huai Hospital, Guangzhou, China
^b Laboratory of Emotion and Cognition, The Affiliated Brain Hospital of Guangzhou Medical University, Guangzhou Huai Hospital, Guangzhou, China
^c Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
^d Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, Oxford OX3 7JX, UK

Review Manuscript

Associations Between Rejection Sensitivity, Aggression, and Victimization: A Meta-Analytic Review

Shuling Gao¹, Mark Assink², Tinting Liu³, Ko Ling Chan⁴, and Patrick Ip⁵

TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE
2021, Vol. 22(1) 125–135
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1524838019833005
journals.sagepub.com/home/tva
SAGE

Perception

Cyberball



Welcome to Cyberball, the Interactive Ball-Tossing Game Used for Mental Visualisation!

In the upcoming experiment, we test the effects of practising mental visualisation on task performance. Thus, we need you to practice your mental visualisation skills. We have found that the best way to do this is to have you play an on-line ball tossing game with other participants who are logged on at the same time.

In a few moments, you will be playing a ball tossing game with other students over our network. The game is very simple. When the ball is tossed to you, simply click on the name of the player you want to throw it to. When the game is over, the experimenter will give you additional instructions.

What is important is not your ball tossing performance, but that you **MENTALLY VISUALISE** the entire experience. Imagine what the others look like. What sort of people are they? Where are you playing? Is it warm and sunny or cold and rainy? Create in your mind a complete mental picture of what might be going on if you were playing this game in real life.

Okay, ready to begin? Please click on the following link to begin: [Start Playing Now](#)

Results

- 30 patients with BPD were compared with 30 control subjects
- Both groups showed negative reactions after social exclusion
- Patients with BPD felt excluded even though they were included
 - Bias of social perception - for rejection
- also a problem in chronic depression

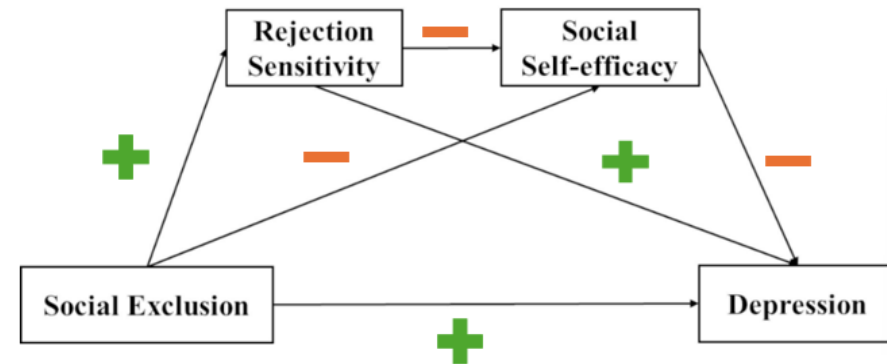
*Renneberg et al., 2011; Gutz et al., 2015;
Seidl et al., 2020*

RS and Depression

Beck's cognitive model of depression (Beck, 1983):

- Negative life events lead to depression through negative cognition

A similar connection has been found in Chinese students:



Modified figure from Niu et al. (2023)

-> RS contributes to the development of depression as the dysfunctional cognition

-> in turn, depression predicts RS -> vicious cycle (Beeson et al., 2020)

RS and Depression

- Low self-esteem predicts higher RS, which subsequently leads to an increase of depression and loneliness (Zhou et al., 2020)

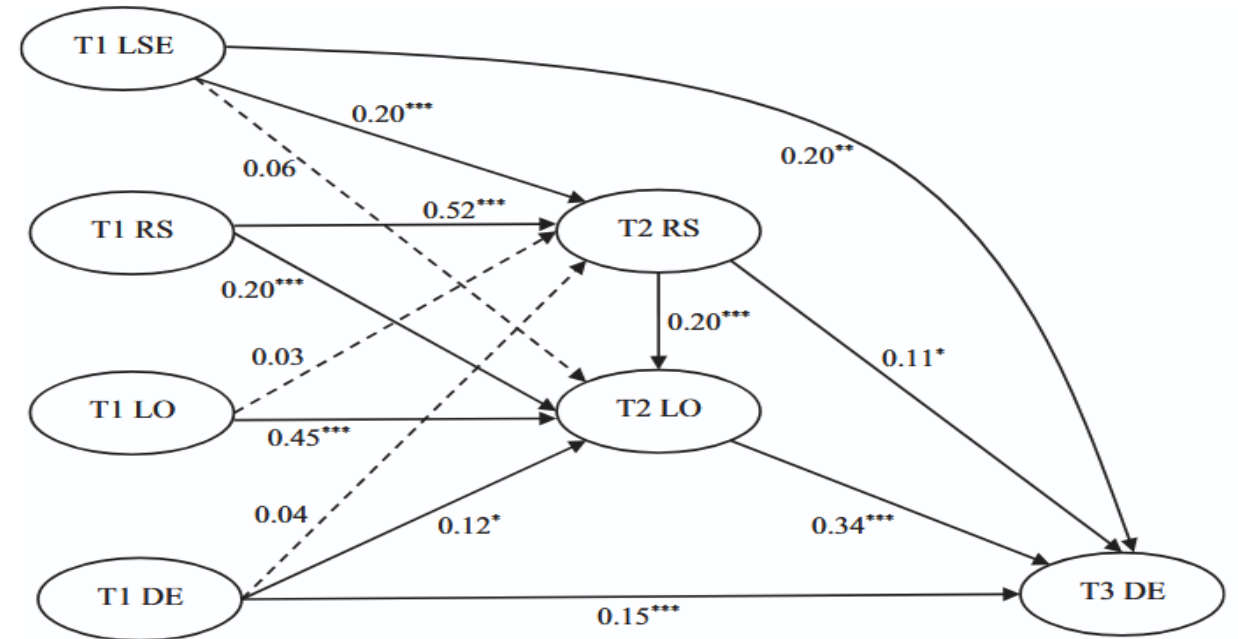


Figure 1. Structural equation model with standardized parameters estimates. *Note.* T1 = Time 1, T2 = Time 2, T3 = Time 3, LSE = low self-esteem, RS = rejection sensitivity, LO = loneliness, DE = depression. For simplicity, the observed variables are not presented in the figure. All variables' loadings are ranging from 0.59 to 0.86. And age, gender, and SES are entered as control variables on all main variables. These control variables are not presented in the figure for clarity. Solid lines mean the path coefficients are significant, while dotted lines mean the path coefficients are not significant. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure by Zhou et al.
(2020)

RS and Social Anxiety

- RS is a risk factor for social anxiety throughout adolescence (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2016)
- -> People with high RS pay greater attention to potential threat in social interactions, which makes them more vulnerable for social anxiety
- Loneliness and low self-esteem mediate this connection (Lin & Fan, 2023)

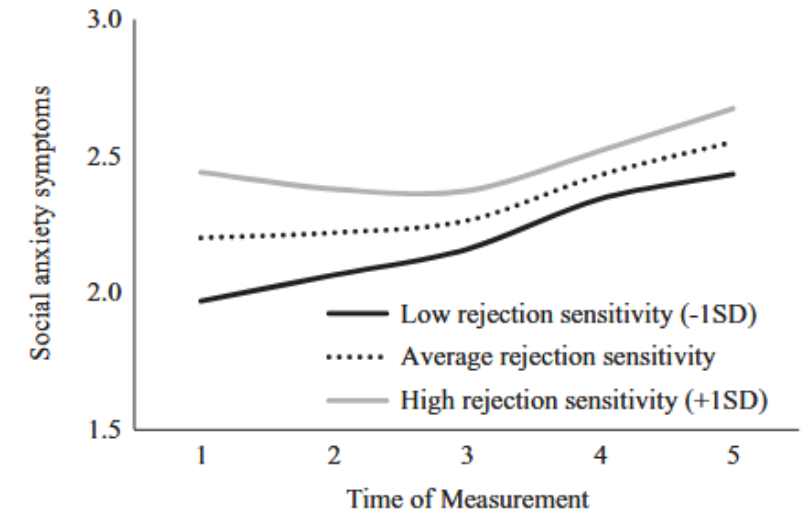


Figure by Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2016)

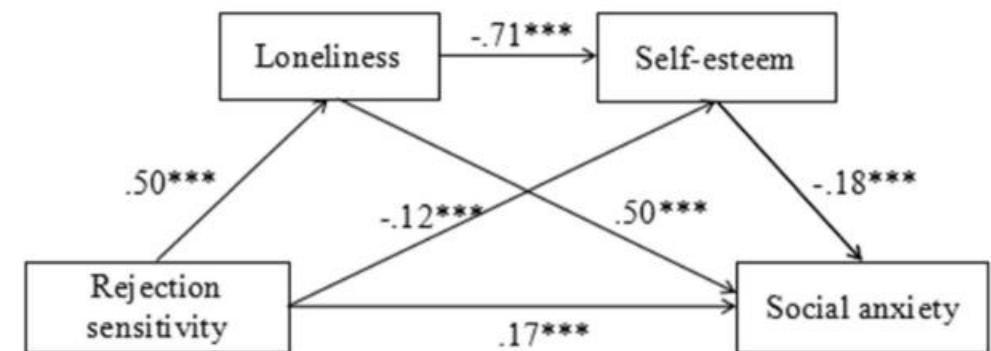


Figure by Lin & Fan (2023)

Suicidality and Selfharm

- A strong network connection has been found between RS and the suicidal ideation of college students, mediated by low confidence (He et al., 2025)
- RS is positively correlated with non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) (Zhao et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2021)
- Factors like low self-compassion and poor emotion regulation mediate the relationship between RS and NSSI (Brausch et al., 2022)



ADHD and „*Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria*“

- RSD is a term created by William Dodson and has become quite popular on ADHD self-help forums and social media (Adhspedia, 2023)
- Dodson describes RSD as an unbearable pain following rejection and sees it as part of the emotional dysregulation diagnosis criteria of ADHD
- RSD is said to be genetically and neurologically determined, and only treatable with medications
- However, Dodson has never scientifically proven his theory
- RSD is NOT rejection sensitivity

New Insights Into Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD) is one manifestation of emotional dysregulation, a common but misunderstood and under-researched symptom of ADHD in adults. Individuals with RSD feel “unbearable” pain as a result of perceived or actual rejection, teasing, or criticism that is not alleviated with cognitive or dialectical behavior therapy.



By William Dodson, M.D., F-APA | Updated on May 9, 2025

Rejection Sensitivity in Psychotherapy



ADHD and Rejection Sensitivity

- ADHD correlates moderately with RS ($r=.46$, $p < .01$) (Müller et al., 2024)
- both higher ADHD symptoms and higher RS reduce levels of well-being, creative and executive functioning, self-control, resilience, and the ability to savor positive experiences



Other Associations with RS

- Narcissistic Personality Disorder (Di Pierro et al., 2022; Poggi et al., 2019)
 - Vulnerable narcissists (VN) have higher expectations of rejection than grandiose narcissists (GN)
 - VN react to rejection with social withdrawal
 - GN react to rejection with aggressive outbursts
- Autism (Lin et al., 2022; Gurbuz et al., 2024)
 - Autistic traits heighten RS, which leads to depression and anxiety
 - Autistics might anticipate more rejection because of early rejection experiences
- Body Dysmorphic Disorder (Saylan & Soyyiğit, 2024; Schmidt & Martin, 2019)
 - RS in regards of their appearance -> appearance rejection sensitivity (ARS)
 - Similar connection for men and woman
 - RS plays a significant role in the severity of the BDD symptoms



High rejection sensitivity

Implications for...

Therapeutic alliance

Therapeutic interventions

Intervention

1. Psychoeducation
2. Explore and understand the individual situation and interpretation from the patients' perspective
3. Cognitive restructuring → finding an alternative explanation
4. Behavioral experiments

→ Practicing alternative behaviors in response to perceived rejection

Exercise: exploration and explanation

Patient reports a situation at work:

Every afternoon, all colleagues go for coffee. She is never asked to join.

She then “buries” herself at her computer and pretends to be invisible.

She feels that none of the colleagues likes her and that she is basically “invisible.”

In pairs: Explore the situation and behavior in detail and develop alternative explanatory models.

20 Minutes

- What was helpful?
- Was did not feel helpful?

Therapeutic Alliance Building

Consider patients' high rejection sensitivity during relationship ruptures

- Self-reflection on own therapeutic behavior
- Encourage patients to report perceived rejection by therapist
- Consider RS as a reason for rupture

Vignette: Therapist Redirects the Conversation

Context: The patient is discussing a romantic relationship in obsessive detail, and the therapist gently redirects the conversation to explore emotional patterns.

Reaction: The patient says: “You don’t think what I feel matters. Maybe I’m just too much for you - as I am always too much for others.”

→ Deal with this!

20 Minutes

Intervention: **experienced** rejection

1. Explore behavior and cognitions
2. Explore goals
3. Enhance acceptance
4. Find alternative ways to achieve goals

Implications for practice

1. Therapeutic relationship

- Knowledge of processing social stimuli increases understanding of patient behavior
- Use “misunderstandings” directly
- Pay attention to non-verbal behavior

2. Therapeutic interventions

- Psychoeducation about biased perception and the processing of social stimuli
- Raising awareness of rejection as a trigger for aversive emotions
- Feeling of "being rejected" ≠ Reality
- Practicing perceiving positive aspects AND being able to evaluate and correct the interpretation of the situation
- **Reducing rejection expectancy** by addressing dysfunctional beliefs/schemas

Sources

- Beck, A. T. (1983). Cognitive therapy of depression: New perspectives. In P. J. Clayton & J. E. Barrett(Eds.), *Treatment of depression: Old controversies and new approaches* (pp. 265–290). New York, NY: Raven Press.
- *Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria* (2023, March) Adhspedia. https://www.adhspedia.de/wiki/Rejection_Sensitive_Dysphoria#cite_note-dodson-1
- Seidl, E., Padberg, F., Bauriedl-Schmidt, C., Albert, A., Daltrozzo, T., Hall, J., Renneberg, B., Seidl, O., & Jobst, A. (2020). Response to ostracism in patients with chronic depression, episodic depression and borderline personality disorder a study using Cyberball. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 260*, 254–262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.09.021>
- Niu, G., Shi, X., Yao, L., Yang, W., Jin, S., & Xu, L. (2023). Social Exclusion and Depression among undergraduate students: The mediating roles of rejection sensitivity and social self-efficacy. *Current Psychology, 42*(28), 24198–24207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03318-1>
- Beeson, C. M. L., Brittain, H., & Vaillancourt, T. (2020). The Temporal Precedence of Peer Rejection, Rejection Sensitivity, Depression, and Aggression Across Adolescence. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development, 51*(5), 781–791. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-020-01008-2>
- Zhou, J., Li, X., Tian, L., & Huebner, E. S. (2020). Longitudinal association between low self-esteem and depression in early adolescents: The role of rejection sensitivity and loneliness. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 93*(1), 54–71. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12207>
- Foxhall, M., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., & Button, K. (2019). The link between rejection sensitivity and borderline personality disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology, 58*(3), 289–326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12216>
- Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., Gardner, A. A., Hawes, T., Masters, M. R., Waters, A. M., & Farrell, L. J. (2021). Rejection sensitivity and the development of social anxiety symptoms during adolescence: A five-year longitudinal study. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 45*(3), 204–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025421995921>
- Lin, Y., & Fan, Z. (2023). The relationship between rejection sensitivity and social anxiety among Chinese college students: The mediating roles of loneliness and self-esteem. *Current Psychology, 42*(15), 12439–12448. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02443-7>
- He, Y., Yang, T., He, C., Zhang, Y., Yang, H., Huang, S., Liu, J., Li, X., Xu, T., & Wu, S. (2025). The relationship between college students' Suicidal ideation and rejection sensitivity: A network analysis. *BMC Public Health, 25*(1), 343. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-21451-x>
- Zhao, J., Li, A., Li, K., & Zhao, F. (2024). How Is Rejection Sensitivity Linked to Non-Suicidal Self-Injury? Exploring Social Anxiety and Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy as Explanatory Processes in a Longitudinal Study of Chinese Adolescents. *Behavioral Sciences, 14*(10), 943. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14100943>

Sources

- Jiang, Y., Ren, Y., Liu, T., & You, J. (2021). Rejection sensitivity and adolescent non-suicidal self-injury: Mediation through depressive symptoms and moderation by fear of self-compassion. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 94(S2), 481–496. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12293>
- Brausch, A. M., Clapham, R. B., & Littlefield, A. K. (2022). Identifying Specific Emotion Regulation Deficits that Associate with Nonsuicidal Self-injury and Suicide Ideation in Adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(3), 556–569. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01525-w>
- Müller, V., Mellor, D., & Pikó, B. F. (2024). Associations Between ADHD Symptoms and Rejection Sensitivity in College Students: Exploring a Path Model With Indicators of Mental Well-Being. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 39(4), 223–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09388982241271511>
- Di Pierro, R., Amelio, S., Macca, M., Madeddu, F., & Di Sarno, M. (2022). What If I Feel Rejected? Borderline Personality, Pathological Narcissism, and Social Rejection in Daily Life. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 36(5), 559–582. <https://doi.org/10.1521/pedi.2022.36.5.559>
- Di Pierro, R., Amelio, S., Macca, M., Madeddu, F., & Di Sarno, M. (2022). What If I Feel Rejected? Borderline Personality, Pathological Narcissism, and Social Rejection in Daily Life. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 36(5), 559–582. <https://doi.org/10.1521/pedi.2022.36.5.559>
- Lin, X., Zhuo, S., Liu, Z., Fan, J., & Peng, W. (2022). Autistic traits heighten sensitivity to rejection-induced social pain. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1517(1), 286–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14880>
- Gurbuz, E., Riby, D. M., South, M., & Hanley, M. (2024). Associations between autistic traits, depression, social anxiety and social rejection in autistic and non-autistic adults. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), 9065. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-59532-3>
- Saylan, E., & Soygiğit, V. (2024). Body image among adolescents: What is its relationship with rejection sensitivity and self-efficacy? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 29(2), 479–492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591045231188411>
- Schmidt, J., & Martin, A. (2019). Appearance Teasing and Mental Health: Gender Differences and Mediation Effects of Appearance-Based Rejection Sensitivity and Dysmorphic Concerns. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 579. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00579>
- Dodson, W. (2025, January 14) *New Insights Into Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria*. ADDitude. <https://www.additudemag.com/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria-adhd-emotional-dysregulation/>