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Why Am I So Overly Emotional?

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D.



More than half of people with ADHD find it hard to regulate their emotions, according to research. Irritability, angry outbursts, rejection sensitivity, and other intense emotions define the ADHD experience — at least in part — for many. Genetics and biology are partly responsible and contribute to a recipe for [emotional dysregulation](#) — reacting too intensely, too impulsively, and out of proportion to the situation at hand.

This emotional intensity takes a toll on relationships with friends, co-workers, family, and romantic partners. On the positive side, it can make people with ADHD more caring, more loving, and more passionate about things that interest them. On the negative side, [ADHD emotionality](#) makes people more likely to overreact, in ways that can be destructive. The reason this happens is no mystery: Emotional people react emotionally. It becomes a problem when it happens too frequently and too intensely.

Below are profiles of highly emotional individuals with [ADHD and relationship struggles](#). Learn how they managed to address challenges like rejection sensitivity, outbursts, and more.

Overly Emotional with ADHD: Real-Life Stories

Rejection Sensitivity

“I don’t take criticism well,” Pauline says. She always feels “on edge” about being criticized. When it happens, she says, “I feel overwhelmed emotionally, so I panic and shut down.”

Being hypersensitive to criticism (real or imagined) leaves Pauline in a high state of [anxiety](#), which is bad enough. Beyond that, it damages her relationship with her husband, Brian, because she withdraws from him. “She stops communicating,” Brian says. When Pauline withdraws, he feels neglected. It kills emotional intimacy and trust, and it is painful for both of them.

How did the couple solve the problem? Pauline acknowledged her [rejection sensitivity](#) in conversations with Brian. She discussed her feelings in the moment and did not hide them. This also helped Brian connect with her feelings instead of being shut out. It gave him a chance to explain himself better when Pauline was feeling criticized, because very often he was not being critical. This helped her to keep things in perspective, and to get reassurance from Brian that she was not failing in some way.

This understanding and support from Brian helped Pauline get a better handle on her overreaction. Dealing with the rejection sensitivity openly gave this couple a foundation for healthy communication and a happier relationship.

Temper Flares and Angry Outbursts

Ethan [loses his temper](#) once or twice a week. It happens more often at home, with his wife and children, and sometimes at work. Luckily for Ethan, he owns his own business. Otherwise, his outbursts would have gotten him fired long ago.

Ethan often gets frustrated and angry when someone does not do something the right way. “I react too quickly rather than talk it through,” he explains. He has tried many times to tone down his anger, but “I don’t know where the off switch is.”

Ethan’s family had to put up with his frequent [outbursts](#), although they knew he was not a mean person. He heated up quickly but also calmed down quickly, all within a matter of a few minutes. Even so, it made them feel unsafe around him. After several

discussions, his wife insisted that he seek professional help. Ethan agreed it was a problem.

The most helpful treatment was a combination of [ADHD medication](#) and behavior therapy. The medication helped moderate his high levels of emotion. The behavior therapy helped him identify the physical and emotional anger cues, so that he could catch himself and defuse the anger before it became an outburst. With treatment, Ethan found the “switch” for better temper control.

Impatience and Pushy Demands

Aiden has no patience for unresolved issues and drawn-out discussions. He needs answers and wants things settled — now. If he’s having an argument with his partner, and his partner wishes to end the discussion and walks away, Aiden follows him into the next room to continue the conversation.

“I pick on something and I can’t let go,” Aiden says. He knows that this is inconsiderate to his partner, but “for the life of me, I can’t help it.” This leaves his partner feeling angry and resentful.

Aiden understands that his need for immediate gratification is part of his ADHD biology and goes back to his childhood. He threw [tantrums](#) in the toy store and the grocery store. Through the years, these behaviors damaged relationships. It never happens in a work relationship because the boundaries there are clear, and the consequences can be severe. Work relationships are not as meaningful to him.

Aiden ultimately managed his pushy behavior by taking more control of his emotions and his impulsivity. He made a strong commitment to respect the wishes of his partner and other people in his life. No meant no — a good rule to live by. He also put in practice a five-second rule when he felt himself getting impatient or pushy. Before he allowed himself to say anything, he counted to five and considered the consequence of his behavior. It was not foolproof, but it helped.

Overly Emotional: 5 Strategies for Managing Intense ADHD Feelings

- Understand the biology of ADHD and [emotional dysregulation](#). Managing the biology is most helpful. Criticizing the behavior is never helpful.
- The person with [ADHD](#) is always responsible for managing his or her behavior. ADHD should never be used as an excuse. Never. Ever. Period.

- Self-awareness and self-monitoring can manage emotional over-reaction at the behavioral level. [Therapy and coaching](#) can help.
- Medication and exercise modulate ADHD biology and the tendency to overreact.
- Treat co-existing conditions — anxiety, mood disorders, substance use, and stress disorders. These complicate emotional self-regulation when they are present.

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About The Author

Peter Jaksa, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years' experience working with children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD. Dr. Jaksa is the author of numerous articles and columns about ADHD, including articles published in **ADDitude Magazine**, **Attention Magazine**, **Organize Magazine**, and **FOCUS**. He has provided interviews to national publications and news organizations including the **Wall Street Journal**, **CNN**, **U.S. News & World Report**, **Chicago Tribune**, and **Men's Health Magazine**. He has presented at national conferences to health care professionals, educators, and the general public. Dr. Jaksa is a contributing writer for **ADDitude Magazine** and a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. He is the author of *Life With ADHD* and co-author of *Real People, Real ADHD*.