



*"There's nothing like rejection to make you take an inventory of yourself."*

- James Lee Burke, American author

## Getting to the Heart of Rejection

Rejection, whether it is real or perceived, is hard to take.

Research suggests that people tend to react strongly to rejection because they are biologically and psychologically wired to avoid getting their feelings hurt. Human beings have developed biopsychological mechanisms over time to encourage acceptance and improve their evolutionary fitness, according to an article by Mark Leary, Ph.D. (Refer to [Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience](#).)

Dr. Leary reports on neuroscientific investigations that have found certain regions of the brain are associated with both rejection behaviors and physical pain, which may help explain why people say they are "hurt" when they feel devalued or rejected.

### Relational Values

In his article on emotional responses to interpersonal rejection, Dr. Leary describes a system, or "sociometer," that people use to monitor social environments for indicators of relational values. He cites [a study of 164 people who reported hurtful episodes](#) in which they felt one or more people did not sufficiently value their relationship.

Indications of low relational value can range from explicit rejection, such as a romantic breakup, getting fired or being expelled from a group, to subtle expressions of disinterest such as low responsiveness (e.g., waiting for an email, text or phone call) or distant body language. While people often consciously refrain from criticizing those they love because they know it will hurt them, they also know exactly what to say to cause them pain.

In the hurtful feelings study, criticism was the most common cause of feeling rejected. People in this study also reported being hurt by betrayal, ignoring or avoiding, exclusion, ostracism or abandonment. Common emotional reactions to real or perceived rejection include jealousy, loneliness, shame, guilt, social anxiety and embarrassment.

Any of these emotions and related reactions, such as sadness or anger, can have an impact on physical and mental health and personal safety. For example, they may contribute to hypertension, sleeplessness, fatigue, loss of appetite, headache, anxiety, depression, lack of concentration or mood swings.

### Compounding Misery

When it comes to rejection, why do some people compound their misery by mistakenly assuming that others find them unlikable or unworthy of attention when the opposite is true? When people lack self-esteem, they may tend to assume that others are thinking negatively about them, even when there's no evidence to support this belief. Fear of rejection or a desire for validation may also be driving factors.

There are a number of reasons why this occurs. For example, adults who anticipate rejection may have experienced adverse events and insecure attachment to caregivers during childhood, suffer from post-traumatic stress due to trauma, or have mental health conditions that affect rational thought processes. Sometimes negative experiences, such as bullying, can lead individuals to be hypersensitive to any type of criticism, causing them to resist engagement in social interactions.

People in emotionally abusive relationships are vulnerable when they are repeatedly told they are to blame, deserve contempt, or that no one else will want them or treat them better. (This is a form of [gaslighting](#).) In such cases, it may be necessary to establish clear boundaries to create a sense of safety, or to heal or end a toxic relationship.

There are also times when “unconscious storytelling” may be linked to feelings of rejection, anger or resentment. For example, you may unconsciously create a narrative around another person’s behavior based on your perceptions, not on what the other person has told you they are actually thinking or feeling. By recognizing and interpreting these unconscious narratives, therapists say it’s possible to gain insights into your own psychology and better understand the motivations and behaviors of others.

## Workplace Situations

There are laws that are intended to protect employees from harassment, discrimination and other employment rights violations. However, assumptions about your own or a co-worker’s worthiness typically do not involve potential violations of these laws.

In the workplace, as in other aspects of life, self-awareness is helpful. Upon reflection, you may realize that your colleagues are too preoccupied with their own work, personal life, accomplishments, challenges, and possibly their own feelings of rejection, to dwell on any shortcomings you may have. Chances are good that they accept you as you are. Conversely, you may notice that you are judging colleagues’ behaviors without a full understanding of their situation.

## What Can You Do?

Here are some suggestions to help you navigate perceived rejection in the workplace:

1. Examine your own behaviors and actions that may be contributing to negative perceptions.
2. Seek feedback on how you are perceived and use it for self-improvement without defensiveness.
3. Avoid making social comparisons that can lead to assumptions about what others are thinking.
4. Try not to project your critical thoughts onto others and expect co-workers to take your side.
5. Make an effort to understand cultural backgrounds, social norms and differences.
6. Practice reflective listening; this may involve expressing compassion and empathy for co-workers.
7. Do not engage in “mind reading” or convince yourself that you know what others are thinking.
8. Take steps to clear up misunderstandings and close communication gaps.
9. Mirror the values that you observe and consider important as an employee.
10. Take ownership for your actions, be collaborative, flexible and willing to try new things.

If you find it challenging to take these steps, consider seeking the help of a behavioral health professional, mentor or coach who can provide guidance and support on underlying causes of negative perceptions and overcoming feelings of rejection. When you are able to accept yourself as you are, including your imperfections, you can build self-confidence and reduce the need for external validation.

Remember, *nobody* is perfect.