Gaining Control Over ADHD Hypersensitivity

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Emotional Sensitivity and Hypersensitivity

Attention deficit disorders and volatile emotions go hand in hand. Just like hyperactivity, people with ADHD find that they lose emotional control suddenly and often, which can make daily life even more challenging.

In fact, emotional disruptions are the most significant impairments of ADHD, and can lead to deep problems with self-image and social interaction.

Hypersensitivity is a separate condition (believed to be genetic and present since birth), though it often occurs with ADHD. It is estimated that up to 20% of the general population is hypersensitive to physical and emotional stimuli, but that number is much higher among ADHD patients.

Understanding how your emotional volatility and hypersensitivity interacts with your ADHD, and how to make use of it, is an important first step toward a more comfortable daily life.

How Hypersensitivity Manifests in ADHD

In some ways, emotional sensitivity and ADHD mood swings are similar to bipolar disorder because they are fast and severe, and even relatively benign situations can bring about a reaction. You may find that a sad commercial causes a crying fit and feeling of deep sadness, or an unexpected piece of good news can send you into hysterics. It may not happen all the time, but when your emotions get the better of you, you can feel helpless, frantic, and alienated from the people around you.

Your particular reactions will surely depend on your own unique personality, but sensitive emotional patterns could also be tied to certain aspects of your ADHD:

- **Impulsiveness.** ADHD people tend to be very impulsive, and that may contribute to their emotional hypersensitivity. Impulsive behavior comes in the form of snap decisions, which can interfere with your daily obligations; impulsive emotional reactions come from an inability to inhibit and process your strong feelings, and can wreak havoc on your social interactions. It follows that if you can reign in your impulses, you can reduce a good deal of your daily stress.

- **Difficulty focusing.** Problems with focus may be interfering with your emotional restraint – and how deeply you experience your emotions. Experts suggest that it often takes much longer for a person with ADHD to calm down than it would for someone without an attention deficit disorder, since they cannot easily divert their attention to other things, and instead get trapped in the emotional reaction. That means your moods are more intense, and they can last all day.
- **High expectations.** Many people living with ADHD have unrealistically high expectations of themselves, which can lead to a cycle of stress, and eventually, an emotional outburst. It’s natural to compare yourself to other people in your life, but since your brain operates differently in certain ways, it’s unfair to expect

your goals and responsibilities to match.
- **Hormonal shifts.** Hormones can cause drastic changes in mood and perception, and when they combine with the hypersensitivity of ADHD, it can be especially difficult to control your reactions. Times of hormonal change (like puberty or menstruation) can be particularly challenging.

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Steps to Better Emotional Control

You may not be able to eradicate your hypersensitivity, but you can learn to counter and control your emotional reactions with some healthy approaches:

Plan for tough times. Have a plan to deal with hormonal phases, stressful triggers, and moments when you're hyper-focused and can't handle being interrupted. Give yourself extra breathing room by taking on fewer responsibilities, and let people know if you don't want to be disturbed. Being proactive now can save you from blowing up later, and that will save your social graces.

Set boundaries. You need some boundaries to protect against overwhelming situations. Don't expose yourself to negativity for too long, whether that's in the form of the evening news or antagonizing people. Walk away from situations at the first sign of emotional flare-up, and have a comfortable place to go for some peace of mind.

Honor your feelings. While it's important to learn to restrict your outbursts, try not to deny yourself your genuine feelings. Whether you're feeling angry, sad, or anxious, don't push it down and ignore it – that will almost certainly make it worse. Instead, think about what made you feel this way, and how you can consciously help yourself out of the rut.

Improve your self-care. Helping yourself means being aware of what your body and mind really needs. One way to stay on an even keel is to exercise regularly, and balance that with some quiet meditation. Burning off energy is a quick way to regulate mood, while your meditative practice is a long-term solution for a happy, confident outlook and fewer ADHD symptoms.

Positive thinking and relaxation exercises are always useful, but sometimes you have to physically block out the extra stimuli. Try to carry a music device with headphones, or a simple set of earplugs to avoid sensory overload. Whatever helps you cope best belongs in your daily routine.

Using your Sensitivity in Positive Ways

Although hypersensitivity can frustrate your life, it can also help you to realize your full potential. First, you have to find a way to live in harmony with your hypersensitivity: choose situations and approaches that suit your personality and temperament, and avoid uncomfortable spots. Don't make life more difficult for yourself – learn to say "no".

Creativity, deep perception, and empathy come naturally to hypersensitive people, and those can be extremely helpful for socializing and building meaningful relationships. However, in order for these traits to shine through, you have to give your ADHD mind the time and space in needs. That may mean doing less in the evenings, taking a solo lunch, and working in regular naps to prepare for stimulating situations. Pause for reflection regularly, and give yourself extra time to process the events of the day.