

# Perfectionism – Reflection notes guided by Gen AI.

When Autism and ADHD (often referred to as AuDHD) intersect with Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD), perfectionism stops being a personality trait or a simple desire for quality. Instead, it acts as a **survival mechanism**—a highly taxing emotional shield used to protect against the excruciating pain of perceived failure or criticism.

**Masking pressure** — years of learning that natural behavior is "wrong" trains a hypervigilance about performance. Perfectionism can become a survival strategy: if everything is flawless, maybe no one will notice I'm different.

**All-or-nothing thinking** — if it can't be done perfectly, the brain resists starting at all. This produces procrastination that looks like laziness but is actually performance anxiety.

**Shame history** — a lifetime of forgotten tasks, failed follow-through, and being told you're not trying hard enough creates a deep well of shame. Perfectionism becomes armour against more failure.

**The perfectionism-RSD loop** — perfectionism raises the stakes of every task (it must be perfect), while RSD makes imperfection feel catastrophic. The emotional response to mistakes isn't disappointment — it's devastation. This loop is self-reinforcing and very hard to exit.

**Paralysis with self-attack** — ADHD makes starting hard, ASD makes pivoting or abandoning hard, and RSD punishes the resulting failure with intense shame. The person gets stuck, can't move, then feels terrible about being stuck.

**Masking exhaustion** — autistic masking is already cognitively expensive. When driven by RSD (fear of social rejection) and held to a perfectionist standard, it becomes completely unsustainable. Burnout is a common endpoint.

**The "Relief vs. Pride" Trap:** When you complete a task perfectly, you rarely feel pride or joy. Instead, you just feel a fleeting sense of *relief* that you survived the threat. This is immediately followed by the fear that you've just raised the bar for next time and will eventually be "found out" (Imposter Syndrome).

Effects:

## 1. Chronic Avoidance and Paralysis

If a task cannot be guaranteed to be done perfectly, the risk of failure is too high to even begin. What often looks like ADHD executive dysfunction or "laziness" to the outside world is actually RSD-driven paralysis. The individual might abandon hobbies, avoid applying for jobs, or procrastinate heavily because starting a task means risking a flawed outcome.

## 2. Burnout from Over-Functioning

To avoid the pain of being told their work isn't good enough, an individual might spend five hours on a task that only requires one. They over-prepare, over-explain, and over-deliver. While this might make them appear highly successful and driven on the outside, internally they are running on a nervous system stuck in "threat mode." Maintaining this level of output inevitably leads to severe autistic burnout.

Growing up neurodivergent in a neurotypical world usually means receiving a disproportionate amount of corrective feedback. From a young age, the implicit and explicit messages are often "you are doing this wrong" (whether it involves socializing, organizing, speaking, or just sitting still).

When a nervous system already primed for RSD absorbs years of these micro-rejections, it learns that being perceived as flawed is fundamentally dangerous.

The subconscious then strikes a desperate bargain: *"If I anticipate every possible expectation, make absolutely zero mistakes, and present a flawless facade, I leave no surface area for criticism to land."*

### **Why do I get annoyed when people compliment my results with "I'm not surprised"?**

It makes complete sense that you find that phrase annoying. In the context of AuDHD, RSD, and perfectionism as a trauma response, "I'm not surprised" is the exact opposite of what your nervous system wants to hear.

Even though the other person intends it as a high compliment about your competence, to a brain using perfectionism as a shield, it often registers as a threat or an invalidation.

Here is exactly why that specific phrase triggers such intense frustration:

#### **1. It Erases the "Invisible Tax"**

For someone with AuDHD, getting a "perfect" result usually requires a staggering amount of unseen effort. You are likely fighting executive dysfunction, sensory overload, hyper-focus burnout, and the sheer anxiety of the RSD loop just to cross the finish line.

When someone says, "I'm not surprised," it implies that the outcome was effortless or natural. It completely invalidates the exhausting, frantic paddling you were doing beneath the surface just to make the water look calm. It feels dismissive of the massive internal battle you had to fight to get that result.

#### **2. It Raises the Minimum Baseline**

Remember that your perfectionism is a shield designed to keep you safe from criticism. When you achieve a great result and someone says, "I'm not surprised," they are essentially telling you: "This flawless output is my baseline expectation of you."

Instead of feeling like a victory, it feels like the goalposts just moved. Your nervous system immediately calculates the danger: If perfect is just what they expect, what happens if I only give 90% next time? Will they be disappointed? Will I be criticized? It transforms your current success into tomorrow's inescapable pressure.

### **3. It Triggers Imposter Syndrome**

Because you know exactly how chaotic, stressful, or precarious the process was behind the scenes, hearing that someone expected this outcome makes you feel like a fraud. Your internal monologue might sound like: "You wouldn't be saying that if you saw me paralyzed on the couch for three days before I hyper-focused and did this at the last minute."

It reinforces the belief that people don't actually see you; they only see the mask and the armor you've created.

### **4. It Offers No "Safety"**

When you are operating out of an RSD-driven need to avoid criticism, what you are actually seeking is reassurance that you are safe and accepted. "I'm not surprised" evaluates your performance, but it doesn't validate your humanity. You don't want to be told you are a reliable perfection machine; you want to be told that your effort is seen and appreciated.

The Translation: When people say "I'm not surprised," they usually mean, "I think you are incredibly capable." But what your AuDHD/RSD brain hears is, "I expect perfection from you, and I am entirely blind to how much this cost you."