



# Why Small Things Feel Big

## *A gentle explanation of emotional intensity*

By Neal Glendenning

Contact: [info@theneuroinclusionproject.co.uk](mailto:info@theneuroinclusionproject.co.uk)

© 2025 Neal Glendenning / The Neuro Inclusion Project / NdCare Group.  
All rights reserved.

This material may not be reproduced, distributed, adapted, or used for training, commercial, or educational purposes without prior written permission.

### **Important note**

This resource is intended for educational and supportive purposes only. It does not replace professional medical, psychological, or therapeutic advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you are experiencing severe distress, persistent mental health difficulties, or are concerned about your safety, please seek support from a qualified healthcare professional or local emergency services.

Use these tools in ways that feel safe and appropriate for you. You are not required to push through distress or manage alone.

Many neurodivergent people grow up being told the same thing, over and over:

“You’re overreacting.”

“You’re too sensitive.”

“You make a big deal out of nothing.”

Over time, this message becomes internalised. Even when the emotional experience feels overwhelming and real, people begin to doubt themselves. They minimise their reactions. They apologise for their feelings. They try to become less affected — often at great personal cost.

This guide offers a different explanation.

Small things don’t feel big because you are dramatic, fragile, or emotionally immature.

They feel big because of **how your nervous system processes emotion, threat, and meaning...** and because of the environments many neurodivergent people grow up in.

---

## It’s not that the thing is small

It’s that the response is fast

One of the most important shifts in understanding emotional intensity is this:

The issue is not the size of the trigger.

It is the **speed of the response**.

For many ADHD and AuDHD nervous systems, emotional activation happens quickly and automatically. Before there is time to think, contextualise, or reassure yourself, the body has already reacted.

Heart rate changes.

Muscles tense.

Breath shifts.

Energy spikes or drops.

By the time language becomes available, the emotional wave may already be at full height.

This makes minor events... a brief comment, a change in tone, a delayed reply, a small disappointment... feel disproportionately intense. Not because the event was huge, but because the **nervous system mobilised rapidly**.

## Emotions are processed in the body first

Many people are taught that emotions work like this:

Something happens → you think about it → you feel something.

For many neurodivergent people, the order is reversed:

Something happens → the body reacts → meaning is assigned later.

This means:

- emotions can feel sudden and overwhelming
- it can be difficult to explain what you're feeling in the moment
- insight often arrives after the emotional peak
- "just think it through" advice fails when access is gone

This is not a lack of emotional intelligence.

It is a **difference in processing sequence**.

---

## Timing matters more than intensity

A crucial but often missed distinction is that emotional regulation depends heavily on **timing**.

Regulation strategies... pausing, grounding, reframing... work best *early*. For many ADHD and AuDHD systems, early warning signals are subtle, delayed, or easy to miss.

By the time distress is recognised:

- the nervous system may already be in fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown
- access to language may be reduced
- reassurance may feel meaningless or irritating

This creates a painful loop:

"I know what helps... but I can't access it when I need it."

The problem is not knowledge.

It is **late access**.

---

## Emotional intensity is not emotional instability

Emotional intensity is often confused with instability.

---

From the outside, strong reactions can look unpredictable or excessive. From the inside, they often feel coherent, logical, and deeply connected to meaning or safety.

Many ADHD and AuDHD people:

- feel emotions deeply
- care strongly about people, values, and outcomes
- experience rapid emotional mobilisation
- take longer to settle once activated

This is not volatility.

It is **high emotional responsiveness combined with slower physiological settling.**

---

### **Why social cues hit hardest**

Small things feel biggest when they involve **people.**

Tone shifts.

Facial expressions.

Short replies.

Ambiguous feedback.

For many neurodivergent people, social safety has not always been consistent. Over time, the nervous system learns to monitor closely for signs of disapproval, rejection, or withdrawal.

This heightened attunement is not imagination.

It is **patterned learning.**

When belonging has historically felt uncertain, the system adapts by watching carefully... sometimes too carefully.

---

### **Rejection sensitivity is a threat response, not fragility**

What is often called “Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria” is not simply emotional pain.

It is a **threat response.**

Perceived rejection, criticism, or withdrawal can trigger:

- intense shame
- collapse or withdrawal
- anger or defensiveness

- urge to repair or disappear

These reactions happen quickly because the nervous system treats social threat as real threat.

You are not overreacting.  
Your system is reacting **fast**.

---

## **Emotional memory is vivid and associative**

Another reason small things linger is emotional memory.

Many neurodivergent people:

- remember how something felt more than what was said
- replay conversations repeatedly
- experience emotional echoes long after events end
- struggle to “move on” even when they want to

This is not rumination by choice.

Emotional memory is often encoded **deeply and associatively**, especially when safety, belonging, or identity is involved.

---

## **Recovery takes longer than activation**

For many ADHD and AuDHD systems:

- emotions rise quickly
- but settle slowly

This mismatch can create self-judgement:  
“Why am I still upset?”  
“I understand it logically... why can’t I let it go?”

Because emotional settling is a **physiological process**, not a decision.

Pressure to recover faster often prolongs distress rather than shortening it.

---

## **Why being told to “calm down” makes it worse**

When someone is told they’re overreacting, several things happen at once:

- the original emotion remains active
-

- the experience is invalidated
- shame is added
- threat perception increases

This is why dismissal escalates distress instead of resolving it.

What helps is not minimising the reaction... but **supporting the nervous system until it can settle.**

---

## **Masking amplifies emotional cost**

Many neurodivergent people learn to mask emotional responses.

They:

- suppress visible reactions
- intellectualise feelings
- delay processing until alone
- perform calm while overwhelmed

This can reduce conflict in the short term, but it increases:

- internal stress
- delayed emotional fallout
- shutdown risk
- burnout

What is not expressed does not disappear.  
It accumulates.

---

## **Context changes everything**

Emotional intensity is not constant.

When people feel:

- safe
- understood
- unjudged
- unhurried

emotional responses often soften naturally.

Not because the person is trying harder... but because the nervous system no longer needs to stay on high alert.

This is why many people notice they are “less sensitive” in the right relationships and environments.

---

## **When small things feel big, shame often follows**

After emotional reactions, many people experience a second wave:

Shame.

They replay what happened.  
They criticise themselves.  
They apologise excessively.  
They vow to “do better next time.”

This secondary response often causes more harm than the original emotion.

Shame keeps the nervous system activated and delays recovery.

---

## **Reframing changes the experience**

The usual explanations for emotional intensity are:  
“You’re too sensitive.”  
“You’re overthinking.”  
“You need thicker skin.”

A more accurate explanation is this:

Your nervous system responds **quickly, deeply, and relationally**... especially under stress or uncertainty.

That’s not a flaw.  
It’s a pattern.

Understanding this does not eliminate emotion... but it often:

- reduces self-attack
  - shortens recovery
  - improves communication
  - restores self-trust
- 

## **What actually helps (gently)**

Emotional intensity does not need to be fixed.

---

It needs to be **supported**.

What helps most is:

- early regulation, when possible
- sensory support
- slowing meaning-making until the system settles
- environments that reduce shame
- relationships that prioritise safety over correction

This is not indulgence.

It is nervous system care.

---

### **A different story to tell yourself**

When small things feel big, the most important shift is internal.

Instead of:

“What’s wrong with me?”

Try:

“My system reacted quickly... what does it need now?”

That question alone can reduce harm.

---

### **A final reminder**

Feeling things strongly does not make you weak, unstable, or broken.

It means your nervous system is responsive, relational, and alert.

With understanding and support, that sensitivity becomes something you can **work with**, rather than something you have to fight.

And that changes everything.