Fear Example: Rejection

Appears in #7, #8, #11, #15, #17, #18 | Areas: Self-Esteem, Pride, Ambition, Security, Personal Relations

References: Common Fears | Fear Inventory – Drill-Down | Fear Inventory – 4-Column | 4-Column Expanded

The fear of rejection is one of the most pervasive fears in recovery — and in human psychology generally. It surfaces in nearly every resentment inventory as the hidden driver behind anger, people-pleasing, isolation, and relapse. In the Big Book's language, it is one of the "hundred forms of fear" (p.62) that drives the entire machinery of self-will.

Mark Leary's sociometer theory proposes that self-esteem is not an independent evaluation of our worth but a psychological gauge of how accepted or rejected we perceive ourselves to be by others. When self-esteem drops, it signals: *you are at risk of rejection.* The fear of rejection, in this framework, is not a flaw but a survival mechanism — one that becomes pathological when the alcoholic mind amplifies it beyond reason.

Drill-Down: Rejection as Root and Convergence Point

Rejection – Drilling to the Root

When "rejection" appears as a starting fear, the drill-down follows this chain:

(a) I Fear being…	(b) Why?	(c) Why?	(d) Why?	(e) Why?	(f) Why?
rejected	alone	emotional pain	using	dying	no God
	abandoned	not surviving			self-reliance fails me

The chain reads: I fear being rejected because rejection means I am alone. If I am alone, I will be abandoned — and I don't believe I can survive that. If I can't survive it, I will be in pain. If I am in pain long enough, I will use. If I use, I will die. I fear dying because I fear

there is no God. And if there is no God, self-reliance is all I have — and self-reliance has already failed me.

> *rejected --> alone --> emotional pain --> using --> dying --> no God --> self-reliance fails me*

Convergence: Fears That Drill Down TO "Rejection"

Rejection is both a root fear and a waypoint. Many surface fears pass through it:

Surface Fear	Path	Convergence
not good enough	–> not accepted -->	**rejected**
not valued	–> dispensable -->	**rejected**
being seen	–> being known -->	**rejected**
vulnerability	–> exposure -->	**rejected**
failure	–> not measuring up -->	**rejected**
abandoned	–> not wanted -->	**rejected**
setting boundaries	–> they won't like me -->	**rejected**

And rejection itself flows into the deeper chain: **rejected --> alone --> emotional pain --> using --> dying.**

Why This Matters

The fear of rejection explains why we tolerate what we tolerate. It explains why we stay in relationships that hurt us, jobs that diminish us, friendships that drain us. It explains people-pleasing, codependency, dishonesty, and the inability to set boundaries. If I believe that being authentic will lead to rejection, and rejection will lead to aloneness, and aloneness will lead to death — then of course I perform. Of course I hide. Of course I become whoever you need me to be.

The inventory doesn't ask us to stop fearing rejection. It asks us to see where we've let that fear run our lives — and to find a power greater than human approval to stand on.

> *"Self-reliance was good as far as it went, but it didn't go far enough."* (◆ **BB p.68**)

4-Column Brief

1. Fear of: Being rejected — by a partner, a parent, a friend, a group, a sponsor, a community. Not just disagreed with, but cast out. Found unacceptable. Told, in word or action: *you are not wanted here.*

2. Why: People-pleasing, dishonesty, low self-worth, co-dependency, fear, pride. I have built my sense of OK-ness on other people's acceptance. When they accept me, I exist. When they reject me, I disappear. I have made other people the judge and jury of my value.

3. Self-Reliance: I perform. I become a chameleon. I say what I think people want to hear. I suppress my own needs, opinions, and feelings. I tolerate mistreatment to avoid conflict. I isolate preemptively — if I never let you in, you can never throw me out. When rejection happens anyway, I rage, I withdraw, or I use.

4. Better Way: "We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be" (◆ BB p.68). If my value comes from God and not from other people, rejection loses its lethal power. People can disagree with me, leave me, even dislike me — and I can survive. Not because I don't care, but because my foundation is not built on their opinion.

4-Column Medium

1. The Fear

Being rejected. Not the minor kind — not someone declining an invitation or choosing a different restaurant. The kind that says: *I see you, the real you, and the answer is no.* The kind that confirms the deepest suspicion: that something about me is fundamentally unacceptable, and that if people really knew me, they would leave.

It appears across the resentment inventory:

- #7 My Father: *"Fathers love their daughters unconditionally."* — If he doesn't, I must be unlovable. Rejected by the first man who was supposed to stay.
- #8 My Sister: *"She makes me feel like I'm still that loser brother."* — Rejected for who I was, and the fear that I haven't changed enough to undo it.
- #11 I Am Unloveable: *"Too many people have rejected me and failed me."* — The principle itself is a conclusion drawn from repeated rejection.
- #15 My Ex-Wife: *"She tells the kids I'm the reason the family broke apart."* — Rejected as a husband, now feared to be rejected as a father.
- #17 My Sponsor: *"He dropped me after I missed a few calls."* — Rejected from recovery itself.
- #18 My Mother: *"Never satisfied with anything I did."* — Rejected by the person whose acceptance was supposed to be unconditional.

2. Why: Character Defects

Character defects at work: People-pleasing, dishonesty, fear, pride, co-dependency, low self-worth, self-pity, self-centeredness, perfectionism.

SDSF breakdown:

- **Selfish:** I make every interaction about whether I am being accepted or rejected. I don't genuinely listen to people; I scan them for signs of approval or disapproval. Other people's needs become secondary to my need to not be rejected.
- **Dishonest:** I hide who I really am. I present the version of myself that I believe is most acceptable. I agree when I disagree. I laugh when I'm not amused. I say "I'm fine" when I'm falling apart. The dishonesty is so habitual I sometimes lose track of what I actually think and feel.
- **Self-seeking:** I seek constant reassurance. I fish for compliments. I do favors with strings attached — expecting gratitude that proves I'm valued. I volunteer not to serve but to be seen. I use helpfulness as a currency to buy acceptance.
- **Fearful:** The fear is the engine. Every dishonest performance, every self-seeking favor, every selfish scan for approval is driven by the terror that without these efforts, the real me will be found wanting and thrown out.

Areas of self affected:

- **Self-esteem:** My sense of self is not self-generated — it is other-generated. I am whatever the last person told me I was. A compliment makes me whole; a criticism destroys me. The Big Book describes this as placing our security in "people and things" instead of in God.
- **Pride:** "Others should see my value." This is the pride statement that drives people-pleasing. If they don't see my value, I must perform harder. The pride is not arrogance — it is desperation disguised as confidence.
- **Personal relations:** "People who love me should never reject me." This is the demand underneath most resentments involving rejection. It is a demand for unconditional acceptance from people who are conditional by nature — which sets up inevitable disappointment.
- **Security:** "I need to be accepted to be okay." This is the core. If acceptance is my security, then every person in my life is a potential threat — because anyone who can give acceptance can also take it away.

3. Self-Reliance: The Self-Fulfilling Cycle

1. I fear rejection.
2. So I perform — I become who I think you want me to be.
3. You accept the performance. But I know it's not really me you accepted.
4. So the acceptance doesn't register. I still feel at risk.
5. I perform harder. I suppress more. I hide more.
6. Eventually, the mask slips. Or I exhaust myself. Or you sense the inauthenticity and pull away.
7. I experience the pulling away as rejection.
8. The fear is confirmed: "See — when people see the real me, they leave."
9. But they didn't see the real me. They saw the mask crack. The real me was never offered.
10. I find new people and put on a new mask. Return to step 2.

The cruelest irony: the behavior driven by the fear of rejection prevents the only thing that could resolve it — genuine acceptance of the real self. As long as I hide, I can never be truly known. And as long as I'm not truly known, no amount of acceptance will satisfy the fear.

4. Better Way

> *"We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. At once, we commence to outgrow fear."* (◆ BB p.68)

The solution is not to become immune to rejection. It is to change the foundation. If my value is established by God — not by the crowd, not by the partner, not by the parent — then rejection is painful but not fatal. People can leave and I will hurt, but I will not die. The fear loses its grip not because rejection stops mattering, but because it stops being the verdict on my worth.

> *"We never apologize to anyone for depending upon our Creator. We can laugh at those who think spirituality the way of weakness. Paradoxically, it is the way of strength."* (◆ BB p.68)

Prayer: God, remove my fear of rejection. I have spent my life auditioning for people's approval — hiding who I am, performing who I think they want, and then resenting them for not seeing the real me. I have made human acceptance my Higher Power and human rejection my death sentence. Free me from this. Let my value come from You. Let me show up as I am — imperfect, honest, afraid — and trust that what You made is acceptable, even when people disagree. Let me love without performing. Let me connect without hiding. And when rejection comes, let me bring it to You instead of carrying it to the next drink.

4-Column Expanded

Why – Expanded

Character defects with manifestations:

- **People-pleasing:** I say yes to everything. I anticipate others' needs before they ask. I monitor their facial expressions for signs of displeasure. I apologize constantly — for existing, for having needs, for taking up space. I make myself small to make others comfortable. I have confused being liked with being safe.

- **Dishonesty:** I don't know who I am anymore. I have spent so long being who others want me to be that I've lost the original. I hide my opinions. I hide my feelings. I hide my past. I present a curated version of myself in every setting — one for work, one for family, one for the meeting, one for online. The dishonesty is not strategic; it's automatic. I don't decide to hide. I just do.
- **Pride:** "No one should see the real me, because the real me is not enough." The pride is inverted — it looks like humility, but it's actually arrogance. I believe I know exactly what you would think of me if you saw me clearly: you would leave. This presumes I can read your mind. That is pride.
- **Self-pity:** "Nobody understands. Nobody has been rejected as many times as I have. Nobody knows what it's like to always be the one left behind." The self-pity creates a narrative of specialness — I am uniquely damaged, uniquely alone — that paradoxically makes genuine connection harder, because it requires the other person to first agree with my assessment of how broken I am.
- **Perfectionism:** If I am perfect, I cannot be rejected. So I strive for perfection in appearance, in performance, in recovery, in relationships. But perfection is a moving target, and the striving never produces the safety it promises. The slightest flaw sends me into crisis, because any flaw is a potential rejection trigger.
- **Isolation:** If I never let you in, you can never throw me out. I reject first. I leave before I am left. I build walls and call them boundaries. I mistake aloneness for independence. But the isolation is just the fear winning — I am so afraid of rejection that I've preemptively rejected the entire world.

Cognitive distortions:

- **Mind-reading:** "I can tell they don't like me. I can see it in their face. They're just being polite." I project my own self-rejection onto others and then respond to the projection as if it were fact.
- **Catastrophising:** "If this person rejects me, it will confirm that no one will ever accept me. This one rejection is the final proof." Each individual rejection is experienced as the verdict of the universe.
- **Personalisation:** "They cancelled plans. It must be about me. They looked at their phone during our conversation. I'm boring them. They gave a short answer. They're

pulling away." I interpret neutral events through the lens of rejection, making everything about me.

- **Emotional reasoning:** "I feel rejected, therefore I am rejected. The feeling is the evidence." Even when the objective facts contradict the feeling, the feeling wins.
- **Filtering:** I hear ten compliments and one criticism, and the criticism is the only thing that sticks. The positive evidence is dismissed as politeness or pity. The negative evidence is accepted as truth. I have a filter that lets in rejection and screens out acceptance.

Psychology:

Mark Leary's sociometer theory (1999) proposes that self-esteem functions as a real-time monitor of social inclusion and exclusion. When we sense that we are valued and included by others, self-esteem rises. When we sense rejection or exclusion, self-esteem drops — triggering anxiety and corrective behavior (people-pleasing, performance, withdrawal). For most people, this system operates within a normal range. For the person in recovery, the sociometer is miscalibrated — often set permanently to "rejection imminent" by early experiences of criticism, neglect, or abandonment. The result is chronic hypervigilance to social cues, with neutral interactions interpreted as threatening.

Kipling Williams' research on ostracism (2009) demonstrated that social exclusion activates the same brain regions as physical pain — the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula. Rejection, in neurological terms, literally hurts. This explains why the alcoholic medicates rejection with substances: they are treating real pain with the fastest available analgesic. Williams found that even trivial exclusion — being left out of a virtual ball-tossing game by strangers — produced measurable distress. For the person whose history includes significant rejection (by a parent, a partner, a community), the pain response is amplified.

Brené Brown's research on vulnerability and shame (*Daring Greatly*, 2012) identifies the fear of rejection as the core driver of shame. Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging." The Fourth Step inventory is, in Brown's framework, an exercise in vulnerability — writing down the truth about ourselves with the knowledge that another

person will hear it in Step 5. The fear of rejection says: *if they really know me, they will reject me.* The program says: *only by being fully known can you be fully free.*

Self-Reliance – Expanded

The self-fulfilling cycle – full detail:

The fear of rejection creates a paradox: the strategies I use to prevent rejection are the very things that guarantee it.

Phase 1: The Performance. I meet someone new — a potential friend, partner, employer, sponsor. Immediately, the fear activates: *what do they want me to be?* I scan for cues. I adjust. I mirror their interests, their language, their values. I present myself as agreeable, competent, easygoing, put-together. I suppress the parts of me that might trigger disapproval: the anxiety, the addiction history, the neediness, the anger.

Phase 2: The Acceptance. It works. They like me. Or rather, they like the version I've presented. For a moment, the fear quiets. But it doesn't resolve. Because I know — somewhere I know — that what was accepted was the performance, not the person.

Phase 3: The Escalation. The relationship deepens. They want more access. They want to know me — the real me. But the real me is the thing I've been hiding. So I perform harder. I give more. I anticipate more. I become more indispensable. The effort is exhausting, but the alternative — being seen — is terrifying.

Phase 4: The Crack. The mask can't hold forever. A bad day. A slip. An honest moment that escapes before I can stop it. They see something behind the performance — the anger, the fear, the addiction, the insecurity. It's small. Maybe they don't even notice. But I notice. And the fear surges: *they're going to see. They're going to leave.*

Phase 5: The Withdrawal or the Cling. Two responses, equally destructive. I either pull away first (reject before being rejected) or cling harder (escalate the performance to desperate levels). Both confirm the fear. Pulling away creates the distance I feared. Clinging suffocates the relationship.

Phase 6: The Confirmation. The relationship fractures or ends. And the conclusion: *See — when people see the real me, they leave.* But the real me was never fully offered. The rejection

was of the exhausted performer, not the authentic person. The experiment was never actually run.

Better Way – Expanded

> *"We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. At once, we commence to outgrow fear." (◆ BB p.68)*

> *"If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through." (◆ BB p.83-84)*

The spiritual dimension: acceptance by God vs. acceptance by people.

The fear of rejection is, at its root, a misplacement of authority. I have given human beings the power to determine my worth. God did not assign them this role. They cannot carry it. No person — no matter how loving, how loyal, how committed — can provide the unconditional acceptance the fear demands. Because unconditional acceptance from a human being is not possible. Humans are conditional by nature. They have their own fears, their own limits, their own needs. They will sometimes be unavailable, distracted, disappointed, and gone. To demand otherwise is to demand that they be God.

The program offers a different foundation: "We never apologize to anyone for depending upon our Creator" (◆ BB p.68). If my value comes from God, then human rejection is painful — but it is not the verdict. It is one person's response, not the universe's judgment. I can grieve it. I can learn from it. But I don't have to die from it.

Prayer: God, remove my fear of rejection. I have spent my entire life performing for an audience that was never meant to judge me. I have hidden my true self behind masks of competence, agreeability, and charm — and then resented people for not seeing through the mask. I have made human acceptance my oxygen and human rejection my death.

Teach me that Your acceptance is the only one that was ever meant to hold my weight. Not my mother's. Not my partner's. Not the group's. Yours. Let me show up as the person You made — imperfect, afraid, real — and trust that it is enough. Not because everyone will approve, but because You already have. And when rejection comes — because it will — let

me bring it to You before I carry it to the next drink, the next mask, or the next performance. Amen.

Practical actions:

1. **Practice being honest about one small thing today.** When someone asks how you are, tell the truth. Not the dramatic truth — just the real truth. "I'm struggling a little today." "I'm tired." "I don't know." One moment of honesty is one moment of offering the real self. That's where genuine acceptance starts.
2. **Call your sponsor or a fellowship member and share the fear.** Not to fix it. Just to say it out loud: "I'm afraid of being rejected." Shame loses power when spoken. That is the mechanism of Step 5.
3. **Notice the performance when it starts.** When you catch yourself adjusting — changing your opinion, suppressing a feeling, agreeing when you don't — pause. You don't have to stop the performance yet. Just notice it. Awareness is the first step.
4. **Write a list of times you were accepted for who you really are.** In recovery. By a sponsor. By a meeting. By someone who saw the real you and stayed. The fear says "no one has ever truly accepted me." The evidence usually says otherwise.
5. **Pray the fear prayer (p.68) daily.** "God, remove my fear of [rejection] and direct my attention to what You would have me be." Daily practice. The fear didn't form overnight. It won't leave overnight. But it will recede.

Sources: Alcoholics Anonymous ("Big Book") pp.60-68, 77, 83-84; Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Steps 4-5, 10; Mark Leary, "Sociometer Theory and the Pursuit of Relational Value" (2005); Kipling Williams, "Ostracism: A Temporal Need-Threat Model" (2009); Brené Brown, Daring Greatly (2012); Pete Walker, Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving (2013); John Bowlby, Attachment and Loss (1969); Sponsorship Workshop Packet 2024

From the Big Book Awakening Step Four guide at bigbook.it/step-4/ · a page of the guide, not the workbook itself: the workbook's own pages are linked from "Originals & sources." · source examples/fear-rejection.md