Introduction:

Rejection sensitivity, a term that originates in the field of psychology, is when a person expects and reacts intensely to rejection because of past traumatic experiences. This activity aims to examine rejection sensitivity that stems from past experiences related to identity (for example, discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality, etc.).

Facilitator Notes:

Before leading the activity, it is important to familiarize yourself with some of the literature about rejection sensitivity (one article is cited below). Participants will be asked to think about their own identities and how they might experience or contribute to sensitivity to rejection, for themselves and/or others. Be aware that this discussion may be painful for some learners, and that not everyone will be comfortable discussing stigmatized aspects of their identities.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Describe the phenomenon of identity-based rejection sensitivity and its consequences.
2. Analyze potential solutions that avoid self-fulfilling prophecies of rejection based on a stigmatized identity.

Time:

45 minutes.

Group Size:

This activity works best with small groups or groups no larger than 30.

Materials:

Identity-based Rejection Sensitivity Participant Instructions (in Downloads); chalkboard or whiteboard, chalk or dry erase markers, pen/pencil and paper for participants.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Empathy
• To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
• To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group

Other Skills:
Friendship, Diversity & Inclusion.

Activity Instructions:

1. Be aware that discussing this topic and the stories the discussion might generate may cause pain, anxiety, and/or anger for some participants. Dialogue should be entered into and managed with sensitivity. It might be a good idea to create ground rules for discussion together before beginning.

2. Begin by defining identity-based rejection sensitivity and providing some examples. You may choose to use examples from your own life to encourage participants to share their experiences. Below are two examples:
   - You were rejected by a past romantic partner’s family because of race, religion, socioeconomic status, or some other identity-marker. Therefore, when you went to meet your new partner’s family, despite the evening going well and your partner reassuring you that their family likes you, you are convinced that they were faking just to be polite.
   - At your previous job, you experienced many microaggressions from your coworkers because of race, gender identity, age, education level, or some other identity-marker. Therefore, at your new job, you are constantly anxious about everyday interactions with your new coworkers and tend to avoid them whenever possible.

   Note: For more information, see this scholarly article by Berenson and colleagues (2010).

   You can explain to participants that identity-based rejection sensitivity is hyper awareness of the risk of rejection by others based on a stigmatized identity. It doesn’t happen randomly – it’s a legitimate response to prior negative experiences. This finely tuned sensitivity can help people avoid other harmful situations because they can spot the discrimination coming, so to speak. But people can also grow over-sensitive as a result of many negative experiences, coming to expect and see bad intentions in others in all situations, even when they aren’t really there. These inaccurate assumptions and interpretations then get in the way of positive relationships.

3. As a group, brainstorm different types of identities (education, gender, age, race, etc.) that in some contexts might be stigmatized and therefore likely to face a pattern of rejection. When a participant names an identity, write it on the board.

4. Ensure that each participant has a pen/pencil and at least one piece of paper. Ask them to list the identities about which they feel most sensitive to rejection. They can include identities listed on the board as well as any that were not mentioned. In addition to listing
the identities, they should reflect on why these identities cause them to be sensitive to rejection.

5. Ask participants to partner with one or two other individuals and share what they wrote. As they share, they should attempt to analyze their responses by answering the following questions:

- Who is the rejection coming from?
- Why does the stigma against this identity exist?
- How does the rejection manifest in your interactions with others?
- Are there counterexamples of when you had come to expect rejection but didn’t encounter it?
- Are there any similarities and differences in how these identities affect your sensitivity to rejection?

6. Instruct participants to take the Identity-Based Rejection Sensitivity Quiz in Qualtrics.

7. Debrief with your own questions and/or the questions below:

- Why does rejection sensitivity matter?
- Whose responsibility is it to address issues concerning identity-based rejection sensitivity?
- What can we do about our own and others’ identity-based rejection sensitivity?

Related Tools:

Tools to use before this lesson:

- Addressing Microaggressions
- Identity Dialogues
- Paseo, The (Circles of Identity)

Similar tools:

- Who Do You Think I Am?