

Reactive Attachment Disorder

When the Inability to Trust Makes Recovery Feel Impossible



What is Reactive Attachment Disorder?

Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) is a condition rooted in early childhood neglect or abuse that disrupts a person's ability to form safe emotional bonds with others. The absence of a stable caregiver in early life rewires how someone relates to trust, comfort, and closeness, creating patterns of withdrawal and emotional guardedness that persist into adulthood.

What Does it Look Like?

- **Emotional Withdrawal**
They pull away from comfort and closeness, even from people trying to help.
- **Distrust of Caregivers**
Every offer of support is met with suspicion or outright rejection.
- **Difficulty Regulating Emotions**
Small frustrations produce intense reactions, or no visible response at all.
- **Resistance to Vulnerability**
They refuse to let anyone close enough to see what they're actually feeling.

How Does RAD Contribute to Relapse?

For someone who never learned to trust or accept comfort from others, substances become a source of relief from emotional pain they struggle to name or share.

- 1) **Trust Deficits Undermine Treatment**
Recovery depends on therapeutic relationships that RAD works against.
- 2) **Short-Term Programs Don't Go Deep Enough**
Forming trust takes months, not weeks. A 30-day program ends before it starts.
- 3) **Without Addressing Attachment, Isolation Returns**
They leave treatment still unable to connect, returning to the emptiness that fueled use.

Prevalence:

~1.4% of children in population studies¹

Co-Occurrence:

42.9% develop substance use problems in adulthood²

Hospitalization Risk:

6.4x higher odds of psychiatric hospitalization vs. controls³

Sources: ¹ Minnis et al., *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2013) ² Betcher et al., *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2023) ³ Betcher et al., *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2023); RAD+ADHD vs. ADHD-only comparison

Long-Term Treatment for Reactive Attachment Disorder

Clients with RAD struggle to trust the people trying to help. Someone who learned early in life that caregivers are unreliable fail to open up to others within a 30-day program. Rebuilding the capacity for safe connection requires extended time and consistent relationships.

Our **long-term, progress-based model** provides the stability and relational consistency that RAD demands. Clients advance when they demonstrate genuine changes in how they trust, connect, and engage with the people around them.



“RAD rewires how someone experiences closeness. They interpret care as a threat. Until we address that deep-rooted pattern, therapeutic relationships stay surface-level, and the substance use continues underneath.”

 **Meghan Bohlman, LPC-S, LCDC, EMDR-Trained**
Executive Clinical Director, Burning Tree Ranch



Dual Diagnosis Treatment for Reactive Attachment Disorder

When RAD goes unrecognized, treatment focuses on the substance use while the attachment wound underneath continues to push them away from every relationship that could support recovery.

- **Treating Both Conditions Together**
Without treating RAD, clients remain isolated and vulnerable to relapse.
- **Rebuilding the Capacity for Trust**
Safe therapeutic relationships are needed for deeper clinical work.
- **Providing Enough Time for Real Connection**
It takes months to rebuild a foundation of trust that enables recovery.

Dual Diagnosis:

The presence of **both a substance use disorder and a mental health condition** occurring together. Effective treatment for dual-diagnosis addictions must address both aspects simultaneously.



Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at www.BurningTree.com.

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