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ALEXITHYMIA

(Deficits in emotion processing)

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ABSTRACT

Definition: The literal meaning of alexithymia is “no words for mood.” The term is applied to those individuals who have difficulty describing their emotions. **Types:** There are two types of alexithymia, trait and state. **Causes:** Post-traumatic stress disorder, an interhemispheric transfer deficit, a dysfunction of the anterior cingulate cortex etc. **Symptoms:** A lack of impulse control, Violent or disruptive outbursts, indifference towards other people. **Treatment:** Treatment of alexithymia may be incorporated into the overall treatment of the person's broader condition.

INTRODUCTION

Alexithymia is a psychiatric term meaning lack of words for emotion and it is a relatively recent term, having been coined in the late 1960s. It literally means “no words for feelings.” The concept refers to a hypothesized communicative function of somatic symptoms. The term is applied to those individuals who have difficulty describing their emotions. This phenomenon is commonly observed among those suffering from chronic somatic problems, including chronic pain. Alexithymia is present in approximately 10% of the general population with significantly higher incidence levels within autistic populations (50%).

Definition:

It is defined as the constriction of emotional functioning, poverty of fantasy life, and inability to find appropriate words to describe one's emotions (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1991).

The characteristic features are

- Difficulty describing feelings
- Difficulty distinguishing between feelings and the bodily sensations that accompany emotional arousal
- Lack of introspection
- Social conformity and
- Impoverished fantasy life and poor dream recall.

Types:

There are two types of alexithymia, trait and state:

- State alexithymia has a specific cause, is often a temporary condition. Post-traumatic stress disorder, caused by experiencing a horrifying event, is one example that is known to trigger this type of alexithymia.
- Trait alexithymia is believed to be a characteristic inherent in a person's personality. Trait alexithymia may be, 'inborn,' or caused by events that happen in a person's early childhood such as neglect or abuse from a primary caregiver.

Causes:

It is unclear what causes alexithymia, though several theories have been proposed.

- Post-**traumatic** stress disorder, caused by experiencing a **horrifying** event, is known to trigger state alexithymia.
- Trait alexithymia is believed to be a characteristic inherent in a person's personality.
- Early studies showed evidence that there may be an interhemispheric transfer deficit among people with alexithymia; that is, the emotional information from the right hemisphere of the brain is not being properly transferred to the language regions in the left hemisphere, as can be caused by a decreased corpus callosum, often present in psychiatric patients who have suffered severe childhood abuse.
- A neuropsychological study in 1997 indicated that alexithymia may be due to a disturbance to the right hemisphere of the brain, which is largely responsible for processing emotions.
- A dysfunction of the anterior cingulate cortex

However, the empirical evidence about the neural mechanisms behind alexithymia remains inconclusive.

Symptoms:

Alexithymia is also understood to have two components;

- A cognitive component where people might face challenges with thinking and emotions while trying to name, understand and talk about feelings.
- An affective component where people might struggle with the experience of sharing, responding to and sensing emotions.

People who experience the effects of alexithymia might notice some different things such as:

- A lack of impulse control
- Violent or disruptive outbursts
- Indifference towards other people
- Difficulties with articulating emotions
- Difficulties with naming different kinds of emotions
- Struggling to identify emotions expressed by others
- Heightened sensitivity to sights, sounds, or physical touch.
- A narrow capacity to understand the reasons behind certain emotions
- Limited or rigid imagination.

Alexithymia and Mental Health

In a number of instances, alexithymia is a symptom of other forms of mental health conditions. To achieve a diagnosis of alexithymia symptoms, a person would need to receive evaluation of and diagnosis of a primary mental health condition. Alexithymia has been observed in people who also have:

- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Certain brain injuries
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

Tests and questionnaires are available to diagnose Alexithymia.

Treatment:

Treatment of alexithymia may be incorporated into the overall treatment of the person's broader condition. During an evaluation, a clinician will most likely talk with the person affected for a period of time and ask them to complete surveys and additional psychological testing. Based upon the results of the person's psychological evaluation, they will have a better idea of how alexithymic symptoms may be associated with one or more forms of mental health conditions.

Therapies include,

- Group therapy
- Daily journaling
- Skill-based therapy
- Engaging in the creative arts
- Various relaxation techniques
- Reading emotional books or stories

CONCLUSION

The literal meaning of alexithymia is “no words for mood.” It is a subclinical cognitive-affective impairment affecting the ability to interpret one’s own emotional experiences. The treatment options for alexithymia are often times very different from typical counseling or talk therapy. For people living with alexithymia, a mental health professional will often concentrate on building a foundation of naming emotions and appreciating a range of feelings. The process will likely include both consideration of the experiences of other people and self-reflection.