

No words for feelings: Alexithymia and mental health

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Alexithymia

A term derived from the Greek 'alexis' (no words) and 'thymos' (emotion) (Sifneos, 1973).



alexithymia *n*: inability to express one's emotions with words

DR Can you say more about your feelings as a result of all these medical problems.

PT Uhm – I really can't pin things down. As I say, I have always – you know – uhm – life to me what you make of it in spite of things, and I've never been one to get terribly emotional about what's going on – trying to be analytical about it, and, as I maintain, all the way along, I knew it started from that infection of the sinus. And I think the basis of the bottom line of what's behind what is going on is that I was never put on antibiotics.

*Graeme, T. J., Bagby, M. J., Parker, J. D. A. (1999). *Disorders of Affect Regulation: Alexithymia in Medical and Psychiatric Illness*. Cambridge University Press (p. 55).

I wish I could describe what happened next, not as I saw it, which I might manage, but as **I felt it**”

(p. 151) – Life of Pi

Alexithymia – History of the concept

- Firstly used by Sifneos (1967) to describe psychosomatic patients who had difficulty engaging in insight-oriented psychotherapy (psychodynamic focus).
- Alexithymia patients demonstrated deficits in emotional awareness and expression of their feelings.
- Conceptualised by Nemiah, Freyberger and Sifneos (1976) as a cluster of “traits”.

Alexithymia – History of the concept

Alexithymia comprises four traits (Sifneos, 1972):

1. The incapacity to express emotions or feelings verbally.
2. The restriction of imaginative life (no dreams, fantasies, daydreams).
3. The tendency to resort to action to avoid or resolve conflicts.
4. The detailed description of facts, events; physical symptoms.

Alexithymia - Evidence

- Deficit, inability or deficiency in emotional processing rather than a defensive process (Lumley, Neely, & Burger, 2007).
- Emotion regulation (emotion awareness, accessing and expressing emotions, monitoring emotions) is a broader concept that includes alexithymia.
- No single assessment that captures the full range of emotion regulation processes.

Normative-Male Alexithymia/Cultural Alexithymia

'I do find it very amusing, and somewhat moving, the average Englishman's difficulty in this area,' he says. 'The struggle for him to say anything clearly about what you might call matters of the heart is a substantial one.'

'Do I find it difficult in real life to talk about my feelings?' He snorts a chuckle. 'That's a very good question and I don't want to answer it! I will say that I am . . . averagely English, and that, as such, I am not unfamiliar with that particular phenomenon.'

Bill Nighy, Daily Mail, 27 February 2015



Alexithymia

- Somatic disorders (e.g. lower back pain, gastrointestinal disorders)
- Medically unexplained symptoms (MUS)
- Anxiety and depression
- Substance use disorders (SUD) and compulsive behaviours
- Autoimmune disorders
- Posttraumatic stress disorder
- Eating disorders
- Self-harm & non-suicidal self-injury

Alexithymia

- Prevalence rates of up to 10% in the general population (Alema, 2005; Salminen et al., 1999).
- Psychoanalytic theory
- Neurophysiological theories

Psychoanalytic Theory

- Operative thinking (Marty & M'zuan , 1963)
- Early disturbances in defence mechanisms (Pirlot & Corcos, 2012).
- Conflict between mentalization and affective life.
- Disaffection and dispersal (McDougall, 1982).
- Sifneos (1972) described two types of alexithymia: primary and secondary.

Psychoanalytic Theory

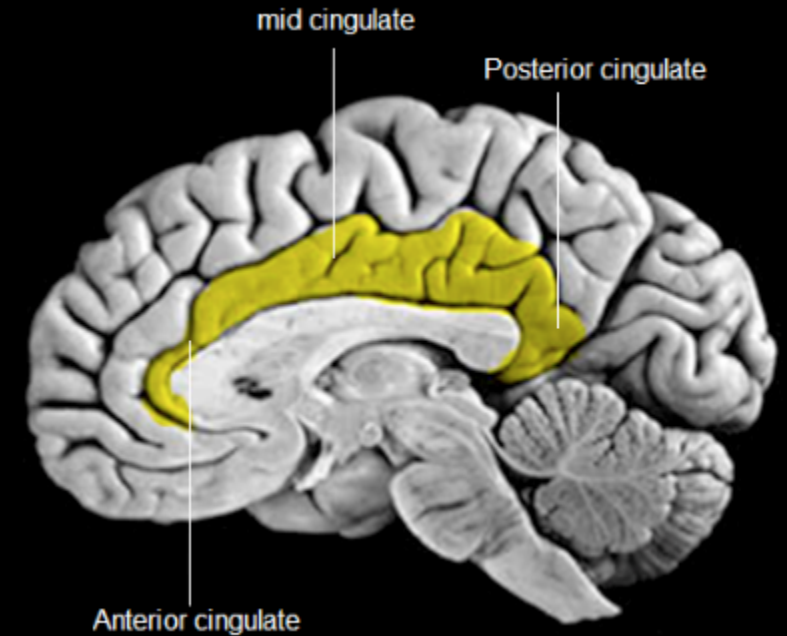
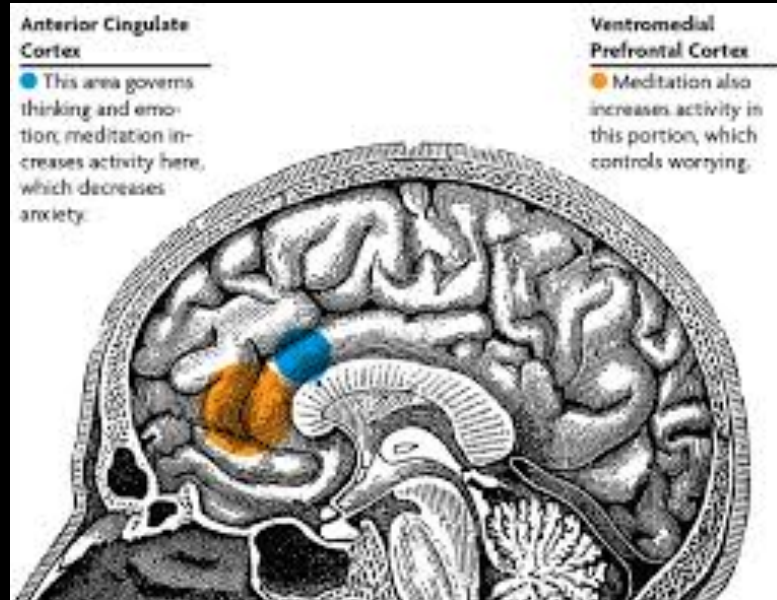
Sifneos (1995) types of alexithymia:

“Primary alexithymia appears as a deficiency of feelings rather than emotions. In his view, the limbic system and the neocortex are poorly connected in these cases: a stimulus arising from nuclei in the amygdala arouses emotions such as fear and anger, which, without any contribution from the imagination and with thoughts originating from the neocortex, are expressed in various forms of fight-or-flight reaction (Pilot & Corcos, 2012, p. 94).”

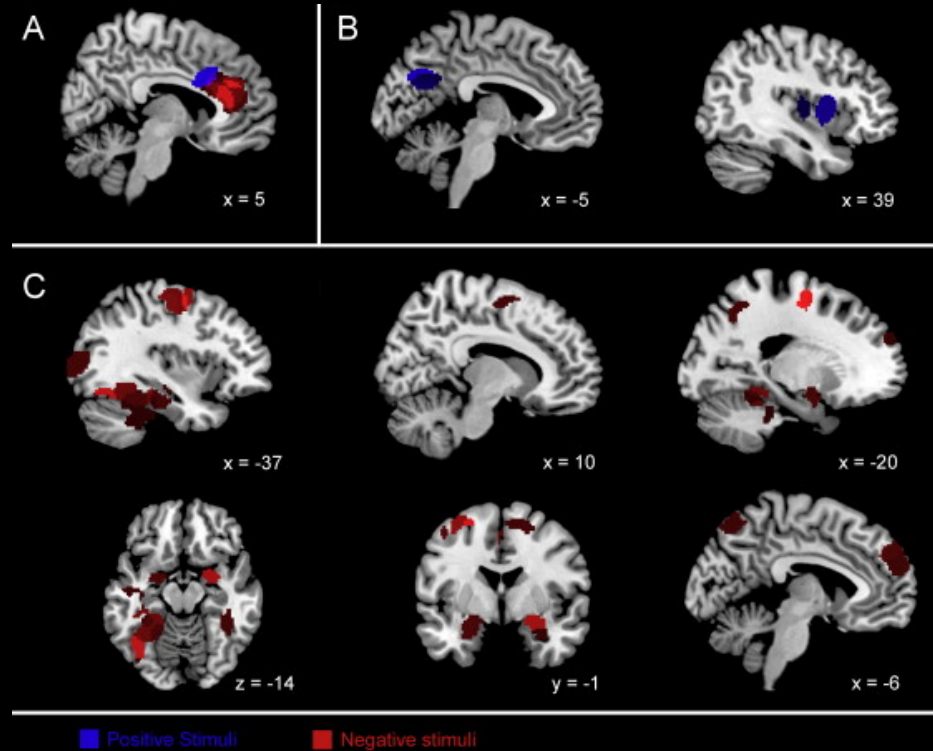
Psychoanalytic Theory

“Secondary alexithymia, in contrast, originates from a traumatic experience that is “devastating and sudden at the preverbal age and that can make a child incapable of expressing emotions through language” (Sifneos, 1995, p. 31, translated quotation), which is conducive not only to psychosomatic conditions but also to post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), drug addiction, chronic alcoholism, anorexia and bulimia (Pirlot & Corcos, 2012, p.94).”

Neural Correlates of Alexithymia



Neurophysiological Theories



Neurophysiological Theories

- Individuals with alexithymia show impaired performance in remembering emotional words (Luminet et al., 2006).
- Problems identifying facial expressions (Grynberg et al., 2012).
- Impaired higher order mentalizing (Swart et al., 2009).
- Central role for the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) – the blindfeel hypothesis (Lane et al. 1997).

Assessment

- Beth Israel Hospital Questionnaire (BIQ)
- Observer Alexithymia Scale (OAS)
- Schalling - Sifneos Personality Scale (SSPS)
- Toronto Alexithymia Scale – 20 (TAS-20)
- Bermond-Vorst Alexithymia Questionnaire (BVAQ)
- Levels of Emotional Awareness (LEAS)

Alexithymia

Key facets:

- Difficulty identifying feelings
- Difficulty describing feelings
- Externally oriented thinking

Alexithymia & Substance Use Disorders

- Adverse impact on therapeutic progress and treatment outcomes.
- Higher rates of relapses.
- Requires different therapeutic approach (e.g. group dynamics such as 12-step fellowships).

Systematic Review of Literature

- 1990-2013
- PubMed, Web of Science & PsycInfo
- Terms used: 'alexithymia', 'alcohol addiction', 'alcohol use disorders', 'drug abuse', and 'substance abuse'.
- English only
- Excluded: Dissertations and conference abstracts.

Results



Findings

- Lack of fundamental research assessing the relationship between alexithymia and SUD.
- Studies have used the TAS, BVQA and LEAS.
- Factors included: attachment, personality traits, mood, affect intolerance and suicidal ideation in alcohol dependent samples.
- No qualitative studies.

Findings

- The majority of the studies are cross-sectional and undertaken with male samples.
- Studies show high prevalence of alexithymia in substance dependent populations.
- The notion that alexithymia is a vulnerability factor in SUD is premature.
- Evidence of alexithymia as a state or trait is inconclusive.
- Studies acknowledge the multidimensional nature of alexithymia.

Findings

- Deficit model
- Little is known about the subjective experience of alexithymia
- Inconsistent use of definitions of emotions
- Strong reliance on self-reports and measurement
- How alexithymia should be studied?

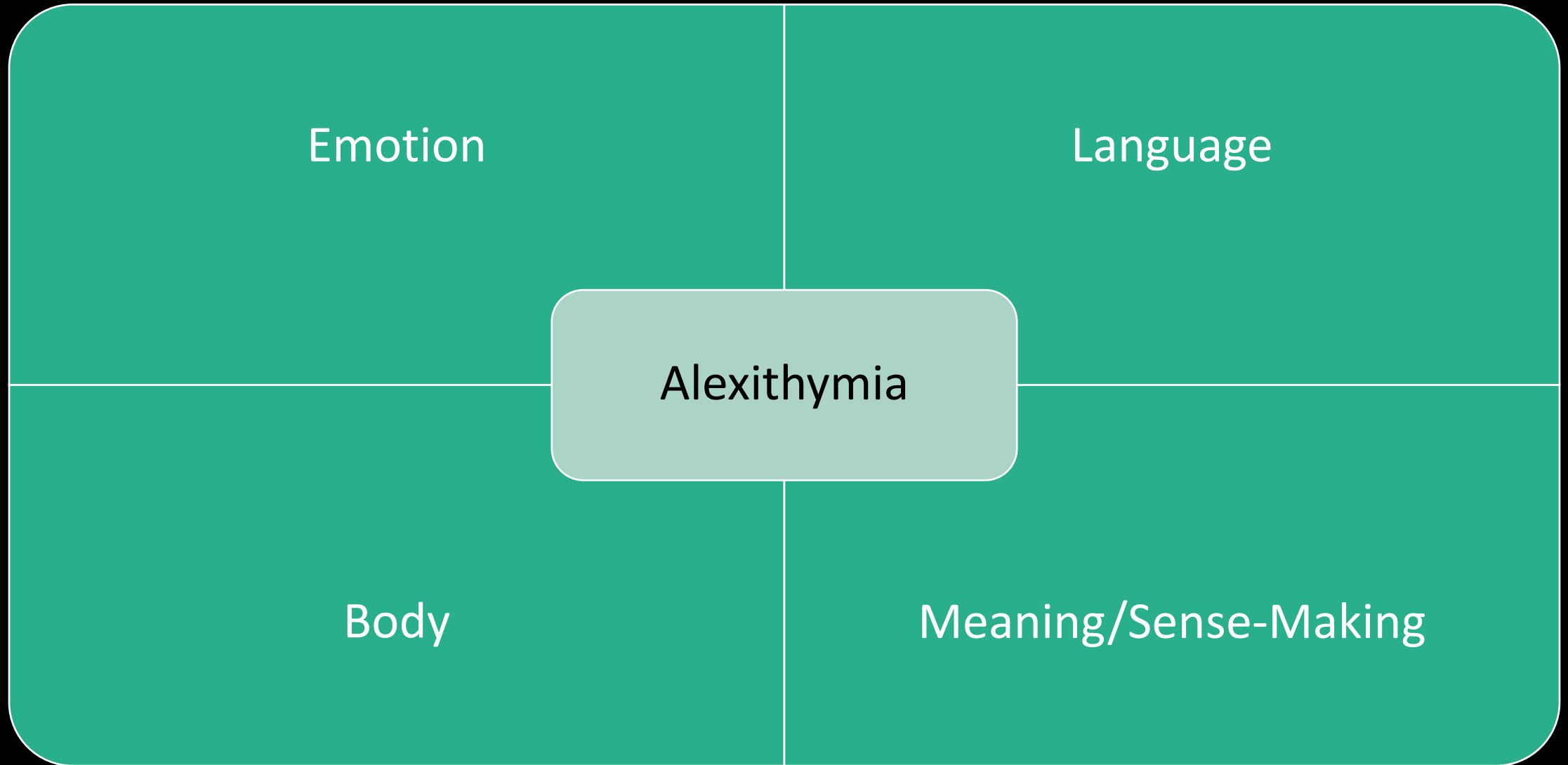
Emotion

Language

Alexithymia

Body

Meaning/Sense-Making



Deficit Model of Alexithymia

- Emotions as the translation of an inner subjectivity that remains unprocessed.
- Language “merely” consist of spoken or written words.
- Presupposes an objectivist theory of perception and sense-making.
- Biomedical/disease approach.

Phenomenology (Experience) of Alexithymia

- Emotions (emotional expressions) are “a simultaneous patterning of body and world” (Merlau-Ponty, 1962, p. 219).
- Language includes all forms of symbolic interaction by means of which we indicate significant qualities, patterns, and experiences (Johnson, 2007).
- Meaning/sense-making is embodied (Dewey, 1981/1925; Heidegger, 1962 & Merlaeu-Ponty, 1962/1945).
- Embodied approach (why traditional ‘talking’ therapy do not work with people with high levels of alexithymia).

Questions

- What is it like to be alexithymic? What kind of world does the alexithymic enact?
- What are the differences in degree between the alexithymic and the person who sometimes has difficulty?
- How do difficulties of both experiencing and verbalizing feelings vary?
- How can appropriate strategies be developed to enable people with alexithymia to sense and communicate their feelings?

Methodological Challenge

How to best capture the experience of alexithymia?

- Explicitation Interviews (Petitmengin, 2006)
- Focusing Method (Gendlin, 1990)
- Descriptive Experience Sampling Method (Hurlbert & Heavey, 2006)
- Visual and narrative data collection methods (e.g. autobiographical accounts) (Pennebaker, 1997).

Clinical & Therapeutic Implications

“What does knowing that a patient is relatively alexithymic tell the medical or mental health practitioner about the patient” (Lumley, Neely, & Burger, 2007, p. 5).

“Of what utility is the assessment of alexithymia in health care settings?” (Lumley, Neely, & Burger, 2007, p. 5).