Emotionless: Alexithymia? [1]

Alice,

I'm told alexithymia is a condition related to an inability to express one's emotions as a result of not understanding them. Those who have the condition usually appear very stoic and tend not to react in what would be considered a "normal" way, and they probably won't understand when others do react "normally." That is pretty much the extent of my knowledge on the subject, though the research I've done suggests that I potentially have this condition. I wanted to know if you knew where I could find further information about diagnosis and treatment.

— Wondering about Alexithymia

Answer

Dear Wondering about Alexithymia,

Understanding and expressing emotions are two components of the human experience that can be perplexing for a lot of people. Learning more about potential causes for your experience of feeling less than "normal" emotionally and perhaps asking questions of trusted professionals can be a helpful way to narrow down possible solutions. Here is some additional information about alexithymia to help you further explore the signs, symptoms, and potential treatment options.

Alexithymia is a clinical term for the inability to understand the intricacies of emotions and feelings. The existence and study of alexithymic experiences began in the 1970’s. Some research suggests that alexithymia is more predominant in men than in women. Alexithymia is also understood to have two components — a cognitive component, where individuals may face challenges with thinking about emotions when attempting to name, understand, and talk about feelings; and an affective component, where individuals may struggle with the experience of responding to, sharing, and sensing emotions. Those who experience the effects of alexithymia may notice:

- Challenges with naming different kinds of emotions
- A narrow capacity to understand the reasons behind certain emotions
- Struggling to articulate their emotions
- Struggling to identify emotions in others
High sensitivity to physical touch, sights, and sounds
Disruptive or violent outbursts
Lack of impulse control
Indifference towards others

Alexithymia is not simply a lack of interest in emotional connection — it's rooted in neurological and psychological mishaps that can be sources of frustration for both those experiencing the symptoms, as well as those around them. Alexithymia also exists on a spectrum — so, for some people the symptoms may interfere more predominantly in their life than for others.

In many cases, alexithymia is a symptom of other mental health condition(s). To diagnose alexithymic symptoms, a person would need to be evaluated for and diagnosed with a primary mental health condition. Alexithymia has been observed in people who also have post-traumatic stress disorder, certain brain injuries, eating disorders, substance abuse, and depression.

Treatment of alexithymia can be incorporated into the overall treatment of the broader condition. During an evaluation, your clinician will probably talk with you for a while and ask you to complete surveys and other psychological tests. Based on the results of the psychological evaluation, s/he will have a better idea of how alexithymic symptoms might be associated with one or more mental health conditions.

Treatment options for alexithymia are often quite different than typical talk therapy or counseling. For those living with alexithymia, a mental health professional will often focus on building a foundation of naming emotions and appreciating a range of feelings. The process will likely include both self-reflection and consideration of the experiences of others. While for some people this emotional comprehension may sound very basic, for someone with alexithymia, the process of growing their emotional intelligence and capacity may be a struggle. Daily journaling, reading emotional stories or books, engaging in the creative arts (e.g. dance, acting, music, or painting), skill-based and group therapy, and various relaxation practices may be used to help cultivate skills for identifying and understanding feelings on a surface and in-depth level.

Just like most mental health or medical concerns, formal diagnosis and treatment should be done by a mental health professional with expertise in the area. When you feel ready, a licensed mental health professional may be the next best step to help ease any distress you may be feeling. Try to be patient with yourself as you decide what is best for you.

Hope this helps!

Alice!

Category:
Emotional Health [2]
Communication Concerns [3]
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Related questions

How to find a therapist [5]
I feel like I have lost the ability to communicate with people [6]
Post-active duty — Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? [7]
Do I have an eating disorder? [8]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [9]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [10]

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