

REVIEW ARTICLE:

UNDERSTANDING ALEXITHYMIA: A PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

AMENA ZEHRA¹ AND MEMOONA JAHANGIR²

¹Department of Psychology, university of Karachi, Pakistan

²Institute of Clinical Psychology, Karachi, Pakistan

CORRESPONDANCE: MEMOONA JAHANGIR E- mail: memoona.jahangir92@live.com

Submitted: September 22nd , 2023

Accepted: June 28th , 2024

Abstract

Objective: The objective of the review is to understand multifaceted construct of alexithymia and its association with psychosocial variables.

Method: A thorough examination of the literature on the construct of alexithymia was conducted, encompassing studies published over several years. The empirical findings over the years regarding various psychosocial variables, including attachment styles and empathy were also reviewed. The Sociodemographic characteristics and comorbidity of alexithymia with other mental health conditions were also analyzed and its treatment approach is also discussed.

Results: The review revealed that attachment bond plays a significant role in the development of alexithymia, childhood trauma due to unhealthy mother-infant bond can be one of the reasons for difficulty in understanding emotions which leads to difficulties in empathy as well. Furthermore, alexithymia has been found to be comorbid with depression, anxiety, autism and other mental illnesses.

Conclusion: The findings of the review suggests that alexithymia is an important construct which can influence various psychosocial aspects of life. Although some of the variables have been extensively studied, much remains to be unclear. Further research will add up value to comprehensively evaluate the impact of alexithymia on psychosocial aspects

Keywords: *alexithymia, psychosocial perspective, attachment styles, empathy.*

Introduction

Alexithymia is a Greek word (A= no, Lexis = words, Thymos= emotions) which refers to no words for emotions. It was first introduced by Nemiah and Sifneos¹ and its salient features are: 1) difficulties in identifying emotions, 2) difficulties in describing emotions and 3) external oriented thinking style. It is considered as dimensional personality trait and not as a categorical all-or-none phenomenon². It is a construct which includes both affective and cognitive aspects and it is defined as impairments in the understanding, regulating and conveying of emotions which is referred to as cognitive-affective disturbance³.

Alexithymia is divided into two types; primary and secondary alexithymia. Primary alexithymia refers to as stable personality trait which is molded in childhood and can be considered developmental whereas secondary alexithymia can be developed later in life when an individual goes through some trauma in life or through environmental and sociocultural issues⁴.

The psychodynamic approach offered a more nuanced view that alexithymia can be connected to immature defensive mechanisms like suppression and/or avoiding powerful emotional experiences¹. Freyberger and McDougall^{5,6} concluded that alexithymia can be repercussion from an ineffective defense mechanism against intense emotions rather than from a core lack of emotional experience. Alexithymia is not only limited to difficulty in experiencing and communicating one's own feelings it can be more profound dysfunction in emotion regulation, which can cause distress at personal level as well as diminished emotional concern for other⁷.

The purpose of this review is to understand the dynamics of alexithymia. In Pakistan, this variable is not much explored. Factors which play important role were studied. This review also predicts what alexithymia can lead to.

Method

The review was open and over 50 years of researches has been reviewed. The researches weren't limited and has been taken from worldwide and empirical studies were picked. It includes both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Eligibility Criteria

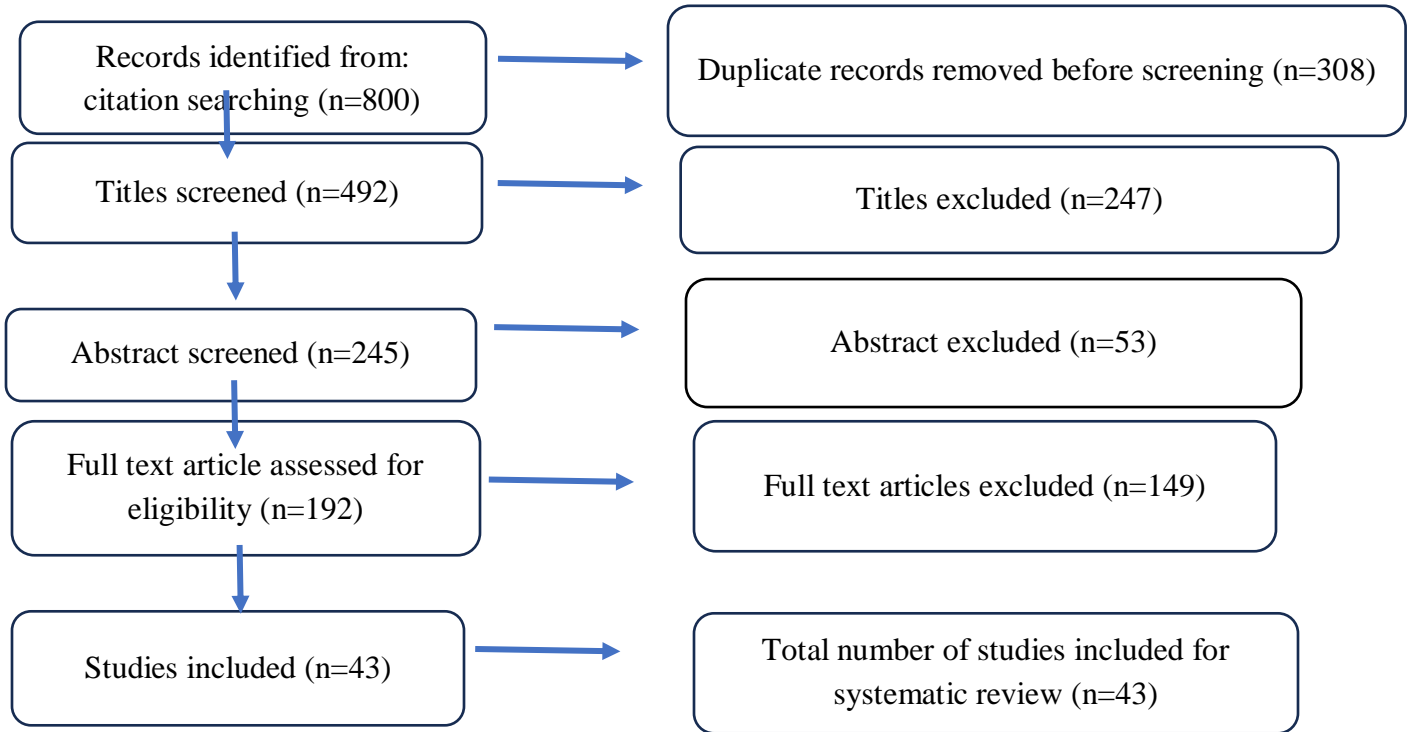
The papers included were published in English language and worldwide researches on the alexithymia were included. Papers from over 50 years were included in the review. Empirical studies were selected, both qualitative and quantitative studies were reviewed.

Information sources

Five databases were used to find papers on alexithymia from over 50 years. These databases included PubMed, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Research Gate and SAGE journals.

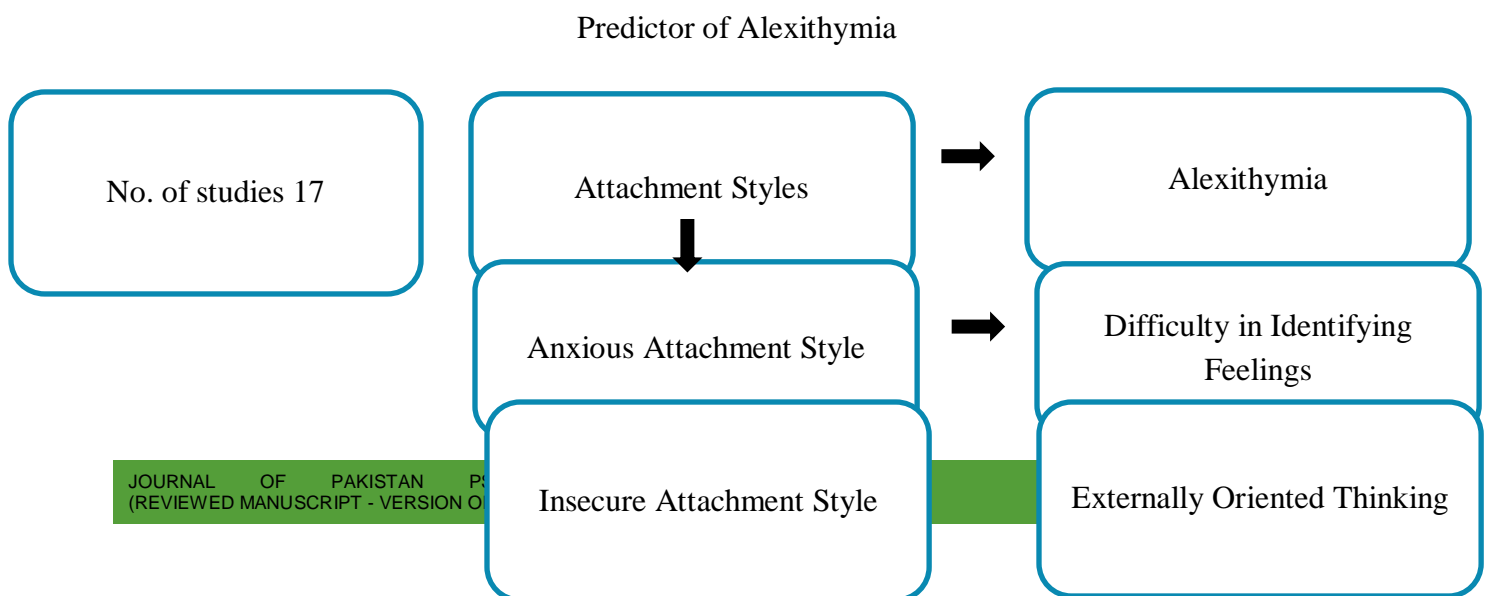
Search

The search was carried out primarily using keywords 'alexithymia', 'predictors of alexithymia', 'alexithymia and empathy', 'alexithymia and attachment styles', 'alexithymia leading to psychiatric conditions', 'alexithymia and its relationship with sociodemographic' and with the help of Chrome.



Results

The flow chart shows the predictors and outcomes of alexithymia and number of studies which are indicative of the relationship. Also, the relationship between sociodemographic and alexithymia has been demonstrated. Alexithymia and its impact on psychological health and also its treatment has been shown.



Avoidant Attachment Style



Difficulty in Describing Feelings

Outcomes of Alexithymia

No. of Studies 6

=

Alexithymia



Lack of Empathy

Sociodemographic and Alexithymia

No. of Studies 2

High Alexithymia



Females

No. of Studies 1

High Alexithymia



Males

No. of Studies 1

No difference in level of alexithymia between male and female

No. of Studies 1

No association between level of education

No. of Studies 2

High Alexithymia



Lesser years of education

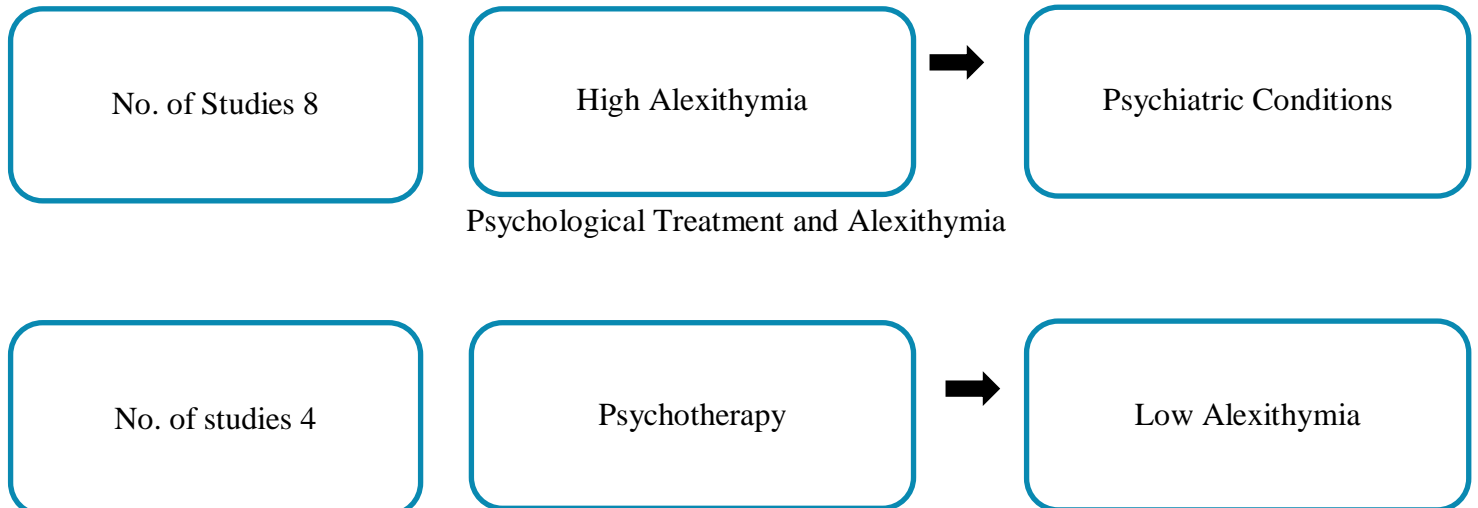
No. of Studies 1

High Alexithymia



Lower Income

Psychiatric Conditions and Alexithymia



Psychological Treatment and Alexithymia

Alexithymia have been associated with many psychosocial aspects as well and some of the important psychosocial factors with respect to Alexithymia have been discussed below:

Attachment Styles

An attachment style is considered to be set of patterns within and around relationships and they are mostly determined in childhood. Early relationships with significant attachment figures are essential for the development of communication skills, emotion regulation, and conduct in social circumstances, according to attachment theories^{8,9}.

Berenbaum and James¹⁰ investigated how alexithymia was carried in families. Children who grow up in circumstances where they feel physically unsafe, emotionally insecure, and where expressing emotions is disapproved are unlikely to learn effective skills, and as a result, they will find it hard to express their emotions. Moreover, past experiences of abuse have also been associated with alexithymia. A study concluded that childhood trauma or issues with the mother-infant bond are the root causes of alexithymia¹¹.

Many researches have been conducted in order to study different components of alexithymia with types of attachment styles. Laible⁹ conducted research which concluded that secure attachment style is linked to emotional awareness, and the ability to build close relationships with respect to having an empathetic capability. Insecure attachment style has been associated with lack of emotional understanding which is the component of alexithymia^{12,13}. Avoidant and anxious attachment styles contribute in higher levels of alexithymia. Moreover, difficulty in identifying feelings is also specifically linked to anxious attachment style¹⁴. Furthermore, difficulty in describing feelings is linked to avoidant attachment style and externally oriented thinking is also linked to insecure attachment style, which concludes that different attachment styles can be associated with different components of alexithymia¹⁴.

A study conducted by Wearden and colleagues¹⁵ deduced that alexithymia is a byproduct of maladaptive defenses which are used to deal with heavy emotions; the development of emotional

skills is determined by attachment styles in early childhood and these attachment styles have the power to block the emotional experience as well^{16,17}.

Considering difficulties in understanding one's emotions due to attachment issues might lead to difficulties in understanding other people's emotions, so, empathy is an important factor to study in the light of alexithymia.

Empathy

Empathy is commonly described as putting oneself in other's shoes. It is an ability to understand other people's situation and perspective. Considering the notion of empathy i.e. understanding the emotions, it can be attributed that alexithymia is correlated to deficits in empathy and for that purpose alexithymia can be sole reason for empathetic difficulties¹⁸. As per 'Simulation Theory' the individual simulates other person's thoughts and beliefs and recreate them in their mind to understand the other person's state¹⁹. Thus, it will be challenging to understand and relate to the emotions of others if one is unable to effectively evaluate and describe their own internal affective states.

Bird and Viding²⁰ also explain in their Self to Other Model of Empathy (SOME) that learned emotional associations can be understood by understanding the factors which impacts one's personal experience of emotion. The affective representation system, which holds representations of one's current affective state and is probably situated between the insular cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex, is thought to be the primary area of dysfunction in alexithymia. An inability to generate a consciously accessible representation of one's own affective state which is compatible with the alexithymia characteristics of inability to identify and describe emotions.

Another perspective; Alexithymia is also associated with a deficit in interoceptive awareness²¹. Interoceptive awareness is the ability to identify, access, understand and respond appropriately to patterns of internal signals. It is a crucial component of empathy, and lack of introspection skills is also one of the characterizations of alexithymia^{22,23}.

Other than psychological factors, sociodemographic factors have also been found to be of great importance while studying alexithymia.

Sociodemographic

Alexithymia and sociodemographic have been studied in order to determine their relationship or association. There are contradictory findings in between age and alexithymia as the researches shows inconsistent results, in adult samples, some studies show no association²⁴, other studies suggest that alexithymia increases with age, and still others suggest that alexithymia decreases with age²⁵. Likewise, studies conducted to see the association between gender and alexithymia also have inconsistent findings. Some studies suggest that males scores higher on alexithymia as compared to females²⁶ while other suggests that female scored higher on the variable of alexithymia^{24,27} as females are allowed to express themselves emotionally whereas, men are discouraged for the expression of emotion. However, research conducted by Sakkinen and colleagues²⁸ showed no significant difference in between male and female. Characteristics of alexithymia has also been studied separately by Joukamaa and his colleagues²⁹ which concluded that men scored higher on difficulty in describing feelings and externally oriented thinking but there was no difference found in difficulty in identifying feelings among male and female.

The association between alexithymia and education level is not well defined as there are contradictory researches and some researches shows no association between level of education and alexithymia³⁰ while some researches have concluded that alexithymia is associated with lesser years of education^{24,31}.

As far as socioeconomic status is concerned; alexithymia is mostly related to lower income²⁶.

The causes of some of the associations are still unknown, further studies can be done to understand the associations and what potential causes can contribute to alexithymia.

Psychiatric Conditions and Other Psychosocial factors

It has been observed that alexithymia has been associated with psychiatric conditions more than with general population³². It has been most prominently associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder³² and it also has very much significance for developing clinical disorders like anxiety and depression³³. Alcohol dependence has also been found in alexithymia but mostly in high level alexithymic individuals³⁴. Genetic and childhood environmental factors also contributes in alexithymia³⁵ and as we discussed the significance of attachment styles for developing alexithymia and it can lead to trauma and other psychological illnesses as the stressful environment does have impact on psychological well-being of an individual³⁶.

Moreover, Impulse control problems like gambling has also been associated with alexithymia³⁷. Neurological disorders like Parkinson's have also relevance in alexithymia and so do schizophrenia³⁸. Alexithymia has also been associated with eating disorders³⁹. As alexithymia contributes in psychiatric disorders, there are many researches which has proposed effective treatments for the alexithymia.

○ Treatment Considerations:

Considering the level of alexithymia, it was concluded by Ogrodniczuk and colleagues⁴⁰ that it is more likely that individuals with low level of alexithymia are more benefitted from psychotherapy as compared to individuals with high level of alexithymia. Moreover, many psychotherapists devised treatment strategies to treat alexithymia. Levant and colleagues⁴¹ devised a six-session program which included emotional awareness and emotional regulation to treat alexithymia as individuals with alexithymia lack these. Emotion regulation has to be the core symptom to treat in alexithymia⁴². Skill based interventions, cognitive behavior therapy and psychoeducation about feelings and emotions also founded to be helping in the treatment of alexithymia⁴³.

Limitations:

The studies reviewed and included has a limited sample size which might also restrain the interpretation of the studies. Moreover, some of the articles were inaccessible which have limited the access to broader knowledge. There are many other psychosocial variables which can be studied in the to understand the alexithymia extensively.

Conclusion:

This systematic review gives valuable insights in understanding the multifaceted nature of alexithymia. Through comprehensive analysis of literature review, it is found that alexithymia is associated with several variables including childhood trauma, empathy, and comorbidity with other mental health conditions. Mother infant bond plays significant role in understanding emotions in childhood, unhealthy bond might lead to alexithymia. This analysis also shed light on difficulty in empathizing. As alexithymia does have impact on psychological health, treatment approaches have also been reviewed. Overall, despite the progress made in understanding alexithymia, there is still much that remains unknown about this construct, further research is needed to fully understand alexithymia in clinical setting and in society at large.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References

1. López-Muñoz F, Pérez-Fernández F. A history of the alexithymia concept and its explanatory models: an epistemological perspective. *Frontiers in psychiatry*. 2020 Jan 31;10:505196.
2. Parker JD, Taylor GJ, Bagby RM. The relationship between emotional intelligence and alexithymia. *Personality and Individual differences*. 2001 Jan 5;30(1):107-15.
3. Taylor GJ, Bagby RM, Parker JD. The 20-Item Toronto Alexithymia Scale: IV. Reliability and factorial validity in different languages and cultures. *Journal of psychosomatic research*. 2003 Sep 1;55(3):277-83.
4. Taylor GJ, Bagby RM, Parker JD. The 20-Item Toronto Alexithymia Scale: IV. Reliability and factorial validity in different languages and cultures. *Journal of psychosomatic research*. 2003 Sep 1;55(3):277-83.
5. Freyberger H. Supportive psychotherapeutic techniques in primary and secondary alexithymia. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*. 1977 Jan 1;28(1/4):337-42.
6. McDougall J. *Theaters of the body: A psychoanalytic approach to psychosomatic illness*. WW Norton & Company; 1989.
7. Alkan Härtwig E, Aust S, Heekeren HR, Heuser I. No words for feelings? Not only for my own: Diminished emotional empathic ability in alexithymia. *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*. 2020 Sep 11;14:112.
8. Bowlby J. *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Basic books; 2008 Aug 1.

9. Laible D. Attachment with parents and peers in late adolescence: Links with emotional competence and social behavior. *Personality and individual differences*. 2007 Oct 1;43(5):1185-97.
10. Berenbaum H, James T. Correlates and retrospectively reported antecedents of alexithymia. *Psychosomatic medicine*. 1994 Jul 1;56(4):353-9.
11. Xie ZM, Fang Y, Mai YL, Zhao JB, Zhang XY, Zhao JB. The role of alexithymia in childhood trauma and suicide risk: A multi-group comparison between left-behind experience students and no left-behind experience students. *Personality and individual differences*. 2021 Apr 1;172:110260.
12. De Rick A, Vanheule S. The relationship between perceived parenting, adult attachment style and alexithymia in alcoholic inpatients. *Addictive behaviors*. 2006 Jul 1;31(7):1265-70.
13. De Rick A, Vanheule S. Attachment styles in alcoholic inpatients. *European Addiction Research*. 2007 Mar 16;13(2):101-8.
14. Oskis A, Clow A, Hucklebridge F, Bifulco A, Jacobs C, Loveday C. Understanding alexithymia in female adolescents: The role of attachment style. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2013 Jan 1;54(1):97-102.
15. Wearden AJ, Tarrrier N, Barrowclough C, Zastowny TR, Rahill AA. A review of expressed emotion research in health care. *Clinical psychology review*. 2000 Aug 1;20(5):633-66.
16. Meins E, Harris-Waller J, Lloyd A. Understanding alexithymia: Associations with peer attachment style and mind-mindedness. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2008 Jul 1;45(2):146-52.
17. Fossati A, Acquarini E, Feeney JA, Borroni S, Grazioli F, Giarolli LE, Franciosi G, Maffei C. Alexithymia and attachment insecurities in impulsive aggression. *Attachment & Human Development*. 2009 Mar 1;11(2):165-82.
18. Valdespino A, Antezana L, Ghane M, Richey JA. Alexithymia as a transdiagnostic precursor to empathy abnormalities: the functional role of the insula. *Frontiers in psychology*. 2017 Dec 21;8:305510.
19. Goldman AI. In defense of the simulation theory.
20. Bird G, Viding E. The self to other model of empathy: Providing a new framework for understanding empathy impairments in psychopathy, autism, and alexithymia. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*. 2014 Nov 1;47:520-32.
21. Mul CL, Stagg SD, Herbelin B, Aspell JE. The feeling of me feeling for you: Interoception, alexithymia and empathy in autism. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*. 2018 Sep;48:2953-67.
22. Brewer R, Cook R, Bird G. Alexithymia: a general deficit of interoception. *Royal Society open science*. 2016 Oct 1;3(10):150664.
23. Murphy J, Brewer R, Hobson H, Catmur C, Bird G. Is alexithymia characterised by impaired interoception? Further evidence, the importance of control variables, and the problems with the Heartbeat Counting Task. *Biological psychology*. 2018 Jul 1;136:189-97.

24. Franz M, Popp K, Schaefer R, Sitte W, Schneider C, Hardt J, Decker O, Braehler E. Alexithymia in the German general population. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*. 2008 Jan;43:54-62
25. Moriguchi Y, Decety J, Ohnishi T, Maeda M, Mori T, Nemoto K, Matsuda H, Komaki G. Empathy and judging other's pain: an fMRI study of alexithymia. *Cerebral Cortex*. 2007 Sep 1;17(9):2223-34.
26. Kokkonen P, Karvonen JT, Veijola J, Läksy K, Jokelainen J, Järvelin MR, Joukamaa M. Prevalence and sociodemographic correlates of alexithymia in a population sample of young adults. *Comprehensive psychiatry*. 2001 Nov 1;42(6):471-6.
27. Karukivi M, Tolvanen M, Karlsson H, Karlsson L. Alexithymia and postpartum anxiety and depression symptoms: a follow-up study in a pregnancy cohort. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology*. 2015 Oct 2;36(4):142-7.
28. Säkkinen P, Kaltiala-Heino R, Ranta K, Haataja R, Joukamaa M. Psychometric properties of the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale and prevalence of alexithymia in a Finnish adolescent population. *Psychosomatics*. 2007 Mar 1;48(2):154-61.
29. Joukamaa M, Jouko Miettunen, Pirkko Kokkonen, Minna Koskinen, Juhani Julkunen, Jussi Kauhanen, Jari Jokelainen, Juha Veijola, Kristian Läksy, Marjo-Riitta Järvelin M. Psychometric properties of the Finnish 20-item Toronto alexithymia scale. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*. 2001 Jan 1;55(2):123-7.
30. Joukamaa M, Saarijärvi S, Muuriaisniemi ML, Salokangas RK. Alexithymia in a normal elderly population. *Comprehensive psychiatry*. 1996 Mar 1;37(2):144-7.
31. Bojner Horwitz E, Lennartsson AK, Theorell TP, Ullén F. Engagement in dance is associated with emotional competence in interplay with others. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2015 Jul 31;6:148233.
32. Berthoz S, Hill EL. The validity of using self-reports to assess emotion regulation abilities in adults with autism spectrum disorder. *European psychiatry*. 2005 May;20(3):291-8.
33. Paniccia M, Paniccia D, Thomas S, Taha T, Reed N. Clinical and non-clinical depression and anxiety in young people: A scoping review on heart rate variability. *Autonomic Neuroscience*. 2017 Dec 1;208:1-4.
34. Thorberg FA, Young RM, Sullivan KA, Lyvers M, Hurst CP, Connor JP, Tyssen R, London ED, Noble EP, Feeney GF. A longitudinal mediational study on the stability of alexithymia among alcohol-dependent outpatients in cognitive-behavioral therapy. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*. 2016 Feb;30(1):64.
35. Lumley MA, Neely LC, Burger AJ. The assessment of alexithymia in medical settings: implications for understanding and treating health problems. *Journal of personality assessment*. 2007 Nov 14;89(3):230-46.
36. Schimmenti A, Caretti V. Attachment, trauma, and alexithymia. *Alexithymia: Advances in research, theory, and clinical practice*. 2018 Sep 27:127-41.
37. Elmas HG, Cesur G, Oral ET. Alexithymia and Pathological Gambling: The Mediating Role of Difficulties in Emotion Regulation. *Turkish Journal of Psychiatry*. 2017 Mar 1;28(1).

38. Brüne M. "Theory of mind" in schizophrenia: a review of the literature. *Schizophrenia bulletin*. 2005 Jan 1;31(1):21-42.
39. Westwood H, Kerr-Gaffney J, Stahl D, Tchanturia K. Alexithymia in eating disorders: Systematic review and meta-analyses of studies using the Toronto Alexithymia Scale. *Journal of psychosomatic research*. 2017 Aug 1;99:66-81.
40. Ogrodniczuk JS, Piper WE, Joyce AS. Effect of alexithymia on the process and outcome of psychotherapy: A programmatic review. *Psychiatry research*. 2011 Nov 30;190(1):43-8.
41. Levant R, Williams C, Hayden E. Alexithymia Reduction Treatment (ART): A manual for a brief psycho-educational intervention for treating normative male alexithymia, group therapy format. Unpublished Manual: University of Akron. 2008.
42. Taylor GJ. Recent developments in alexithymia theory and research. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 2000 Mar;45(2):134-42.
43. Kennedy M, Franklin J. Skills-based treatment for alexithymia: An exploratory case series. *Behaviour Change*. 2002 Sep;19(3):158-71.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

