

Alexithymia

Alexithymia is a condition that is not uncommon with autism. It is a difficulty or inability to identify or describe emotions.

Individuals with alexithymia may have a hard time recognising the difference between various emotions and physical sensations. They may not be able to identify which physical sensations are related to emotions and which are not.

This does not mean that people with alexithymia do not feel emotion but rather that they don't have the words to describe what it is that they are feeling.

Social presentation

People with alexithymia may have a hard time determining how to present the socially expected emotions in certain circumstances. If a person does not have a good understanding of how an emotion feels or what physical sensations are associated with it, it can be difficult to communicate those emotions socially, such as when receiving a gift.

Alexithymia can be associated with social isolation.

Misinterpretation of emotions

Having a hard time recognising your own feelings when you are autistic and may present differently to your peers, can also result in misinterpretation of your feelings. Others might assume you are happy because you are smiling, but if you are autistic smiling may not necessarily indicate happiness. However, if you also have alexithymia, it can be hard to know what you are actually feeling in order to explain that to your peers.

Some individuals with alexithymia can unknowingly learn incorrect information in regard to emotion. If you are presenting in a way that others interpret as happy, but what you're actually feeling is anxiety for example, people may tell you that you look happy, and you may learn that the sensations associated with anxiety, are what happiness feels like. This can become confusing when you're taught to desire particular emotions. If you've unknowingly learned that happiness feels like anxiety, it's not going to be something you want.

People with alexithymia may genuinely believe they are okay or fine when in reality they are struggling significantly with depression or other emotions.

Unprocessed emotions can also lead to more physical manifestations, for example stomach ache, feeling sick or faint, having panic attacks etc. This might lead you to believe you are physically unwell when it is more of an emotional experience.

Management tips

Therapy can help some people with alexithymia.

It can be useful to journal and keep track of different sensations you're feeling, such as racing heart, feeling generally uncomfortable, feeling tense muscles etc. as well as energy levels and what happened prior to having those sensations. This can help you look at patterns and what emotions you might be feeling. Having low energy levels could indicate that you are stressed or dealing with low mood, particularly if there isn't an alternative explanation.

You might find it easier to express emotion through art or music.

It can be helpful to increase your emotional vocabulary. Sometimes it can feel like certain emotional words are overused. For example, sadness could refer to grief, depression, generally feeling unhappy, feeling disappointed etc.

If you have trouble reading other people's expressions, it can help to ask them to verbalise how they are feeling so that you don't have to spend as much energy trying to decipher how they are feeling.