

Autism & Alexithymia Fact Sheet

What is alexithymia?

The term 'alexithymia' was introduced by a psychiatrist called Professor Pete Sifneos in 1972. The term means no words for emotions or is more commonly known as emotional blindness.

There is no clinical diagnosis for this, however it is often seen in autistic people, or people who present with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, along with people who have suffered a brain injury.

It is estimated that half of the autistic population have difficulty understanding and describing their emotions. As a result of this people with autism often experience more heightened anxiety and higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation.

What are the signs of alexithymia?

A person who has alexithymia may have difficulty in understanding and describing how they feel. In fact, they may not even be able to identify the emotion, feel it and show it to others at all. For example, when we are happy, we smile, laugh and generally feel cheerful. For a person with alexithymia, they may appear distant within the social arena, humourless or lack the socially responsive action to others cheerfulness. This stifles their emotional vocabulary to be able to communicate their own feelings, worries and concerns to others. This can lead people to feeling socially isolated and at risk of depression and loneliness.

How can we spot the symptoms of someone who might be struggling to communicate their emotions?

It's not that easy to spot the signs of alexithymia until you see the actual symptoms, so the earlier the intervention the better to try and reduce the anxiety of the person.

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Understanding the needs of the person is always a good place to start. If you are aware of certain factors that can trigger the person, for example crowds or noisy environments, try and read their body language and look for the subtle signs of anxiety or agitation. We all present with 'positive' and 'negative' indicators of wellbeing. 55% of our communication is through non-verbal body language which can be difficult for us to control. Often, we can spot the signs and symptoms of emotional distress here.

You may see signs such as the following:

- Panic
- Confusion
- Self-harm
- Anger or agitation
- Increased breathing
- General discomfort or looking uncomfortable
- Lack of affection
- Appears out of touch with the social situation
- Apathetic e.g. appearing not to care about others emotions
- Person avoids talking about emotions

It is important to highlight here that for people with autism the above signs do not mean the person is unable to feel. It is often the case their feelings can be more sensitive to others, but lacking the ability to communicate this can lead to significant mental health conditions, and even suicide.

How can we help people with alexithymia?

Standard therapeutic interventions may not be useful for a person with autism and alexithymia. There is also no specific treatment for alexithymia. Understanding how the person communicates is the most important issue to consider before considering any interventions.

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There are some useful strategies to help people:

- Encourage people (if they are able) to keep a diary and write down the events of the day and then discuss these events with someone they trust. This may just identify triggers and emotional responses that can be explored.
- Mood charts – these can be designed in various forms according to the person's needs. Using visual/accessible images of different emotions can help people express themselves.
- Drawing and artwork can help express thoughts and feelings without the need for verbal communication.
- Discussing different emotions when these are observed. Encourage a discussion with the person (at an appropriate time) to highlight the different forms of non-verbal and verbal communication. Encourage the person to try and use these in everyday life.
- Intensive Interaction – being able to model and discuss body language can help bridge the gaps between emotion and expression.
- Communication plan – encourage the person to keep a record of their emotions and how they express or present these. The people in the circle of support can then help identify early any problems which hopefully can avoid escalation to depression or suicidal thoughts.

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