

I Don't Know What I Feel:

Alexithymia, Adaptation and Health

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Alexithymia is the inability to identify and express feelings and emotions. Maxmen and Ward (1995) describe alexithymia as “a trait in which (one) has a constricted emotional life, diminished ability to fantasize, and a virtual inability to articulate emotions ... the absence of emotions ... as if no emotions exist (p.481)”. Emotions are triggered from one’s thoughts, memories, life situations, and reactions in one’s body (physical & chemical). Emotions are socially construed phenomena that are expressed via language, narratives, life stories, and behaviors. This writer takes the premise that it is important that everyone be able to hear, understand, and use the messages contained in our feelings. One needs to learn to identify feelings, express them appropriately, and use them to enhance life, rather than detract from it. There are messages about what feels good and what doesn’t. Messages of love, joy, hope, surprise, sorrow, hate, and fear. Messages about control, boundaries, protection, sexuality, and so much more. One’s mind and body are containers for positive feelings such as love, contentment, and joy as well as negative feelings such as shame, regret, emotional hurt, hate and anger. There is organization of one’s internal and external experiences. There is collective experience of psychological relationships that become attached to one’s experience and perception of control, boundaries, safety, protection, sexuality, beauty, power, resilience, gender, culture, and spirituality, among other things. We all use emotions as a means of communication with ourselves and others. The concepts people use most often to describe their emotional experience are love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear. These emotions also have facial expressions associated with them. There are physical/chemical/bodily reactions associated with these emotions. Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), has a list of emotions, description of various emotions, and how one might behave when having these emotions. **Adaptation** to life changes, good, bad or challenging requires us to acknowledge, identify, and verbalize our feelings to ourselves and those around us. Adaptation is related to emotional flexibility; individuals with emotional flexibility vary their

approach to dealing with their own and others' feelings. **Emotional flexibility** allows one to experience an array of feelings (anger, love, sadness, joy, hate, guilt, fear, et cetera) and tolerate these same feelings in others. The ability to experience and express emotions fosters a higher degree of engagement with people, and one's surroundings.

Where Did the Emotions Go?

Many people are able to not only think about, but feel emotions as they process their day to day, moment to moment experiences. But for some, those with alexithymia, the ability to get in touch with feelings and verbalize them seems lacking. Such people are externally focused in their thinking. This is in contrast to having the ability to identify and describe their feelings; their internal life. If the ability to identify and express one's feelings is so important in life and relationship, why don't some people have this ability? In other words, where did the emotions go? There is no one answer to this question. There is evidence that those who have suffered trauma (e.g. rape, incest, physical abuse) are often cut off from their feelings (see publications by Judith Hermann). For some, while growing up they may not have had the opportunity to identify and express feelings while in a close, interpersonal relationship with a significant other. Some may not have had role models as to how to name and express feelings. Some may have been socialized to not express emotions, but to focus on intellectual thoughts and/or acting. Some may have been pressed to quickly find solutions to their problems or punished for expressing certain emotions. Some may have been forced to attend to the emotional and interpersonal needs of others and not their own needs and feelings. Still others may have witnessed disastrous effects in others (or themselves) who express certain emotions and concluded that emotions should be avoided.

Emotions and Health

Research has repeatedly shown a relationship between mind and body. Denial of emotions can be detrimental to one's physical and psychological health. It's important to build a repertoire of feelings, talk about feelings, and share understanding of other's feelings. It is equally important to build the capacity to name emotions, understand emotions, communicate emotion, demonstrate emotion, and learn how to transform emotions for mental, physical and spiritual well being. In other words it's important to build **empathy** and one's **emotional intelligence**.

Emotions and Empathy

Does the following statement describe you: "I am an empathic person"? **Empathy** is being able to experience someone else's thoughts, feelings, and experience. How would you answer questions such as "sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems" or "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." Go to this website to take an empathy quiz: umichisr.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bCvraMmZBCcov52&SVID

You will learn how you compare to almost 14000 college students on empathy.

Also go to this website for ideas about how to increase your empathy:
http://www.ehow.com/how_2057644_increase-empathy.html

Emotions and Therapy

For those who have become fragmented individuals, cut off from your emotions, therapy can be helpful. The profession of psychotherapy recognizes the tendency of individuals to avoid dealing with their feelings through, denial, self - injury, self - defeating attitudes and behaviors, aggression toward others, drug use and abuse, addictions, compulsions, somatic complaints, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders.

Therapy can contribute to the development of **emotional intelligence**; the ability to read one's emotions and use them in a constructive way, as well as read others' emotions and respond in a constructive way. Ability to deal with interpersonal conflict when they arise. Free to be yourself. Free to express yourself in relationships and not have your identity defined solely by the needs of the other person in the relationship or by an addiction or compulsion. The self - confidence and security that comes from truly knowing yourself and being comfortable with your interests, values, opinions, and feelings. In individual therapy or group therapy you discuss your experiences and concerns and can begin to cultivate curiosity and understanding of personal feelings. This provides increased self - awareness and opportunity for growth, wellness, and effectiveness in interpersonal relationships. These are all indications of health and success.

References

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