

# Alexithymia: “Does My Partner Feel Anything?”



**By Samantha Rodman PhD**

Some people come in to therapy stating that their partners seem to have no [empathy](#) at all. They act self-centered and seem entirely unaware of their partner’s deeper feelings. When a conversation involving emotions is initiated, the partner seems bored or distant. This has the effect of making these people feel lonely, disconnected and desperate for some genuine closeness. The partners of these “robots” feel drawn to act out in ways that seem “crazy,” like crying, not letting the partner end discussions (which the partner calls “fights that *you* start”), and fantasizing about infidelity (particularly [emotional affairs](#)) or leaving the relationship entirely.

what if nothing’s there?

In [my last post](#), I discussed how Asperger’s and narcissism can both make people seem very unempathic and self-absorbed, but for different reasons. Many people with Asperger’s also have a seeming lack of feelings, or inability to express their feelings, which is called alexithymia.

Alexithymia is the inability to express emotions or to understand others’ emotions. It is present in about 10 percent of people, and some studies find that it is twice as common in males, while others find more equal rates across gender. Alexithymics can feel emotions, although not a wide range, but they do not know how to verbalize them. Usually, they are unaware that certain sensations are actually emotions. For example, a person with alexithymia will appear angry, but when asked if he is angry, will deny it. Similarly, their eyes may fill with tears and they will assume they are tired or have a blocked tear duct. This can obviously be very frustrating for partners, who assume that the person is purposely or passively aggressively hiding or lying about his emotions for some deeper reasons. The idea that the person could be unable to notice or express them is usually not even considered.

Alexithymia is linked with poor marital quality and higher rates of divorce. It is also implicated in can lead to “[Affective Deprivation Disorder](#),” which is “crazy” behavior in the partner of the alexithymic. It is also the dynamic I explained in [Mr. Perfect and His Crazy Wife](#), or when I described [attachment panic](#). People become angry, frustrated, sad, lonely, and desperate when continually denied emotional validation and support from a partner. The difference with alexithymics is that they are usually not being passive aggressive. They genuinely cannot imagine their partner’s experience and feel no emotions themselves, so they are not “hiding” or “deflecting,” but are angry and confused because they literally have no idea what a partner means by “emotional support” and truly believe that the partner is the one with the problem, and is emotionally unstable and irrational.

Alexithymics often have a range of canned responses to normal social situations in which empathy is required. They can mimic others’ responses and assemble a repertoire of phrases like, “That must be so

hard” and “Awww,” with the correct, imitated, tone. Only an intimate partner will notice that the same responses recur over and over and the pseudo-emotion that is exhibited dissipates instantly. This is why other people often think that an alexithymic is normative, and that the partner is the one with the issue.

Alexithymia is really a disorder of imagination. In order to empathize, you need to imagine yourself in someone else’s shoes. Alexithymics therefore seem to have no imagination, little spontaneity, and a constricted fantasy life. Their dreams are usually of everyday occurrences, and are boring for them to recount and for others to hear. They are not artistic or creative. They can succeed at work in occupations where order and predictability are prized, but they cannot think outside the box or predict others’ social or political maneuvers, so they will only advance until a certain point before they plateau. (However, they are very stable and even keel, so they will never make impulsive decisions that jeopardize their jobs.)

Conversations with alexithymics can feel monotonous and frustrating. In the excellent (although jargon-heavy in the last chapters) book [Emotionally Dumb: An Overview of Alexithymia](#), the author writes, “The alexithymic communication style is object-tied and logical, with a striking absence of poetic undertone which might reveal deeper resonances of psychic life.” The alexithymic does not often lead with opinions or reflections. Rather, he discusses factual happenings in his day, or details about his activities, without offering observations or feelings about them that would draw others into his story. It seems to others that the alexithymic is intentionally shutting down deeper communication, but he just does not understand how or why people would continuously discuss feelings or hypotheticals. Alexithymics are very literal. They usually don’t enjoy novels, or shows or movies that focus on emotions, but if they come into contact with them, they may learn ways of talking or relating from them, just as they mimic others in their social circle.

The imagination deficit in alexithymia impedes romantic and sexual functioning. Empathy and imagination are necessary for responsive sexual behavior. For fulfilling sex, people usually need to be able to pick up on non-verbal communication and to know what a partner is alluding to or hinting at. Sex with alexithymics can feel very mechanical and awkward. Alexithymics can learn sexual techniques, and will then repeat them by rote after they received a positive response once or twice, but there is limited variety or spontaneity during the act. Some alexithymics feel physically uncomfortable during sex and don’t enjoy it, because sex arouses emotions that then make them feel overwhelmed or even physically sick. Others are addicted to sex as a rote way to feel physical pleasure. In neither case does sex feel like “lovemaking” to a partner.

Alexithymia does not only occur in people with Asperger’s. It can also affect individuals with depression, PTSD, or those with emotionally neglectful childhoods (which you can read about in [Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect](#), and probably means the person likely had an unempathic, [narcissistic](#), or alexithymic parent himself). In the Asperger’s case, though, it is more often trait (or innate, permanent) alexithymia, and in the other cases, it is more often state alexithymia, which can be helped with therapy.

State alexithymia is thought to develop from having your feelings constantly ignored and/or invalidated, or via observing parents who don't express emotions normally. When parents "mirror" a baby or child, they notice the child's emotion and label it and respond in kind, such as when a baby looks surprised, the mother says, "Oh! That was a surprise!" When parents are not capable of empathic responding, a child does not learn about his own emotions or what they mean. Therapy that is geared toward helping a client recognize and identify his emotions can therefore be helpful, and can change a relationship dynamic. Sometimes, insight oriented therapy can help a client uncover repressed anger and sadness about his childhood, and can be cathartic and lead to emotional change and the expression of dormant imagination and creativity.

Trait alexithymia may be more organic and biologically based, as is Asperger's and autism spectrum disorders as a whole. In therapy, clients can learn to express more empathy and possibly to identify their and others' emotions by rote. It is unlikely that this will lead dramatic change, and partners will find themselves in a marriage where people finish one another's sentences and call each other during the day just to tell each other something exciting or upsetting. However, just having a therapist explain to an alexithymic that a partner's emotions are not abnormal or irrational can be marriage-changing (if, of course, the alexithymic is open-minded enough to identify as alexithymic and own this aspect of his identity).

#### Self-help for Alexithymia

Alexithymia which has a biological cause may not benefit by psychotherapy. If the neural structures involved in emotion-processing are damaged by atrophy or injury (TBI), the process may not be reversible. Moreover, even for those with a treatable form of alexithymia, psychotherapy may be impractical due to travel constraints or extravagant costs. In these cases compensatory coping strategies can help one function as well as possible in personal and public life. These strategies range from education to help clarify the nature of one's difficulties, to tailored practical 'self-help' strategies for better handling inter- personal relating and crises. Along these lines the following suggestions may be useful for those who have alexithymia:

#### Recognize alexithymia – don't ignore it

If you have heard about alexithymia and suspect you have it, take time to read more about the function or dysfunction of emotional awareness in everyday life, and try to identify corresponding aspects of your own experience. Most literature on emotional intelligence, and particularly titles about Asperger's syndrome, tend to cover this subject. This proactive approach will prove more beneficial than ignoring alexithymia, as it prepares the way for self-help techniques to be targeted to those areas in which you experience setbacks. In the long run the awareness gained will help your life to become more manageable, adjusted and enjoyable.

### Accept yourself

During the discovery process you will learn that you do not have an inadequate personality, but that you are different in a beneficial way and possess valuable qualities as part of that difference. Some of the noted qualities alexithymic individuals display are loyalty, dependability, ability to speak one's mind, a skill for noticing detail, exceptional memory for certain facts (such as names, dates, schedules, routines), a desire for order and accuracy, an acute sensitivity to physical stimuli (hearing, touch, vision and/or smell), increased perseverance and endurance in areas of interest, and not infrequently a prowess in certain sports or games (Attwood and Gray 1999). These traits are valued, and even desired, by those who lack them, which knowledge can contribute to general self-acceptance as you evaluate both the weaknesses and strengths in your character.

### Practice detecting emotions

Learn to familiarize yourself with the possible signs of emotion, such as a racing heart, feeling faint, blushing, breathlessness, body-tension, goose-bumps, butterflies, sickness or pain in the stomach. When such symptoms appear it will be difficult for you to distinguish whether these signs are from emotions or physical illnesses, such is the conundrum posed by alexithymia. But it is worth asking the question in order to save yourself unnecessary trips to the doctor due to misinterpretation of body states. You may be able to make a hypothetical connection between the physical signs and current life-events or circumstances which might have elicited the reaction in your body.

If you have some vague sense that the symptoms may be emotional, try to find techniques whereby you can reduce the physical effects of these emotions in your body even if you can't quite identify which emotions they are. There are general ways to achieve this, such as by reducing the quantity of your activities, slowing down your pace, relaxing or lying down to rest, all of which may alleviate the upsetting effects of emotional stress. On these occasions it may help to do self-comforting activities like listening to soothing music or preparing a favourite meal.

A second technique is to selectively change your present circumstances – your schedule, your present projects, or even the company you keep with others – to see if this removes the evoking stressors. If this does remove the stressors, your body will feel less tense and any ill-feeling will dissipate.

Third, try injecting a new activity into your schedule and start it immediately, preferably an enjoyable one such as a favourite sport, hobby, watching TV or visiting a friend. This frequently succeeds in redirecting an uncomfortable emotional state, such as depression or sadness, replacing it with more enjoyable ones. There will of course be times when these methods don't work, but take heart – even non-alexithymic people can't always control their emotions.

Learn techniques in 'emotional etiquette'

Because you will be mixing with non-alexithymic people much of the time you will benefit by cultivating a keener sense of others' emotional messages judging by their verbal and physical cues, such as smiling and crying. If you have a vague idea of what the other person might be feeling – even if you can only detect such broad categories as 'good' and 'bad' or 'happy' and 'sad' – this will be a good basis on which to craft your response. If you can recognize these general categories of feeling, you can respond also with general 'potted responses' which pass as polite and acceptable exchanges, even if you don't understand the fuller complexity of others' feelings. These versatile responses can be (a) generalised comments of concern toward the other person's unhappiness (e.g. 'That's no good' or 'That must make you feel awful') or (b) a praising response toward others' sense of good fortune or happiness (e.g. 'Wow! You must be happy about that' or 'I'm really happy for you'). Such broad responses pass as acceptable emotional etiquette which do not require you to look for deeper emotional nuances.

A further useful technique in emotional etiquette, and one which enormously benefits those with alexithymia is the so-called 'compliment – critique - compliment' technique. Alexithymic individuals are noted for being direct with their stated opinions, which to a non-alexithymic person can seem deliberately rude or hostile. Without clear qualifiers of the emotional intent behind your statement, non-alexithymic persons may suspect that kind words have been deliberately withheld from statements as an act of unfriendliness. To avoid this gross misunderstanding it pays to soften one's statements with a compliment before offering a blunt factual observation. For example, where an alexithymic individual might point out to a mathematics student 'Your answer to that equation is incorrect', a more reassuring approach might go something like '[compliment] I like the way you set out your work, I can see you've put a lot of effort into it... [critique] but on this occasion the answer to the equation is incorrect... [compliment]but good luck on the next question, I hope you do better'. The encouraging statements offered here both before and after the factual critique qualifies the emotional tone and motivation of the speaker. If no qualification is offered, then the hearer may feel that the speaker is just being unfriendly. Learning to use qualifiers and simple feelings responses like those outlined above may feel somewhat automated or phony, but they will nevertheless get you through to your old age with the least amount of heartache to yourself from misunderstandings, and for this reason they are worth employing.

Be wary of commonsense advice about feelings

Be wary of friends bearing commonsense advice about 'how to get in touch with your feelings'. Acquaintances who gain a sense of how difficult it is for you to apprehend your feelings may suggest body-

relaxation, meditation, self-esteem affirmations, expressive discussions, primal-screaming, and other random techniques. These suggestions are usually intended for people with proficiency in the normal range of feelings, and may not be suitable for alexithymics. In fact they may even lead to confusion, frustration and physical turmoil when your emotions become stirred and find you cannot modulate their effects.

#### Create a stable routine

Without the ability to self-regulate your emotions efficiently, it is very difficult to modulate the level of anxiety that comes with meeting new people or facing unfamiliar circumstances. Therefore some people with alexithymia find it helpful to maintain a stable predictable routine to help control the sheer quantity of new emotional information that has to be negotiated. This familiarity has the effect of minimizing both fatigue and anxiety associated with unfamiliar situations.

#### Foster co-supportive relationships

Above all it is important to have co-supportive relationships with those who can offer guidance and strength in areas where you feel disadvantaged. It may be that you develop a special relationship with a non-alexithymic person, such as a friend, therapist, partner or workmate. The advantage here is that you can integrate your functioning with someone who can anchor you in emotional areas when and where you need it, someone who might gently steer you away from something when you are over-doing it to your detriment, or who can advise you on the emotional etiquette in various situations. In turn, you can help this person by supporting them in ways that you are skilled at giving, e.g. by offering them your neat reality sense and attention to details, giving a sports massage, by helping them with their mathematics homework or some other intellectual task, or with whatever other talents you have. But you should be forthright and tell the other that you cannot function proficiently in the emotional arena, and they are not to expect you to do so. This person should be encouraged to seek a measure of emotional fulfillment outside of your relationship, with others, which will help also to avoid a more problematic co-dependent style of relationship. A girlfriend/boyfriend would be a suitable partner for co-supportive activities because they are frequently present, or a second choice might be a friend, therapist or colleague (or indeed you may find several co-supportive relationships).

#### Take time out to gather your thoughts

Anecdotal evidence shows that those with alexithymia are able to process some emotional data but that it takes longer to do so because they use different parts of their brain to do this than others. Whereas a typical person might intuitively grasp emotional data in

milliseconds, those with alexithymia experience a delay factor lasting anywhere from one extra second to several hours to arrive at the same conclusion. They have to think things out in a slower, rational manner, and to this aim 'time-out' rituals sometimes prove useful for catching on to the emotional values in situations and relationships.

Reflection time usually requires a private space free of distractions, such as a private bedroom, a study or locked bathroom, and is best practiced a few times each day. Other relatively distraction-free settings may be a meditation place, such as a church or ashram, a secluded nature spot, or while doing gentle sports like swimming, walking or gardening. The duration of time-out sessions is up to each individual, but it is best kept short so as to avoid practical reflection slipping into morbid rumination. Over-thinking about past slights, failed relationships, how difficult you find life, what people think of you, or where your life will end up in ten years leads only to morbidity and can bring on serious depression. It is therefore best to keep these reflective times focused on more practical emotional matters close at hand. A second recommendation is to terminate any time-out sessions in which only empty-headedness or confusion manifest, as nothing productive may take place at these times.

Overall, taking time out to gather your thoughts can improve your grasp of the feelings, intentions and expectations of others, as well as clarifying your own. This will greatly help your sense of clarity and ability to make informed decisions.