THE EXPERIENCE OF ALEXITHYMIA:
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF AN MSN ONLINE GROUP

by

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Abstract

In the light of the controversy and lack of clarity which exists around the alexithymia construct a qualitative study was undertaken to answer the questions: What is the lived experience for those who self identify as being alexithymic? How is alexithymia experienced and described by those closest to people who self-identify as being alexithymic? A thematic analysis of postings to the ‘Alexithymia chatsite’ was conducted in the tradition of interpretive phenomenology.

The analysis yielded six theme clusters, the central cluster being Varying Levels of Emotional Awareness. The other five theme clusters are: Problematic Interpersonal Relationships, Attributed to Childhood, Coping Strategies, Sexual Disinterest and Unique Experiences in the Body. The analysis suggests that lack of awareness of emotion creates difficulties and challenges in the lives of those who identify as alexithymic.

The data supports suggestions in the literature proposing different types of alexithymia based on varying levels of emotional awareness. Being unable to identify and name feeling during an emotional event and the implied delayed processing are interesting findings discussed. Also anhedonia, sexual disinterest and other consequences of alexithymia are discussed in the light of current research.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Alexithymia Construct

Clinical observations and analysis of transcribed interviews with patients led Sifneos (1996) to the conceptualization and coining of the term “alexithymia.” From Greek, and first published in 1972, the term is translated: (a) lack of, (lexi) words, for (thymos) emotion (Sifneos, 1996). While working with patients with psychosomatic complaints, Sifneos and his colleagues began researching the role played by emotion in these illnesses. Their exploration of the topic was influenced by the work of French psychoanalysts Marty and de M' Uzan who published interviews with seven psychosomatic patients. The inability to fantasize and a very concrete, utilitarian style of thinking, which they referred to as ‘pensée opératoire’, was remarked on by Marty and de M' Uzan. Sifneos (1996) noted a similar thought style in the interviews he examined as well as a remarkable difficulty in describing and expressing feelings.

Though other characteristics of alexithymia have been identified, the major defining features continue to be outlined as: 1) difficulty in labeling and describing feelings; 2) difficulty in distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations of emotional arousal; 3) impoverishment of fantasy life; 4) a concrete, externally oriented thinking style (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Early descriptions of alexithymic patients referred to their wooden or rigid posture, diminished facial expressions and boring attention to detail (Krystal, 1988). Such observations have been expanded upon using the Q-sort method to generate a prototypical description (Haviland and Reise, 1996). The list of characteristics generated by 13 experts include: bland or flattened affect, tendency to be somatically preoccupied, communication through action and
nonverbal behaviour, interpersonal remoteness, lack of imagination and insight and a tendency to be socially conforming.

Models of alexithymia have developed within various divisions of psychology. The original psychodynamic models remain, while cognitive-behavioural, cognitive-developmental and neurobiological models are also finding various levels of support. The initial psychodynamic theories of alexithymia focused on the effects of early childhood experiences. Krystal (1988) suggested that alexithymia results from affects which never matured or from a regression into affect immaturity. McDougall (1982) developed a slightly different approach, still within the psychodynamic view. She suggested that feelings exist in the alexithymic, but that the individual unconsciously defends against them as a consequence of problems in the earliest mother-child relationship. The defenses of splitting and projective identification are used to preclude feelings from awareness. This theory also includes the inability to fantasize.

A cognitive-behavioural theory of alexithymia, developed by Martin and Pihl (1985), draws on Lazarus’ theory of affect. Assuming that affect occurs as a result of a cognitive appraisal of some interaction with the environment and that information is processed through either simple or complex schemata, alexithymia is seen as the utilization of only simple schemata. Simple schemata do not require cognitive awareness and generate physiologic responses rather than further processing that involves more complex symbolization, thought and behaviour.

A cognitive-developmental theory of alexithymia (Lane & Schwartz, 1987), incorporating the developmental theories of Piaget and Werner, proposed five levels of emotional awareness. The level of emotional awareness a person is capable of depends
on the development of their cognitive processing. In this theory, alexithymia is seen to exist on a continuum but alexithymics do not reach the formal operational stage where emotional awareness involves awareness of complicated blends of feelings in self and others.

All kinds of theories regarding deficits in neurobiological pathways that could explain alexithymia have emerged over time. These theories examined the role of the right hemisphere, the corpus callosum, and the dopaminergic system, for example (Bermond 1996). In his review of neurobiological findings regarding emotional experience Bermond (1996) noted that alexithymic complaints can be observed in various cases of neural malfunctions or brain damage. Alexithymic characteristics can become the outward manifestation of the interruption of the brain’s processing of emotion at any stage, for example at the stage of physiologic arousal, or neurotransmitter relay, or interhemispheric transfer of information. Another review of the neurobiological literature (Lane et al., 1997) proposes that alexithymia may be a limited, or in extreme cases nonexistent, ability to consciously experience emotion – the emotional equivalent of blindsight or “blindfeel.”

Taylor and his research colleagues have worked over a few decades to validate the alexithymia construct, particularly through their work on the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS) (Taylor, 1994). Many of their publications attempt to incorporate all existing theories of alexithymia. They present alexithymia as both a descriptive personality construct and a disorder of affect regulation (Taylor, Bagby, Ryan, & Parker, 1990; Taylor, 1994; Bagby & Taylor, 1997a, 1997b; Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). While treating alexithymia as both a personality trait and a disorder of affect regulation is
feasible, Taylor and colleagues do not present a theory that would integrate these two approaches. Without such a theory, the attempted integration of all positions is confusing because, for instance, the psychodynamic defenses of splitting and projective identification would seem to have little in common with neurobiological models in terms of underlying brain processes. Their approach is analogous to painting a picture of alexithymia on the broadest possible landscape with no obvious background or foreground.

**The Current State of the Construct**

Alexithymia has been found, in varying percentages, in different medical and psychiatric populations as well as in the general population. For example it has been reported in those suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse disorders, somatoform disorders and personality disorders (Sifneos, 1996). Three decades and at least 1,260 studies (PsycINFO, June 2004) after the first publication of the term, the alexithymia construct has not been adequately clarified regarding its definition, core features and measurement. In fact, now research suggests that at least two main types of alexithymia may be identifiable; one type where emotional experience is present but the person does not seem to be conscious of the experience and another type where emotion is not experienced and therefore being conscious of emotional experience is impossible (Taylor, 2004).

Other ongoing debates arising from the literature are: whether alexithymia is a dimensional or categorical trait, the stability of alexithymia as a trait, and whether it can be explained in terms of a psychological defense or a developmental deficit (Taylor, 2004). Also the construct of alexithymia has not been clearly differentiated from
negative affect (Lumley, 2004; Waller & Scheidt, 2004), depression (Hintikka, Honkalampi, Lehtonen & Viinamaki, 2001) and more recently, from perfectionism (Lundh, Johnsson, Sundqvist & Olsson, 2002).

The need to understand alexithymia has gained heightened importance within a broader literature as the role of emotion in an integrated nervous system is being reestablished (Damasio, 1998) and also as the interest in emotional intelligence grows (Barchard and Hakstian, 2004). In the meantime the assumed relationship between alexithymia and illness has not been demonstrated (Bermond, 1996; Frijda, 1996). Also, the putative pathways to psychiatric disorder remain relatively unsubstantiated beyond stating that a deficit in the cognitive processing or regulation of emotion is involved. It remains important to establish whether alexithymia does indeed play a role in psychosomatic and psychiatric disorders.

Whereas references to clinical case notes and observations leaves one with the impression that alexithymia is a very distinct problem (for examples, see Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997; Krystal, 1988), reviewing the literature suggests that what is being called alexithymia could be one of a multitude of problems such as: a feature of depression, a sequel to early traumatic experiences, a feature of perfectionism or maybe brain damage that prevents the person from consciously processing emotions.
CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Rationale for the Study

The state of the construct suggested that a qualitative study would be timely. It seems that the boundaries of the domain of alexithymia are ill-defined, that the nature of the domain is murky and there is a need to stand back and reexamine the construct for the sake of greater conceptual and theoretical clarity.

Qualitative methods are used when little is known about a topic, when the research context is poorly understood, when the boundaries of the domain are ill-defined, when the phenomenon is not quantifiable, when the nature of the problem is murky, or when the investigator suspects that the status quo is poorly conceived and the topic needs to be reexamined (Morse, 1991a, cited in Morse, 2003, p 883).

This study contributes to the process of reexamination. As a study which provides a substantive picture of alexithymic individuals and an in-depth description of the experience of the phenomenon, it sheds light on questions not examined in the quantitative literature. At the same time this study, as an inductive method, will contribute to determining questions and appropriate directions for follow-up research.

The Context of the Study

While reviewing the alexithymia literature I did an internet search of the word. The search yielded a link to an MSN group called the ‘Alexithymia chatsite’ (http://groups.msn.com/Alexithymiachatsite/). I signed up on this chat site and have been receiving the e-mail posts to the site for over a year. In the light of the controversies being described in the literature I concluded that the site would be a very useful resource in the study of alexithymia.
Framework of the Study

The phenomenon of interest for this study is the experience of alexithymia as described by the alexithymia chatsite members. Rather than designing a study around a research question this study was determined by the nature of the data. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as most suited to the data because this type of analysis aims to explore in detail the participant(s) view of the topic under investigation (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). The data are phenomenological in nature because the posts are concerned with individuals’ personal perceptions and accounts of the alexithymia phenomenon. IPA is used in psychology and more recently in health psychology because it shares with the social cognition paradigm an interest in the connection between verbal report, cognition and the physical state (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999).

Phenomenology seeks to describe the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without resorting to theory or deduction, while bracketing previous assumptions. As such phenomenology takes peoples’ perceptions of their own experiences and transforms these into meaning units. These meaning units are explored to discover the “essence” of a phenomenon and written about as clearly as possible so that the phenomenon is understood. Phenomenological research is descriptive and interpretive at the same time (van Manen, 1997).

In keeping with the purpose and design of the study, the quantitative literature will not be reviewed in any further detail here. This literature will be referred to when relevant in the discussion of the findings.
Research Questions

The Alexithymia chatsite offers a unique source of data regarding the experience of the phenomenon. The study set out to elicit from the data, concepts and themes central to the experience of alexithymia as identified by those who identify as alexithymics and their partners. This was undertaken in the qualitative tradition, using very general questions so the data would not be constrained by existing theory and predetermined categories. The study questions were: What is the lived experience for those who self-identify as being alexithymic? How is alexithymia experienced and described by those closest to those who self-identify as alexithymic?
CHAPTER THREE: STUDY METHOD

The Source of the Data: the Alexithymia Chatsite

The alexithymia chatsite was set up to provide information and a discussion forum for partners of alexithymics. Therapists and theorists are also welcomed to the site. Finally, those who identify as being alexithymic are welcomed to participate; with the understanding that therapy or a cure is not being offered by the site (http://groups.msn.com/Alexithymiachatsite/whatsnew.msnw). What I have found, in receiving the posts to the site for the past 21 months, is that those who identify as alexithymics use the site more than partners do. Users of the site engage in a fair amount of discussion regarding the various theoretical approaches to alexithymia as well as their personal experiences. By internet and very quiet site (Michalak & Szabo, 1998). I have been receiving the postings since June 10th, 2003 and have received nine hundred and eighty seven posts during that standards, based on the number of members and posts per day, this would be considered a small twenty-one month period. Large newsgroups received more than a hundred messages a day, medium-sized groups receive between thirty and a hundred and small groups receive less than thirty messages a day (Michalak & Szabo, 1998).

There are one hundred and four discussion topics on the Alexithymia site (to the end of July, 2004) and the number of posts to each discussion varies greatly. Forty of the discussions have only one or two posts. In contrast “The big ‘S’ – Sexuality” discussion has 61 posts, “Am I alexithymic?” has nine posts and “Can someone offer advice please?” has 29 posts. Individual posts too vary greatly in length, from a couple of lines, to a couple of paragraphs, to three pages.
Method of Data Analysis

The study was conducted according to the procedure for thematic analysis and phenomenological interpretation provided by van Manen (1997). The purpose of this type of research is to provide a clear, precise and systematic description of lived experience. Following ethical approval from the university’s Research Ethics Board I began a thematic analysis of the chat site postings.

The posts on the Alexithymia chat site are organized by discussion topics which were treated as preliminary themes. Having printed all the archived posts to the chat site received to the end of July 2004, I placed each discussion in a manila folder, giving each folder an alpha-numeric code for referencing purposes. I then, in the manner described below, examined each discussion to uncover sub themes or thematic statements.

I immersed myself in the data by reading each discussion topic posted to get a sense of the whole discussion and to get an overall impression. I read and reread all discussions in this manner, tying to gain an understanding of each member’s experience before proceeding to the next step.

I used van Manen’s (1997) approach of selective reading to guide the process of interpreting the data. Each statement was treated as having equal worth and was divided into meaning units and then considered for thematic content. When doing this line by line analysis I read the line a number of times considering the question: What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described, (van Manen, 1997, p 93). I highlighted statements, words and key phrases that were significant in revealing the experience of alexithymia. I used a different colour pen for each new theme in the discussion. I then returned to the
highlighted text and wrote words in the margin that reflected my understanding of the participant’s interpretation of the phenomenon, topic or issue being discussed.

When I felt I had saturated my reading, highlighting, and notation of each discussion, I transferred the highlighted data to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I used the discussion topics as column headings. I labeled the rows with the letters of the alphabet so that I could enter significant words or phrases alphabetically, for easier comparison and cross referencing between the discussions. This spreadsheet was a useful tool to view the themes across as well as within the discussions. Because of the volume of the data, the spreadsheet was the only way to proceed to the next step of identifying common themes and organizing them into clusters.

I carefully examined the reduced data in the spreadsheet and reflected on what information was incidental and what was essential to the meaning of the experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1997). Interpreting the data was a difficult task but informed by van Manen’s (1997) statement “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects of qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (p 107). At this point I was influenced too by what postings generated discussion versus postings that were never responded to and therefore seemed to reflect only one person’s experience.

I then began the writing process, the culmination of which is found in the following chapters. In this writing process I constantly revisited the original posts to ensure that I was being true to the lived experience.
Rigor

The reporting above of the methodological processes used for this study demonstrates the study’s consistency and credibility. Credibility was not threatened by interactions between me (the researcher) and the participants, because I remained an observer. Further, the use of archived documents meant that there was no transcription involved and therefore there was no loss of data prior to analysis.

I attempted to improve validity in five ways: 1) by bracketing my own orientation to the phenomenon so that the reader will understand my interpretation of the data; 2) by presenting coherent and convincing arguments which are supported by verbatim quotes from the data; 3) by verifying my interpretation and theme selection in discussion with other researchers (two of my committee members); 4) by negative case sampling, watching for samples that disconfirm my expectations (Osborne, 1990); 5) by relating the findings to what is known about the phenomenon in the literature (in the final chapter) (Creswell, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

Old ethical questions are being revisited in the era of computer-mediated communication, such as: how to gain informed consent, how to protect participants’ privacy, what is public versus private behaviour. A recent publication in the American Psychologist (Kraut et al., 2004) provides updated guidelines for institutional review boards. These guidelines reiterate that informed consent is not required if the research involves the study of existing documents that are publicly available, and that an expedited review is sufficient. The archived posts to the Alexithymia chat site I consider public in this context. The membership settings for the group read “Public. Anyone may view and
become a member of this group without the permission of the manager”
(http://groups.msn.com/Alexithymiachatsite/). The settings also indicate that a member’s posts, photos and files will not be deleted if the membership is cancelled.

It is presumed that those who join this group are aware of the settings and will protect themselves with pseudo or nick names. Researchers are aware however that the identity of chat site members is not always protected in this way, as IP addresses can be traced by others. Further, there is a certain amount of naiveté among some internet users who maintain an expectation of privacy in this very public domain (Kraut et al., 2004). I therefore had to consider any possible harm that might ensue from exposing the group.

In this case there seems to be only one group on the World Wide Web devoted to the topic of alexithymia. The potential harm suggested by the literature is future flooding of the group by those who become aware of the chat site by reading the research. There is a danger of subsequent distortion of the group’s original purpose (Kraut et al., 2004; Michalak & Szabo, 1998; Nosek, Banaji & Greenwald, 2002). The potential benefit of the research, however, in shedding further light on the meaning and experience of alexithymia, is in keeping with the purpose of the site.

I had resolved these issues as follows: I feel the benefit of the research outweighs the possible risks to the group. I was not comfortable with disturbing the rhythm of the group by declaring my intention to analyze the archived posts. As such I treated the study as observational research. However the Research Ethics Committee suggested that I give the group some indication of my intention to perform a thematic analysis of archived posts. To comply with this suggestion I contacted the site manager about the study. The manager of the site replied as follows:
As far as I see, messages on the site are wholly in the public domain, user identities are hidden, and information can be removed on request, so people are free to do what they want with that information, including analysing it, commenting on it or publishing excerpts. I have always been working with that assumption anyway. I can understand an ethics committee would get uptight about doing something with data that is not expressly declared in the signup process, but as the identities are hidden, there is no infringement of personal data management rules. So I am happy to sanction the analysis of site patterns without making it explicit to the group beforehand. …. I think announcing the project risks distorting the result and possibly making people hesitate to post (Hal).
CHAPTER FOUR: THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESULTS

The themes uncovered in this analysis are grouped into six theme clusters, as shown in Figure 1: Varying Levels of Emotional Awareness; Problematic Interpersonal Relationships; Attributed to Childhood; Coping Strategies; Sexual Disinterest; Unique Experiences in the Body. These theme clusters describe the experience of being alexithymic as represented in postings to the web site and how it affects the lives of those who experience it, as well as their partners. These theme clusters are elaborated upon below through my commentary and direct quotes from participants of the alexithymia chat site. The fact that five of these theme clusters are presented diagrammatically as subordinate to the theme cluster Varying Levels of Emotional Awareness reflects how posters relate their various experiences to their level of emotional awareness.

The Experience of Alexithymia

![Figure 1 Main Theme Clusters]

Figure 1  Main Theme Clusters
Varying Levels of Emotional Awareness

This is an obvious umbrella theme arising from the postings which indicates that there is notable variability among posters regarding their experiences of emotion. Some posters to the site are sure that they are alexithymic while others know they have some challenges understanding their feelings but are unsure if the alexithymia descriptions fit their particular experiences. Partners vary too in that some feel they know that their partner or ex partner is alexithymic, while others are looking at the site wondering if they have found the right explanation.

The theme clusters and sub themes of this umbrella category, which are numerous, are presented in Figure 2 and Table 1 below. In attempting to describe what is central to the experience of alexithymia according to the experiences of the chat site users, this theme cluster attests to the complexity of the topic of emotional awareness. For instance a person who does not express emotion may have emotional awareness; however the non expression of emotion may also indicate the non awareness of emotion at the physiological and/or cognitive level. As posters discuss their experiences of emotional awareness there is some lack of clarity, confusion and sometimes contradiction in their descriptions. They are, after all, interpreting and describing complex processes within the body.

There is an issue with terminology on the site, an issue also present in much of the published literature, whereby the difference between emotion and feeling is not clear. (I use the term feeling to refer to the subjective awareness of an emotion and the chat members also discuss using the terms in this way. However the terms are not consistently used in this way by posters).
Figure 2  Theme Cluster: Varying Levels of Emotional Awareness

Table 1 – Varying levels of emotional awareness sub themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Varying Levels of Emotional Awareness</th>
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<td>Sub themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unaware of emotion at any level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of emotion on the physiological level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-expression of feelings</td>
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<td>Unaware of the emotion being exhibited</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem with detecting, classifying and reporting current feeling states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprising sudden awareness of feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational variability in emotional reactions</td>
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Unaware of emotion at any level

Both Anne and Ratina describe their experience as not having conscious awareness of their subjective feeling or the physiological correlates of emotional experience. This does not seem to be particularly distressing for them.

Imagine you are about to launch off over a cliff on a hang glider. For me I have no emotional conscious awareness of the dangers. There is no sense of fear, exhilaration, racing heart beat or anything. I am completely in the moment, being able to give myself completely to what I am doing physically (Anne).

Like you, I do not have trouble understanding my emotions, I just don't have them at all most of the time. After looking closer at the definition and what Alex is, I don't think it fits us. From what I have read here, Alexithymics feel emotions/sensations yet fail to recognize the meaning and mistake it for strange bodily sensations. I don't have any strange sensations. I know what I should be feeling yet I am just not. Is that the case for you also? (RatinaCaige).

Anne does however express worry at not being able to interact appropriately with people. Her worry seems to make the situation stressful for her, contrary to the image she creates at first about carefree hang gliding and being completely in the moment. She seems to experience her lack of emotional awareness as a social stressor and a reason to live a stable, quiet and routine life.

EMOTIONS - very rarely do I genuinely feel clear distinct emotions, though I know that in different situations, various emotions are felt by non-alex people. ..... In situations that are simple and that I am well versed in, the whole flow of communication seems fine and isn't all that different from anyone elses. But other times I see that my naturally empathising with them out of my emotional response to what they are saying is lacking, that my responses are not sufficient and that there is a missing of relatedness or repore. Trying to read emotions is like being deaf and trying to hear. This worry that I have makes it even more difficult to relate with people. Now this whole dilemma is pronounced when I am with people that are good communicators and in touch with their emotions. When talking with purely analytical people I feel much more self confident and at ease because I am not required to interact emotionally with them ..... Now I try to be conscious that there is NO single appropriate mode of feeling for a given situation. From understanding different personality types I
realize that different people feel and react in different ways. This has given me the liberty to try to go inside myself and see what feelings are there. This I do by being still inside myself, (centered) and seeing what is there. This I find very hard if I think there is pressure on me to respond in the appropriate way, then I am completely disorientated because I don't know what the 'appropriate' way is. As usual I need no pressure, expectation or time limit, to be able to let this practice work. Therefore I lead a very stable, quite, routine life, that I can enjoy (Anne).

**Awareness of emotion on the physiological level**

A researcher posted an invitation to men between the ages of thirty five and sixty five, to participate in research designed to learn more about alexithymia and masculine gender socialization. The response of one participant to the researcher is enlightening regarding the measurement of alexithymia through self report questionnaire.

I am keen to assist you, but your questionnaire is frustratingly flawed and will get false answers from an alexithymic, esp. since you insist on all questions being answered and there is no “Don’t know” button. Remember: alexithymics have learnt what is expected of them and play that back as required in order to get by in life.

Examples:

"I am often confused about what emotions I am feeling.”
I am NOT confused, I am simply not aware of any emotions. ....

“It is difficult for me to reveal my innermost feelings, even to close friends.”
WHAT feelings? There’s nothing to reveal! But I know what you are looking for.

.... “I do not like to show my emotions to other people.”
There ARE no emotions to show. It has nothing to do with liking or not.

(Garfield1340).

While an initial reading of this post would seem to indicate that Garfield is not experiencing his feelings at all, one response suggests that he has the physiological aspects of the experience of emotion “‘I have physical sensations that even doctors don’t understand’. Well, I shake when I am with a woman I find attractive and I don’t know why, but I don’t run to the doctor because of it!”

Gabrielle too experiences emotion on the physiological level:

You are fortunate to feel emotions on the inside. .... Most often I do not experience emotions in a psychological sense, but rather feel physical
manifestations of emotion, such as rapid heartbeat when “angry” or a cooling sensation in my head when I am happy (Gabrielle).

Paul seemed excited in a subsequent post to read about the cooling sensation in the head (described by Gabrielle) as signifying happiness, this worked for him to identify the feeling of happiness. He is one of a number of posters who feel that by tuning in to their bodily sensations they can learn to identify their feelings. Paul, like Gabrielle, feels the physical correlates of emotion and seems to share with her a limited cognitive awareness of emotion.

Non-expression of feelings

The following descriptions illustrate the non-expression of feelings as a factor in the experience of limited emotional awareness. Triton indicates that his former wife Anne shows limited awareness of others’ emotions and also jaded describes this for herself.

Ann certainly is 99.99999999999% unable (or unwilling) to fully form and express feelings, or recognize feeling states or nuances of others, and in my mind I would consider this to be primary [alexithymia], especially since she has been this way from at least earliest childhood, according to her self-report, her sister’s report, her brother’s report, and most of all her mother’s report (Triton).

The funny thing is I’ve always wondered what was wrong with me. I don’t show emotions at all for others to see, but on the inside I feel emotions all the time. I just don’t express them. At times, I can …. Normally it’s just when I’m angry though. It’s very taxing for me to cry. In fact, I hardly ever cry. At times I feel like a zombie. I zone frequently. I do have feelings on the inside, but it’s hard to explain. I feel something, but I’m not sure if its anger or hurt. I guess what caught my eye about alexithymia is that when in situations that I think should be uncomfortable … I completely go numb. I’m not able to move or talk. It’s almost like I’m not home. I don’t react (jaded).
Unaware of the emotion being exhibited

Some people are not aware of the emotion that their behavioural expression (face, voice and body language) is exhibiting. Their subjective awareness of what they are feeling can be totally contrary to what others interpret from their behaviour.

Triton talks of his former wife always smiling, though this expression is inappropriate in certain contexts. Meg writes about her possibly alexithymic partner “But I see him get very angry at things and then deny he is angry.”

The main thing that clued me in to my man was that he will 'appear' very agitated, angry, upset about something. But when you ask him how he's feeling - he will tell you he is fine. And the thing is: he's not really telling lies or covering up in the traditional conscious sense. He really DOES feel fine! He can't understand why people think he is angry a lot of the time. But it shows up on his face, voice tone and body language (Meg).

Not processing emotions in real time means that alexithymics appear to have incongruent responses to situations. Triton talks of his former wife always smiling, though this expression is inappropriate in certain contexts. Meg writes about her partner “But I see him get very angry at things and then deny he is angry.” Others tell alexithymics that their facial expressions do not match the feeling (or lack of feeling) that they are reporting. The alexithymic is likely to be unaware of a feeling that others are seeing displayed on their face.

Do some of you have problems with facial expressions? People often tell me I look happy when I am angry or hurt. Also they often ask me if I am alright, and say I look sad when I am unemotional (greentea).

Hi, I also have problems with facial expressions. Some annoying people say that I am saying two things at once sometimes ... I actually practice my facial expressions beforehand if I am going to give a speech or a talk. I write little notes to remind myself to smile :) (Alice).
Triton indicated in some posts that he believed his wife was denying or afraid to admit her emotional experiences, in this post he is clear that she is not detecting the emotion she is exhibiting.

Your experience of grief with the kitten reminds me of Anne's occasional grief/worry [sic] about certain things, which has always seemed inconsistent.... almost as if some effects do register vaguely and others simply don't. I often observe that a person with alex may express a whole range of emotions, but does not experience the existence of these emotions, leading them to accurately say "such-and-such an emotion simply does not exist in me", even though to the outside observer this is not true. What the alex individual is saying is that the affect has not been experienced, even if expressed, so in that sense they are telling the truth when they claim no emotion. In other words affective events such as pleasure or grief (and all the rest) don't exist because they aren't experienced.

**Problem with detecting, classifying and reporting current feeling states**

Problems with detecting, classifying and reporting current feeling states is a phrase one very well educated poster, Adam, used to emphasize that alexithymia is more complex than not using emotion words or not knowing their meaning. It captures very well the nature of the struggle with awareness of emotions that chatsite participants discussed.

I'm not an expert on alexithymia, but my personal experiences have been different from yours. I do not experience an awareness of emotions in "real time" interactions. As a consequence I often appear to others as not displaying the appropriate emotions in any given situation. Most often I do not experience emotions in a psychological sense, but rather feel physical manifestations of emotion, such as rapid heartbeat when “angry” or a cooling sensation in my head when I am happy (Gabrielle).

Makiskaya who identifies as being alexithymic does not experience feeling states as feelings:

It seems to me that there are degrees of Alex. While people tend to talk of it as an on/off switch kind of thing. Reading some of the chat ... I can 'see' that others seem to be a bit more cut off from their emotions than I think I am. This
emotions/feelings differentiation is quite subtle/complex to understand for me. I have a pretty full range of emotions ... trouble is they don’t often make it to the forebrain feelings interpretation (I think that’s it?!) (Markiskaya).

Alice is one of a few posters who become aware of a “shot of electricity” in some emotional situations. It was not clear to her what the sensation meant.

The last time I had it was when someone condescended to my mother (who is a very intelligent woman) at a dinner party. I got this shot of electricity as you said. I knew I was not happy. But then it went away as quickly as it came. ....Another time was when my manager, who is a very attractive man (but married) gave me a sexual look. I got an electricity feeling but I can’t recall if it felt good or bad. It also went away quickly. I am confused by that one (Alice).

Jaded explains that she knows she is feeling sometimes but finds the experience difficult to label. At other times she goes numb.

I do have feelings on the inside, but it’s hard to explain, I feel something, but I’m not sure if it’s anger or hurt. I guess what caught my eye about alexithymia is that when in situations that I think should be uncomfortable ... I completely go numb (jaded).

Both Alice and Adam describe their efforts to improve their emotional awareness:

Speaking of which, when I was in my grief counseling, almost two years ago, I was told to look for "fishes" - meaning to watch for moments in which something leapt out of my unconscious to the surface. In the grief situation, this definitely happened. It is the only time when I’ve had identifiable flashes of feeling (Alice).

My part-time course this year focused largely on developing the skill of understanding the meaning of what we feel. I suspect there has been some improvement. I have become better at controlling my reactions to theoretical challenges, because I recognise the import of the flushes and so on; it's something of the anger family, probably (=frustration?). But I have a long way to go and I don't know how to benchmark whatever progress I might make (Adam).

This comment by Adam indicates that he believes he is improving in identifying his feeling, however elsewhere on the site he describes getting frustrated in class.
Ironically Adam can identify the feeling of frustration and explains why this feeling was easy to identify.

A few weeks ago I signed up for an introductory course in counseling skills. The focus at this stage is on our own thoughts and feelings. We do a few interactive exercises in the class, to see how it makes us feel. I was null-hypothesizing that, when I closed out all outside influences, I would discover the true self uncontaminated by external events. But I found that if I shut out all cues from people's behavior, what I think they expect etc., I'm stuck for an answer. The exercise seems entirely arbitrary. The questions on the worksheets say things like, "How did you feel in this situation?", "How does it feel to ...." I'm not allowing myself to fake the answers by making up a story. I stare at the page, I shut my eyes, but all I feel is rising frustration at being faced with a task whose parameters I do not understand. I don't even know what I'm looking for. How do I tell what I was feeling?

It may sound contradictory to say that I get frustrated because I can't get in touch with my feelings. Surely frustration is a feeling? True. But I never said I don't have feelings, nor that I can't understand any of my feelings. The key difference is that in this context it isn't hard to work out what the feeling is about. All my focus is on one specific task, in particular a thought about failing at that task, and the feeling rises rapidly in response to that thought. Hence: it's got to be frustration. This is "outside in" classification of emotion—identifying it from the context.

But it's much more difficult when the situation is more complex. Suppose someone is telling me a story about things that have happened to them. There are many thoughts going through my head at the time—the content of their story, their motives for telling me, my assessment of how I should respond, how long it is going to go on for etc.. Now suppose I feel something physiological going on inside me. How am I to know what the relevant emotion is or what it is about? (Adam).

Surprising sudden awareness of feelings

Some posters claim to be generally emotionally flat and have to engage in effortful, conscious processing in order to know what they are feeling yet they experience strong instantaneous feelings at times. They describe being cut off from their feelings and being numb and become surprised by occasional breakthroughs of emotional awareness.
“I’ve found in the last couple of years that very occasionally when I’m watching a “weepy” movie (itself a rare event), my eyes suddenly tug and get watery. It always takes me by surprise and distracts my attention, I get quite unsettled by it” (Adam).

While I am rather cold 99% of the time, I get little moments when my eyes water .... This is the first time death really made me react at all. I am embarrassed when my eyes water. I cannot control it, but I am trying to. It just happens. It is not dramatic, but I never cried before (except when faking it) so for me it is a big deal. It does not happen that often (Alice).

Angry outbursts are described as surprising by posters who otherwise describe themselves as affectively flat or apathetic in interactions with others. Anger is a theme that comes up in a lot of descriptions given by partners of alexithymics. The partner experiences expressions of anger as different from the usual non-expression of emotion.

For example Jemima writes:

During our 26 years of marriage my ex often expressed anger, and while the words rang hollow he often told me that he loved me. He never spontaneously expressed a genuine feeling. For example, he did not say things like I’m happy, I’m sad, that hurts, I’m bored, I’m feeling lazy, I’m content, I’m stressed...... nothing. When asked if he was feeling any given thing he always said no.

Alexithymic posters provide descriptions of the sudden outbursts of unexpected anger that they considered uncharacteristic of their usual behaviour.

I am normally as placid and non-confrontational as it is possible to be. But there have been a handful of incidents in my life – no more than about 1 every 2 years – of me being taken by surprise by my own anger when it is too late. The red mist descends (seemingly from nowhere) and I explode in a frenzy of rage (Adam).

Jim replied to the above “Me too Adamski, but only about every ten years!” Paul writes in a different discussion “But I can get very angry and not have a clue what is happening until later then I wonder why I got so angry.”
Situational variability in emotional reactions

Reading through the discussions leaves one with the impression that alexithymia is experienced at varying degrees of severity and that some people go through periods of being more alexithymic than at other times.

I too feel as though I slip in and out of Alex. When I say that I mean most of the time there is no emotional challenge. But when I sense one, I get confused because I don’t know why I am feeling challenged. That’s when the Alex seems to kick in and it can take days for me to get to a point where I can have a civilized conversation with anyone (Susie).

I’ve noticed that my A [alexithymia] comes on most strongly when I am around certain people. These are people I feel very strongly about, they tend to be very sure of themselves and are confident that they are always right. This leaves me unable to have any of my own feelings (Paul).

Your theory about people with strong personalities bringing on A is right on. As (myself) will do anything to avoid stress... subconsciously. These people with strong personalities have strong unpleasant (stressful) reactions to your own feelings or opinions as well as strong pleasant (stressful) reactions. This subconsciously warns you to suppress your feelings and opinions, and you do it without thinking. That’s true of me, what about everyone else? (greentea).

Posters describe going numb in situations perceived as uncomfortable or challenging:

I guess what caught my eye about alexithymia is that when in situations that I think should be uncomfortable ... I completely go numb. I’m not able to move or talk. It’s almost like I’m not home. I don’t react (jaded).

I can definitely agree with your pattern of going numb or tuning out when confronted with a difficult situation. .... When I am in a similar situation, my eyes glaze over (gabrielle).

One partner describes her husband’s shutting down when he is stressed, while Heather indicates that the recovery of her emotional capacity did not happen after depression:

But he seems to have it [alexithymia] all the time and it gets worse with stresses. Like right now while he is dealing with what he is terming a deep depression. He
has almost shut down and did for a few weeks but is seeming to get better, in that he is functioning better. He refers to periods of time where he feels nothing. Which is of course foreign to me b/c when I am stressed I feel everything (Like_eponine).

I had very obvious emotions as a kid, so I remember what they feel like. But ever since a year or two after I got depression, now I don't feel anything that intense anymore. It's like everything I feel is tuned down to 1 or 2 percent of my total emotional capacity. I've been like this for 8-10 years (Heather).

**Emotion processing experiences**

Further to the variability in awareness of emotion described above, this theme explains what it means to chat site users to be unable to detect, classify or report current feeling states. Experiencing feelings ‘on delay’, ‘off line’ rather than ‘on line’ or outside of ‘real time’ is how some alexithymics on this site described their experience. The sub themes explain posters’ emotion processing experiences in terms of delayed processing, processing from the outside-in and in terms of incongruencies between internal states and emotional display behaviour, either they are others’, experience as a result of delayed processing.

*Delayed processing*

Delayed processing refers to a strategy some posters use to deal with feelings; they are not aware of current feeling states but they process the emotional event after the fact to identify their feelings.

What some of the participants clearly articulate is a sense that they do not experience emotion in real time. They process the event after the fact to figure out their feelings.

I keep a diary of physical sensations that are out of the ordinary – stomachaches, feelings of hot and cold, shakiness, dizziness, etc. I am, fortunately, a healthy person so these are likely emotions and not symptoms caused by the flu. I look back on these notes later and decide what each onset might have represented. So
in a way I am creating my past. I cannot ever do it at the time. But I can read through the sensations a week or so later, and ascribe feelings to them (Alice).

Gabrielle, who identifies as alexithymic, explains the delayed processing as experiencing emotion as an afterthought: “Alexithymics spend a lifetime experiencing emotion as an afterthought, rather than a spontaneous reaction to a stimulus. They usually only recognize their feelings after a very conscious “processing” of the input.” One ex partner agrees with this description “This is exactly true with my ex. He seems to experience emotion as an afterthought. Yes! .... the times when I’ve gotten the most out of him are times when he’d spent several days thinking and then giving me a response” (Jana).

Heather recounts trying to tune in and process her emotions based on the advice of a therapist she was seeing. She gives us an example of delayed processing, not being sure about the emotion label she is using, as well as describing her feelings as muted.

Okay. Well, I was doing something else and suddenly remembered this experience with a guy at a business who treated me like crap. I stopped what I was doing to concentrate on it. I thought I could express my feelings by imagining him getting fired, or something. I tried saying, "I hate you," and stuff like that. I tried thinking of revenge - smashing his windshield, burning down his house, etc. The “bad” feeling didn’t ease. In fact, it got worse and worse, until I recognized that I felt angry. And yet this was still a very muted feeling - maybe 5% instead of 1 or 2%. .... I'm still trying to figure out if I knew I was angry because it was obvious and I felt it, or because I know that's what causes my stomach to clench and my neck to get hot. Maybe both? Sigh. "Angry" was more of a suspicion than a realization, too. It seems like if I felt emotions as intensely as I used to, "angry" would have been totally obvious. So I dunno (Heather).

From the outside-in

The delay in processing emotion has been referred to by participants as outside-in processing whereby the person recalls circumstances and considers contextual cues to
name their feelings. This sub theme captures how the strategy of delayed processing is undertaken by some posters.

When I spoke of a problem reporting a current feeling state I meant that, even though I may be aware of feeling something, I don’t know what it is. Afterwards I can mull it over, think of various possible causes, settle on the most plausible answer and classify the feeling accordingly. This is classification from the ‘outside in’, using circumstantial factors and contextual cues to label the emotion in retrospect. It takes time, peace and a lot of processing power to work it out this way. That’s why I need to crawl away and think by myself for hours after any kind of emotional episode. So it’s not strictly speaking reporting which kind of feeling I had in the past, so much as hypothesizing what it might have been. .... What seems to be missing in these cases is the final stage of the emotion, where the feeling resonates with the triggering thought, thereby directing the feeling towards whatever the thought is about (Hal).

In response to this post, Triton (a partner) argued that he believes that for everybody, the cognitive processing of emotion is from the outside in, but that for non alexithymics it is more rapid. But as Hal suggests, the process becomes more one of guessing what was going on in the body after the fact. Hal gives us a vivid description of what it is like when he cannot make that connection between his thoughts and the physiological correlates of emotion.

As I sit here and type I am aware of things going on in my viscera. I am agitated. My fingers are jittery (if that makes sense), my stomach doesn’t know whether it is sore because it’s full or empty or what. I feel considerable discomfort and it’s been bugging me all day. Maybe if I concentrate and analyze everything that’s gone through my head in the last while, I might work out what’s causing it. It could be irritation due to the noise outside my flat. It could be something to do with being restless or not knowing what I ought to be doing this evening. It could be that I’m worried about giving a paper on the nature of philosophy at a conference in London on Friday and I haven’t booked the flight. Maybe it’s to do with thoughts about my ominous financial prospects. Or it could be related to the mono flare-up that has kept me off work in the call-center all week. Maybe it’s a combination of some of these things. I don’t know and I don’t know how to find out. I don’t know how I should feel about each of them. I don’t know what to do about them. So I just get on with whatever I think best and hope the jitteriness goes away (Hal).
Affect experienced as mood

Affect experienced as mood refers to the varied experiences with their moods described by both those who identify as alexithymic and by their partners. There are references in a number of postings to prolonged depression, to anxiety and other psychiatric diagnoses received by participants. Though this points to the experience of affect some use the term depression as being cut off from their emotions.

A couple of posters felt they were shut down emotionally for between 8 - 10 years, before gaining some relief by being treated with an antidepressant.

I had depression for about eight years - with all of the symptoms you listed – but I argued with people who suggested that might be my problem. I didn’t think I had depression because I always thought depression meant you were “sad.” And I wasn’t sad! I didn’t feel anything! ... Now it’s ten years later, and a knowledgeable doctor finally put me on Lexapro, to bring my emotions back. ... Trust me, you can get your feelings back (Heather).

A partner of an alexithymic witnesses a similar situation but more short term:

Like right now while he is dealing with what he is terming a deep depression. He has almost shut down and did for a few weeks but is seeming to get better, in that he is functioning better. He refers to periods of time where he feels nothing (like_eponine).

Paul in a series of posts talks about discovering that he is alexithymic but also indicates that he has been given a number of other diagnoses. He describes the benefits he derived from learning about alexithymia from the Soprano’s television series. He also describes a breakthrough happy time for him. This experience would possibly be explored as a manic episode in a clinical setting. He picks up on themes from other posts about moving in and out of alexithymic states. His story in some ways is atypical compared to others on the site, but perhaps is just a more dramatic illustration of the experience of alexithymia.
My story started with a chronic pain in my back (unprocessed feelings) and a trip to a chiropractor. After a number of visits he suggested a therapist. She said I had A. [alexithymia] I choose to heal myself, and set a goal: to experience my feelings in the moment. My research indicated A was a disconnection between the right and left sides of my brain. So I theorized if I did it to myself I could undo it. But as I scratched the surface there were a host of other symptoms that needed dealing with: severe panic attacks, ACOA[adult children of alcoholic], agoraphobia and other phobia, arthritis, obsessive-compulsive, depression, etc. I set my goal to come out of this healthy, I am definitely [sic] not done yet. .... I have recently learned that I can release these tensions if I can cry but that is not very easy to do. ...

I have A [alexithymia] and after afew [sic] months of reading everything posted I am just as confused as ever as to what is going on in my head. ..... It wasn’t until a year and a half ago I learned about the HBO show the SOPRANOS where the star has A and is seeing a therapist for it. In December there was an episode that really hit home for me the incident that tramatized [sic] me into A was portrayed so vividly I now know the abject [sic] terror that stripped me of my ability to “express my feelings.” I never had any childhood memories tiny bits and pieces of things relatives told me, now some of it is comming [sic] back. But at times the pain is absolutely overwhelming I have recently found the switch in my head to shut down "feelings" when they become more than I can take. But I have also tapped into the part of my brain where I never had access before, I can go days not eating or sleeping where I just "feel" things an all together extremely pleasant "feeling." The longest was nine days where I did not sleep a wink I suffer no ill effects, on the contrary [sic], I "feel"fabulous [sic]. I was wondering if any one out there knows how to open this path in the brain, are there certain triggers that are used to keep "feelings" being felt. What I am trying to say is I can shut down at certain triggers, ie: [sic] when I think I see anger in someone, but I want to open up at my bidding. Does anyone have any hints suggestions or "feelings" on this? Does it just come naturally to nonA’s? [sic] Do you all "feel" all the time? Can you turn it on and off at will? ....

I too have some problems with the Soprano defination [sic] of A, but there is some truth to it in my case. I have spent my whole life seeking very high grade stimulation in extreme sports. The things I like to do always put my life at risk some say I am trying to commit suicide, and I have often wondered if it was true. But thanks to the Sopranos defination [sic] I realize I have just been trying to feel something. The A has been what has saved my life because everything I do I over analyze everything without feelings then take a calculated risk. I don’t feel alive until my life is in danger. This pursuit has taken over everything in my life, nothing else comes close, not love or money can make me feel alive. I must have this high grade stimulation or I get very depressed.

I have been trying to read bodily sensations, but I can not tell if what is going on in my stomach is a low grade panic attack or love. I’ve been asking friends questions like how would you feel in certian [sic] situations I am trying to learn to feel in the moment (Paul).
It is interesting to compare Paul’s description of himself to someone like Adam, who also identifies very strongly with being alexithymic and has had bouts of depression, much psychosomatic illness and describes being anxious in some situations (though not as a received diagnosis). Rather than being a thrill seeker Adam tries to keep his life very quiet and stable.

.... when I was in school and had to answer an essay question entitled “What makes my life worth living.” I really couldn’t think of anything. I took three weeks off school to avoid the essay. It sparked a period of intense self-examination and that lasted years, producing only a state of anhedonic depression and psychosomatic illness. ....
I also complained of a type of depression that wasn’t like sadness. When I used the term, I meant that I felt totally zapped of energy most of the time, like I was sinking to the floor. I felt awful, in a very physiological way. My thoughts were very negative and pessimistic, but I wouldn’t say I was sad, nor despondent or dejected. I never got tearful, and (almost) never sank into the well of self-pity that some people seem to envisage when they hear the word ‘depression’.
My ex-girlfriend is adamant that I am a natural parent, because I’m always attending to practical concerns, particularly for her welfare, and paternalistically trying to educate and enforce morals. On the downside, I’m also judgmental, over-critical, domineering, over-protective, didactic and pedantic. I watch out for other people’s explicit emotional needs and respond to them because I’m not very aware of my own. ....
I too find it better to live a stable, routine kind of lifestyle, avoiding that unknown. I can’t say I enjoy it, though; but then I don’t really enjoy anything - except company and even then it’s in a strange vicarious sense.

Adam also identified very strongly with the description of her ex boyfriend given by Jana below (“I can identify completely with this profile of your boyfriend. It’s me in a nutshell too. It’s kind of unnerving how close this is ...”).

I'll give you kind of a laundry list of things that made me think that this [alexithymia] might be what is going on with him....
1) Retains tight control of emotions at all times, but releases it every now in then in a fit of anger (occasionally physical fighting, not with me)
2) I viewed his many activities more as distractions that he was using to avoid feeling, or to avoid knowing that he doesn't feel
3) He is very analytical. Has never been empathetic; really a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" kind of outlook. In fact, an interesting note, his father died when he was 17 (he's in his 30s now) and not he nor any of his family members really
ever talk about it, or reminisce about him. I don’t at all get the impression that he was a bad man, they just never talk about him. One time his mom told me that, after he died, she didn’t really cry or fall apart, she just got on with it. And she wondered if there was something wrong with her because of this (so, could this “non-feeling” be genetic?)

4) When stressed, he distances.
5) He never gets excited about things.
6) He makes decisions on principal [sic].
7) Just like Gabrielle said, he seems to be growing more cynical and isolates himself more. He could go several days without leaving his house or opening the shades.
8) His non-close friends would never know something was wrong because he has a ‘surface personality’ that’s outgoing.
9) He’s had psoriasis since I’ve known him...and I read somewhere that it’s common that Alex manifests itself as such(?)
10) He definitely looked to me to decide things...what we were going to do, what movie to see, what to eat, where to go on the weekends...but oddly, this didn’t seem to give him comfort.
11) He has Asperger’s Syndrome in his family.
12) He has, when pressed, admitted that he’s not responding to me because he really doesn’t know how he feels.

Absent memories and motivation

As we have uncovered it in preceding themes, the experience of alexithymia means, for some posters, not having real time or current feeling responses and this also implies that emotional memories are not created.

Having lived with an alexithymic partner for many years I have noticed her very strong propensity to forget events, conversations, or experiences on a regular basis .... even after ten years of living together would still not remember some of the most basic things – like what foods I did or didn’t like, .... what events took place in our children’s lives years ago, or what took place in her own childhood. This ‘not being able to remember’ though is not global, but more (I hazard a guess?) confined to the remembering of the more emotionally coloured events. The data of mundane events and impersonal details, even from many years ago, are remembered by my ex-partner extremely well in many cases .... (Triton).

Over time I started losing my emotions, even the bad ones. Now I don’t think I have them at all. .... Now I don’t even know what I want or what I don’t want, so I’m stuck here in a rut. ... Does alexithymia just kinda appear at a certain age? I think this is what I have, because even my memories don’t have much emotion. In fact, I don’t have much memory at all anymore as far as my past is concerned (RatinaCaige).
Paul identifies with the tendency to forget but gives a slightly different interpretation of what might cause it.

A comment on amnesia, in me it is selective and involuntary. I have suspected it had to do with “feelings” I wasn't able to process at the time that went along with the memory. But at other things I have amazing recall with excruciating detail but mostly on events where there wasn't lots to feel. I think bad feelings are associated around the forgotten memories. There is something that triggers the forgetfulness and an inability to remember some things (Paul).

Hal provides an interesting example: “For instance a couple of years ago, I was showing some pictures to my sister of me playing football with my dog when she burst into tears. I didn’t know why. It turned out the dog had died the week before. I had even given my mum advice about where to bury it and how to tell dad. But it completely slipped my mind.”

Patience writes: “I’m brand new to all this. I found out yesterday that my husband of 16 years is an A. & the forgetfulness is a pattern I’ve observed over the years. After a major emotional event (like a death), a bit more of his memories and capacity to respond emotionally appears to disappear.”

In the discussion entitled ‘forgetting’, from which the above quotes are drawn, there is some speculation about their pattern of forgetting being associated with alexithymics’ experiences with emotions. Other threads are peppered with references to no memory of childhood and blankness about the past, without such association being made.

He also has almost no memories of his childhood but tells me it was happy. I have challenged him a few times on this as to ’how do you know it was happy if you can’t remember it?’ and we have had some discussions regarding that. He does tend to go off and think things through. He is very bright and articulate. And some of the patterns he exhibits do not
indicate to me that he had a happy childhood. So, I DO question this with him (Meg).

This could be the explanation for my very bad memory. I have years of blankness which were the years I lived an interesting, emotionally loaded life. However I remember isolated details very precisely from some of these times, and I remember years where there was little interesting or exciting happening. .... On the other hand, I have memories of my past because my family would retell my emotional stories. I don't remember the event. I remember the story, and I create a picture from a third-person perspective. In this way my past life is emotion-free. Now I realize if I don't tell my stories to someone who can remember them and remind me later, they will be lost. It is a good way to clear out bad memories. But it is bad when I am too busy to tell stories, or if I forget it before I tell someone. The memory is lost (greentea).

New members to the site are relieved to find an explanation for their lack of motivation and inability to sustain interest in activities or relationships. Others discuss how the anhedonia which is associated with lack of feelings means that the usual means of motivating ourselves with external rewards does not work in their lives.

I seem to be experiencing some sort of revelation, I hope. I have thought and thought (as I have been generously afforded the time), and I figure that even though I can understand Alex intellectually and it makes complete logical sense to me and my situation, none of the possible therapies are going to have any effect if I am not emotionally motivated to get up and do them in the first place. .... So where does emotional motivation come from? The conclusion I keep coming to through a variety of mental scenarios is a couple of things; the first being that it all has to do with other people. .... And my drive has always been other people, if I really want to think about it (Susie).

I can relate to this to the extent that I normally seem to motivate myself only when it is for the benefit of someone else. I've evolved a general strategy. I figure out what I need to do for myself, but I don't have the drive to do it. So I then figure out a way of giving someone else an interest in my success or failure. Then I can get motivated to do it. I can pad this out with anecdotes in due course. But yes, it's a definite trait. Now I come to think about it, the only therapy which worked on me used exactly this method. The therapist told me to try various exercises for the following session, and made it clear he would be disappointed if I didn't try them. I was then challenging my behavior for someone else's benefit, and it worked (Hal).
Problematic Interpersonal Relationships

Not surprisingly, not experiencing real time emotional responses or not being emotionally expressive interferes with the personal relationships of alexithymics. Unless they can choose partners who are similar to them, their relationships often end in failure. Ex partners who found the chat site were so relieved to find an explanation for what they experienced in their relationships with alexithymics. This theme cluster encompasses failure in relationships, dating experiences and ongoing relationship strains.

This outcome of alexithymia and that it is being discussed by alexithymics is somewhat paradoxical as illustrated by this ex partner’s posting.

I have been reading some of the past posts with interest and the following is a generalized response to some of those posts. I stayed with my Alexithymic ex for 26 years because I had a poor start in life which left me with many psychological scars. As a result I didn’t realize that I deserved to be treated with compassion and love from my partner. I do not think that it is possible for a caring feeling human to love or feel fulfilled with a true Alexithymic, any more than it is possible for an Alexithymic to feel love. .... This is an individual whose problems are unlikely to cause personal distress to those not involved in a personal relationship with him or her. The fact that these people seem "normal" to the outside world, coupled with the Alexithymic’s inability to experience the inner turmoil which usually signifies a problem, means that it is very unlikely that these individuals will ever perceive that a problem exists. Therefore, to them, there's nothing to fix. The only ones suffering are those in close relationships with these people. .... In business he was extremely successful, honest, decent, and generous. I, on the other hand, was a woman with feelings who was often frustrated and desperate for a response from him ... I was married for 26 years to a man who was an excellent provider, generous, honest, faithful, and to the outside world he seemed to be totally in love with me. When I left a year ago and he didn't even bat an eye I knew that this behaviour was at odds with my theory that he is a control freak. Now I know that the behaviour of my ex is in another league altogether. The freedom that comes with the knowledge that I've gained since I read about Alexithymia two days ago is indescribable (Jemima).
Failed Personal Relationships

Failed personal relationships are a big feature of alexithymics lives. Past relationships, ongoing relationship difficulties, and current breakups were discussed in various threads, with few positive outcomes being described. The failure in relationships is described in poignant terms by alexithymics and their partners.

First, I want to say WOW. I have just discovered the term alexithymia and this chat site within the last couple of days. I stumbled on it while trying to get some closure from a 3 1/2 year relationship that has disintegrated in the last year and a half. I couldn’t even begin to tell you how long I’ve been trying to figure out what was wrong with my ex-boyfriend and why we couldn’t turn around what began as an amazing relationship with much promise for the future. All research so far points to alexithymia, even weird stuff like a correlation between
alexithymia and psoriasis/dermatitis (has anyone else heard of this?) and links to Asperger’s Syndrome (which one of his family members has) (Jana).

As soon as I came across the term alexithymia and read the descriptions given, my head exploded with realization. Finally, there was something that actually described me in some detail. .... Every now and then in my life, something or someone has become important to me for various reasons, but I have just never been able to effectively let them know this or to show any kind of keen interest for any length of time. It has led to my having few close friends, a marriage break up, and now the alienation of the one woman who has come closest in my life to understanding me and accepting me despite my faults (Druss).

**Dating experiences**

Establishing relationships through dating is also a challenge in the lives of those who posted to the web site. They find themselves at a loss regarding the social interchange needed in the dating situation.

Adam has given up on dating because of what he feels is spectacular failure. “My few brief relationships failed because partners demanded sincere emotional responses that I was incapable of providing, and their constant remonstrations against my logical attitude and stoic demeanour were wearing me out and doing me harm. My stunning failures would make an amusing book in its own right.” This, in spite of all he learned from a book on dating by John Gray. He gets into a discussion with Alice about Gray’s book. While she slams it as being unhelpful, hypocritical (written by a many-times-divorced man) and full of gross generalizations, Adam thinks it provides helpful information for the emotionally illiterate. While arguing the merits of the book he also provides insight into what alexithymics struggle with when it comes to dating and mating.

The value for me was in understanding that certain signals should not be read literally, and that people were reading much more meaning into my simple actions than I intended. I often get accused of having attitudes that are actually alien to me, because I hadn’t been aware of the other person’s expectations and how they
might influence the perception of what I was doing (e.g. not phoning a potential girlfriend until I had the time to devote to them – weeks later). The courtship game is frustratingly non-literal and emotions of affection have to be engaged and nurtured with all sorts of signals, promises and sentiments. I am no good at this, yet, but Gray’s book was helpful in pointing out some of my grosser mistakes.

Both Adam and Alice indicate that they do not recognize at times, their attraction to other people and cannot read the behaviour of others who are “hitting on them.” Anne indicates a similar problem and looks at it from two sides.

On the other hand I have no success in pursuing men that I am attracted to. I have begun to realize that it is the same paradigm [sic] working in reverse. No man wants or is attracted to a woman that shows no emotion. .... With men I am interested in I have a lot of difficulty knowing whether they really like me and I am never sure, because what others would pick up as a man’s obvious advance, I don’t, or am left in a quandary (Anne).

Though Alice indicates that she is interested in having a partner and has many male friends her difficulties come to the fore when a relationship becomes sexual. “I get asked out quite often, but I lose interest when the sex starts.” She is determined to work on recognizing attraction when it happens to her.

About attraction. I really don’t enjoy breaking in to sweats and feeling sick either. But it has happened to me. I am working on trying to see if I can connect it to speaking with or meeting someone who intrigues me. You see it often is due to the weather being so hot - so I cannot always tell. This is one of my projects right now - when my heartbeat gets faster, I ask myself, what just happened? (Alice).

Gabrielle gives Adam some advice from her experience

I have had great difficulty with the emotional aspect of intimate relationships. However, I have never had trouble finding appropriate mates (including my husband). I do have some advice: all of the men with whom I have had relationships either had alex. characteristics, or were pretty detached emotionally (all were electrical engineers or software guys). So you will have better luck finding a girlfriend who is somewhat atypical, i.e. a bit less emotional. Being a father figure is not necessarily a bad thing. I have a similar situation with my husband, and we have a pretty good relationship. .... you look for a "daughter" who is eager to learn from you. I mean a curious woman who is interested in
connecting with you intellectually - one who lives to learn rather than to feel. I am definitely this way, as are most women on the autistic spectrum (Gabrielle).

Adam has had some experience with internet dating and explains how his success in this domain falls apart when he meets the woman in person.

I even tried internet dating on some occasions. The results were quite remarkable. The people I corresponded with were exceedingly complimentary about my depth of insight and emotional intelligence, saying that I was what every guy should be, or was the person they had wished for but didn't believe existed. However, when I visited them in person, the spell wore off. I didn't walk it like I talked it. My emotional intelligence is only theoretical, not practical. I can write like a poet when I want to, and I know roughly what people like to hear, but it's merely wordcraft. Truth is, comic persona aside, I appear affectively flat. Women need to feel appreciated, and I can convey my appreciation quite honestly in words; but if they want a genuine non-verbal display of sentiment from me, they are likely to be disappointed - unless I decide to fake it. Sometimes, as I've mentioned before, I have had to act emotional in order to resolve an ongoing stand-off with a girlfriend, but it feels very insincere even though I judge it to be apt (Adam).

**Ongoing strains**

Alexithymics do get beyond the first date but experience ongoing challenges in maintaining relationships, especially if they have non-alexithymic partners. There is a tendency towards the development of a parent-child dynamic within their relationships; they may experience a sudden loss of interest in their partner and partners experience various strains which I describe as partner burnout.

*Parent child dynamic*

Alexithymics long term relationships eventually take on the dynamic of a parent child relationship in certain senses, as Gabrielle illustrates.

I have Asperger Syndrome and Alexithymia and I do love my husband, but after the first few months it became increasingly difficult for me to show it in an outward or a romantic way. It is almost as though he became a blood relative ... my feelings for him began to be like the connection between father and daughter. I love my husband in the way a child loves a parent, or vice-versa, but not in a swept-up romantic gushy way. My feelings toward my husband are what I would imagine to be the feelings between two people who have been together a long
time, shared a lot of experiences, and who have a compatible world view (Gabrielle).

This can change other aspects of the relationship and can lead to frustration and breakup as was Triton’s experience.

I very much identify with you experience of a parent-child dynamic taking place between alex and non-alex’s. This was my experience with Anne, and I watched her become the ‘compliant girl’ with her ‘adult’ friends as well. I stopped having sexual relations with Anne some years before our marriage ended because the sentiment between us was that of father-daughter (mostly cultivated/fantasized by Anne) and I could not enjoy sex with this incestuous overtone (yuk!) (Triton).

Not all partners related to the parent child dynamic. In fact, both Trition (partner) and Adam (alexithymic) indicate that in their respective experiences the alexithymic can play the parent/adult role in the relationship and that the child role is related to the domain of emotional functioning.

My ex gf (girlfriend) kept telling me I tended to act more like a father than a lover ...it points to a parallel with conventional male parenting relationships: showing concern and giving strong advice for practical and moral matters, but lacking in overt displays of sentiment. ....The main way that I am child-like is that I'm not very good at looking after my own needs, and generally require someone else to do this for me: this could be because my feelings don't inform me what I need and when. I'm more of a parent than a child in relationships, up to a point; yet I certainly have a kind of bewildered child-like quality too (Adam).

Loss of interest

An interesting phenomenon, of suddenly losing interest in a partner is described by a number of participants and also by ex partners. Greentea writes “I have also experienced a sudden loss of interest in a loved one, and continued the actions of affection. It is a strange habit.” “It has happened to me. I haven't ever been in love so it has not been very dramatic - but it has been surprising. I wake up and suddenly I am not even thinking about them any more” (Alice).

This sudden seeming loss of interest is explained by Adam as follows:
On the question of a decrease in loving behaviour after a while. I think this could be a result of the operational or functional style of thinking. When courting somebody, the priority is to attend to their needs, be affectionate and impress them in order to cement the relationship. When this has been achieved, the logical mind then attends to other practical demands. It is difficult to know when and why a partner needs affection and it is hard to remember to shift one’s focus back to it every now and then. I certainly haven’t mastered it and I haven’t managed to make a relationship last for more than a year. I just can’t do the emotional relationship dynamics (Adam).

Jana related to this explanation in terms of her experience of her partner. “I think your description of the courting/early stages of the relationship are RIGHT ON. See, he had been attracted to me (from afar, unbeknownst to me) for some time before we met. Once we finally met and things got rolling, it seemed like all of his energies were directed to the relationship and attending to me.”

Incidentally the loss of interest occurs in friendships as well:

I show the same lack of sentimentality with friendships and can walk away from best buddies forever without a second thought. If there is no practical reason to keep in touch, then I don’t see what the point could be. Actually, I found out some years ago that I had acquired a reputation for disappearing on people who thought they were my friends (Adam).

*Partner burnout*

There are a few posts that describe the utter frustration and burn-out experienced by partners of alexithymics over the long term.

Well, I just read nearly every word here and have to tell you, HE’S DEFINITELY AN ALEX. Man, the really depressing part is that I’ve tried everything I know and I’m just exhausted to death, lonely, hurt and emotionally drained. ...To even receive a facsimile of emotion from him, I have to explain in detail for him what to do or say. I feel like a real retard at times and wonder how the hell I got myself into this. I guess I just kept thinking to myself that it would get better. It doesn’t (Savannah).

I lived with my alex wife for 7-8 yrs and almost ended up deranged trying to figure out what was going on .... and then I found out about alex. .... Your are so right about caring people not being able to feel fulfilled with an alex. Its like starvation, emotionally, and living with an alex leaves the heart in a state of
anorexia – not due to lack of emotional hunger, but because of a paucity of food (Triton).

Rosa related to many partner stories she read on the chat site and feels that living with an alexithymic for 30 years has broken down her health and her confidence.

You don’t know how much your true life stories with alex has helped me. I have felt just the same feelings and torture, as you have, over 30 years. .... My husband never responded emotionally and it started from the first day of our marriage. .... I thought it was my fault and was in panic. I tried and tried to find help in so many ways, but didn’t find anyone who would understand me. .... Now after all these years nothing has changed and I have fibromyalgia and depression. .... Now I realize I need help to get better and at the same time go through divorce. My husband is, as your partners, seem to be a wonderful companion in every way: excellent provider, faithful, helpful, and in every way an example of a fine husband (Rosa).

Attributed to Childhood

This theme reflects the fact that childhood was discussed in relation to its role in the development of alexithymia. Both partners and those who identified as alexithymic are obviously searching for answers to explain the condition. Posts referring to the psychoanalytic literature and to peoples own experience attributed alexithymia to childhood and upbringing.

My mother interpreted the world for me right up until I was about 35 years old, then I started to try to think for myself. I remember going to the movies with her, (as I often did), and as she verbally gave her interpretation of the movie, I remember thinking, "what will I do when she dies, how will I interpret [sic] the world?" Though, I was more unconscious of her subtle control over me until I started to break away from her. Her more subtle influence was in the form of voice intonation [sic] and making declarations. Both were done to silence me. ...... As a young child I was extremely shy and clung to my mother. My mother was my mouth-piece as a child. I remember being at school and the teacher making a huge mistake about my conduct and telling me off in front of the whole class. I did not utter a word in defence, but went home distraught and told my Mum, expecting her to put it right. .... I have come to see that my relationship with my Mum is the bed in which alexithymia germinated and grew. She herself often mourned over my lack of social interaction, and yet new [sic] not how to put things right (Anne).
One mother writes about her experience of her daughter whom she thinks is alexithymic:

I did notice she was different as a child, she was very demanding but at the same time wanted to be left alone. It was like I either had to give her my attention or nobody at all, which is impossible when she is one of five children. What I mean by that is that if I was nursing another of the children she would force her way in to sit on my lap instead, then if I put the other child down and picked her up she would change her mind and move away from me. If I picked the other child up again she would then repeat this despite me telling her no..... That's only the beginning of what I noticed, she did a lot of bizarre things as a child but now that I'm here to tell you, none are coming to mind! Typical! (Jo).

Having an empty and unemotional childhood with various degrees of abuse is discussed. For example:

I too was the child of parents that I consider quite cold. The only reason I can recognize that now (as once I had no idea) is because I became involved with an emotional person. .... My upbringing was empty. .... The understanding I have thus far is that through a lack of emotional nurturance growing up and a few particular instances of emotional abuse (I guess you could say) I learned to shut down my emotional side, and because I wasn't challenged in that decision it remained that way for a while. I believe, once again from the impression I get, that having emotional reactions verified or something, encourages a language in the mind to help express feelings externally. ?? That is what I think is missing for me. I already know all of these things I am reading, but it is only now that I seem to have words. .... Probably all to do with my upbringing (yes I'm sure it is), it feels taboo. These things that I have wanted to do and believed would benefit me were things of ridicule. Emotions and self expression were never discussed, and when displayed were greeted with odd looks and sideways glances, like there was something wrong with me (Susie).

Adam questioned whether or not some cultural traditions and not just the family nurtured alexithymia.

In some communities, particularly those with a strong work ethic, alexithymic characteristics are traditionally valued. The work ethic in my community was very firmly engrained, and my family was especially traditional in most respects. It might be rash to say that it caused my alexithymic traits, but it certainly reinforced some of the problems and made them difficult to address. Even now, if I was to discuss any difficulties with my father, he would reiterate traditional maxims, telling me I'm dwelling on things too much, and just need to knuckle down to some decent hard work, or I need more discipline to eradicate quiet moments and avoid entertainments and distractions (Adam).
Some never experienced or witnessed displays of affection within the family and seem to be unfamiliar with familial love:

Extraordinary. I never had any idea that you were supposed to 'love' your parents, the idea still seems strange to me today. But then I never loved anyone else either (Jim).

Totally, Jim. The idea of being affectionate with parents or siblings seems strange and wrong, certainly in my family (though I think it's a good thing when I see it in my ex's family, or in my sister's family). I don't know how much of it is cultural - I never saw my parents being affectionate with each other. When I was growing up the idea of loving people was alien to me (but I think I loved cats very much) (Adam).

Others experienced punishment or physical abuse and they believe their emotions did not develop or they cut themselves off from all emotion to deal with their pain.

My mother was very robotic, emotionless. The only emotion I can remember clearly is fear. She would get upset by nothing and cry, and she would punish me, but would never explain why I was being punished. That made me angry. My dad was always at work. At home he was nice, but detached. At one point my mom forbid me and my younger brother to talk to each other, because we were becoming friends and threatening her power. We would stand together against her illogical demands. ....

I was punished for being angry, for not being happy and respectful all the time, for not obeying commands instantly and precisely. My parents had no explanations for behavior. I did not learn the concept of social courtesy until I was a teenager. Offering help to a host seemed like nonsense to me, because my parents expected me to do the same to them and I thought they did not deserve it. They never told me that I should do it because I appreciate what the host does for me, and to show I care. They said "You should do it because it is right." It is so hard to learn to feel from a blind person (greentea).

Was there any hugging in your family growing up, or only hitting like in mine? .... Until this episode [of the Sopranos] I always wondered why I got so weird at Christmas. Now I know because of my old mans hangover I got beaten unmercifully for being a child I was seven years old on that Christmas Day. The incident that traumatized me into A was portrayed so vividly I now know the abject terror that stripped me of my ability "to express my feelings" (Paul).

Triton indicated in some posts that his ex wife was still being influenced by her mother as an adult: "I would watch her mother chastize her like a naughty child if she
expressed anything contrary to her mother's values ... Her mother, a controlling nasty woman ... rapidly crushing any verbal comments that did not fit her program.” He reveals a strong belief that his ex wife finds expressing emotions taboo and is afraid to be emotional. In a four page post, he cites literature about ‘maternal de-adaption’ arguing that when a mother is de-adapted the child cannot develop imagination and therefore becomes alexithymic. Hal, in response, cautions that this theory is very speculative and expresses his doubts about psychoanalytic accounts of alexithymia.

**Coping Strategies**

The theme cluster coping strategies refers to strategies posters used to deal with their emotional processing deficits. The use of drugs and alcohol is mentioned by both alexithymics and partners. However, the patterns of coping most often discussed were developing a system of principles to guide decisions, emotional coaching, living emotions vicariously and faking emotions. There is much in the discussions (as suggested in the examples provided elsewhere in these results) to indicate that alexithymics achieve a high degree of competence and success in the workplace, in business and in academia, however that success depends on using the right coping strategies for everyday survival.

Gabrielle mentions “we need someone to process the world for us ... someone rational and intelligent who can guide us through the world.” This quest for a guide is important because “we know something is “good” because partner/father/teacher says it is.” Gabrielle describes this need as having “pathological gullibility” and recounts that “once in my twenties and once a few months ago (age 32) I had two devastating things
happen on account of my quest for someone to teach me. And both times, I very nearly lost my life.”

Figure 4 Theme Cluster: Coping Strategies

*Developing a system of principles to guide decisions*

While we might tend to think that not having to deal with messy emotions would be a relief in daily living, there are some surprising outcomes when our behaviour is not guided by our feelings. Adam is one participant in particular who is aware of how not having emotional responses in the moment can cause havoc. His solution is to formulate rules, policies and principles to guide his decisions.

I noticed years ago that I make practical decisions on the basis of rules, policies and principles. Not in a naive way of doing what I’m told: rather, I formulate covering laws to tell me what to do in certain situations. It is especially apparent in the social domain: whom I see and when, whether I should go out and so on. When people ask me why I make certain decisions, I state the rules I am following out loud, and they usually say I am some sort of weird alien, because real people don’t think like that. They tell me I have been brainwashed by religion or take utilitarian ethics too seriously or whatever. That’s not it. It's just that I normally don't have an automatic feeling-based preferences, and if I didn't have rules or policies I would vacillate endlessly between all the options (which I do if
I can’t find a principle to favour anything). .... Note however, that the rules are not designed to reign in emotions and impulses, but rather to replace them (Adam).

Micahmollo agrees that rules make his life work well also “without them I would be a scattered math geek, with ability, but very unproductive.”

Adam found that he has to have someone to bounce decisions off since things have gone badly for him on numerous occasions.

Several times I’ve relearned that it’s better for me to have someone to bounce my evaluations and decisions off. In fact, I’ve just made my most determined attempt so far to rely on my own intuitions and instincts because I had nothing left.... but it’s been a disaster. My train had stalled but now it’s derailed. I’m facing homelessness again.

As discussed in the relationship theme cluster with a slightly different slant, alexithymics are seen as compliant children at times. Compliance is not the word they would use for their behaviour: “I defer to other people’s opinions because I have no strong feelings one way or the other” (Adam). “It annoys me logically that I have no innate preferences. I often “create” opinions on the spot to go with the flow, entertain others. When there is no opinion at all, it is hard to accomplish anything....” (greentea).

Though, as we have seen, rule making helps with this difficulty of not having personal preferences, when it comes to personal choices alexithymics change their plans, back out of commitments and change their opinions on a regular basis.

It is such a part of my life that I now explain to most people I meet that I change my mind a lot. Your (Adam’s) theory about the lack of emotions affecting commitments makes sense to me. If there is no intuition or feelings then the judgment would be based on facts, convenience, or another person’s perspective. Exactly like you said (greentea).
Emotional coaching

Emotional coaching refers to receiving assistance, such as verbal guidance and support, in order to experience emotion. Partners sometimes provided this assistance with varying levels of success.

The experience of emotional coaching had negative outcomes for both Alice and Hal. "... when any guy I have been with tries to guide me into the emotional realm, I try to go along, and then I feel physically ill" (Alice).

Some aspects of emotional coaching seemed to be positive for Hal at first, but his overall evaluation of the experience was negative.

A previous gf [girlfriend] had a theory that I had a mental switch between a logical framework and an emotional framework. .... She was the only partner who was able to circumvent my unsentimental logic, and when it happened I felt like I was floating. (I didn’t know what the feelings were, but I know they were intense and she assured me they were safe). She was a good emotional coach. But the effect was only temporary; I couldn’t think like that without her guidance. ....This technique was only possible when there were strong emotions in real time and when she was hand-holding me through the whole process.... I was always totally bewildered by these feelings, and it was only because I trusted her that I didn’t panic. It was a trippy time, but not one that I would be keen to revisit. I was wholly dependent on her evaluation of what was happening to me and in the end it nearly destroyed me (Hal).

Vicarious experiencing

Vicarious experiencing refers to experiencing the domain of emotions through other people; borrowing other peoples’ interpretation of situations and using their words to describe feelings not identified for oneself. This strategy is observed by partners who posted to the site and by those who identify as alexithymic.

The need to have someone else interpret the world and tell them what they are feeling is common in alexithymics’ experience.
Here's what I think I notice in Anne. She sometimes is aware of her feelings, and sometimes not. In both cases she tends to offer vague descriptions of problems in her life, or of difficulties she is having, in an attempt to get others to sum up these matters with appropriate feeling words ... then Anne will take these feeling words for herself as a product which she herself induced through conversation. She is not shy in other areas though, and will deliver the hardest matter-of-fact opinions about a whole range of issues (Triton about his ex wife, Anne)

We are most certainly children (Gabriel says of alexithymics). ... We need someone to control us ... we need someone to process the world for us, we need a partner to experience life vicariously through.

The vicarious reliance.... I've been seeing the same counselor for over a decade now, and we recently sussed this is what I have been up to all along. I was coming in every week to sow my version of events and reap an evaluation about them, or at least have my assessment validated or challenged. I didn't know how to feel about these things, so I got someone else to do the feeling for me (Hal).

**Faking**

Faking is another strategy used by alexithymics to deal with their deficit.

Alexithymics sometimes fake what they believe are appropriate feelings in social situations. They learn from others, from TV, or wherever they can what is expected of them. They sometimes get caught out in their attempts to fake feelings.

I agree that actions are often misunderstood when not accompanied by conventional emotional cues (I for example am very flat when dealing with death, even though I know and “feel” a loss). The actions associated with loss? I often fake them (Alice).

It's interesting that you mentioned trying to compensate for feeling flat during a period of bereavement. I'm the same and at certain special times I thought I'd have to fake sadness so as not to appear cold-hearted; but in my usual manner I'd overdo the expression and people would think I was deeply distressed (Adam).

Both Alice and Adam admit that they feel insincere about faking emotions, but like others they feel that there is some social pressure to respond appropriately in certain situations. For partners it becomes painful when it becomes obvious that there is faking of emotion taking place.
Alexithymics just learn to mimic feeling responses, with accompanying facial
expressions of concern (furrowed brow) or happiness (smiling). Such mimicry —
cultivated since early childhood — allows them to blend into a crowd without being
noticed for their lack of emotional expression. The painful thing is for a partner
of an alexithymic to wake up one day and realize what they had been taking as an
expressive emotional connection was in fact an act of mimicry that has no true
value (Triton).

Adam sees the faking of emotional responses and other strategies as a way to hide
or compensate for his deficiencies. “By contrast the therapies that have worked best for
me are the ones that either cover or compensate for certain deficiencies. My social life
took off (at least superficially) when I make a great effort to fake social emotions. ... and
I’ve learned useful appropriate reactions from unsubtle TV soaps.” Adam emphasizes in
another discussion how TV has been helpful for him:

Some people have mentioned that alexithymics can learn appropriate expressions
from TV and movies, and this is certainly true for me: even to the extent of
quoting popular lines in character to make a point. I’ve learned a lot from TV
soaps, and it has helped at times in relationships when I’ve recognized what’s
happening and made a conscious decision to copy a famously emotive scene from
TV or movies.

Greentea engages in copying or mimicking emotions also and refers to this as testing
people: “Copying emotions from TV is a common theme. Books, TV, trial and error with
people. Try one move, see how they react. Try it differently a different time, see how
they react. Anyone else test people?”

**Sexual Disinterest**

Sexuality was a busy thread on the chat site and the topic also came up under
other discussion headings. Generally those who identified as alexithymic recounted
negative sexual experiences which seem to have led to attitudes of disinterest in and
distain for sexual activity. Their descriptions of these negative experiences suggest that
sex is a difficulty in a similar way that experiencing emotion in the moment is for them.
One thread asked if sex is worth it and all three posts to this thread had reservations about an affirmative answer to this question. It is interesting that partners do not weigh in with the same concerns on this issue. In fact some partners indicate that they have a normal sex life with their alexithymic partners.

Figure 4 below illustrates the sub themes of this theme cluster: Normal sex drive, mind does not join in, not seamless; Against my will; Irrelevant, boring, useless, chore; Conventions and rule book; Dysfunction, where is the pleasure?

Figure 5 Theme Cluster: Sexual Disinterest

Normal sex drive, mind does not join in, not seamless

This theme refers to the disjointed, uncomfortable experiences of sex reported by those who identify as alexithymic. One poster felt that he had a normal sex drive but his
mind got in the way. "But when I find myself in an intimate situation, the drive takes over regardless and I act accordingly, unless my mind reasserts control and starts to panic or disengage" (Hal).

On a similar vein "I feel physical arousal in some situations, but it disappears when I lose my focus or on any interruption. Sex is usually not seamless, so I just lay there bored with no feeling and think about other things" (greentea).

One short thread discussed a published paper on women and sexual intercourse. The posters were very critical of the research purpose and design but they also reported findings contrary to what the study actually found. Their misinterpretation suggested that alexithymic women need more sex than non alexithymic women, whereas the study reports an inverse correlation between alexithymia and frequency of vaginal intercourse.

Gabrielle relates her difficulty with sexuality to her experience of being alexithymic in terms of rationalization and obsessive thinking. "They (alexithymics) use rationalization as a crutch for a disability of emotion processing. .... Some of the problems of obsessive thinking and emotional processing disability are relatively benign ... some are more disabling ... such as a great difficulty with mechanical and emotional sexuality"

Alice reported that she can imagine herself becoming President (of USA) before she can imagine herself having a sex life. She has had sexually active periods in her life but feels they corresponded with times of high alexithymia. Much of the end of the sexuality discussion was taken up with people posting back and forth about a comment Triton (a partner) made, which could be interpreted as implying that Alice was
pathologically dissociated because of her attitudes to sex. As the discussion went on
Alice felt that she was disrespected and removed herself from the site.

Against my will, cost benefit analysis

A few women commented that they had sex because they felt it was expected of
them or they got into a situation where they wanted to decline but didn’t. “I personally
have problems saying no. I have “learned” that in certain situations, sex is expected by
the male. .... The first time it happened he had no idea I didn’t want to have sex, so he
did it anyway. It felt like rape. Was it? (greentea).” She recognizes that sometimes this
scenario unfolds because she does not want the confrontation that might come from
saying no.

Adam describes a similar situation quite differently:

To me, I make a cost benefit analysis, and if it seems on balance a good idea to
invest the time and energy, I’ll do so. .... Although I’m not feeling sexual, it’s not
technically against my will either; even if, given the choice, I’d rather do
something else. I know you’re supposed to feel something really strong and
passionate about these things, but I’m not aware that I do. (Adam)

Irrelevant, boring, useless, chore

Having sex was discussed as being irrelevant, boring, useless, and also as being a
chore.

I can totally relate to Alice and Adam when they talk about a chore. Honestly,
sometimes you want the other person to hurry up and have sex so you can take a
shower and go out. .... Sex means nothing to me, although my body will have
some slight response to foreplay there is nothing else. I guess I should avoid it
(greentea).

Conventions and rule book

A couple of posters felt that sex is guided by conventions and is an activity which
requires a rule book. “Sex has so many rules and conventions. ... Sex is a big old

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checklist. Certain things must take place for it to be called sex” (Alice). A partner on the site disagreed with the rules and conventions post and answered Alice’s question about what sex is like for her as a non alexithymic woman. Alice’s reply is interesting.

What you have described sounds to me like a good conversation – in one you achieve understanding and connection above and beyond what the words are actually say. I have experienced that many times. This is what many of my most treasured memories are made of – communicating in a transcendent way, above and beyond what is actually physically occurring. But that never happens in sex, for me.

_Dysfunction; where is the pleasure?_

This theme refers further to the type of sexual dysfunction experienced by alexithymics, particularly their difficulty in deriving pleasure from the sexual experience.

One male poster talked of not having pleasure in sex for the past ten years: “So is this just straight anhedonia? Dunno, but I also have almost never felt anything while coming the past 10 yr (orgasm are confusing and meaningless, utterly without weight) (2kool4scool).” Alice says of orgasm “I may have “peaked” before as you call it, but probably just didn’t interpret it as something I was supposed to like.”

Gabrielle indicated that she found a lot of things explained on the site, including her sexual dysfunction “I saw a new therapist today and he said that I appear alexithymic.... Also, I have read about sexual difficulties. This is most definitely true for me. I cannot become aroused by anyone, however I can sexually satisfy myself.”

It seems the pleasure and excitement of foreplay is not at all pleasurable for Adam:

I do know however what it’s like to feel aroused in the bedroom and feel like I’m getting the flu. I feel myself getting hot and sweating and it’s a bit worrying. I don’t know what that extra factor is that is supposed to make getting hot and sweaty a pleasurable experience; maybe it’s the sense of impending release of something.
Experiencing sexuality as an electric impulse or shock was mentioned a couple of times. "I sometimes feel electric impulse shock through me, in a sexual way. But it is sudden and then gone, although it is sexual" (greentea).

**Unique Experiences in the Body**

The themes in this cluster comprise: Lack of Pleasure, Pain and Illness

Symptoms. A number of threads overlap in describing what being in the body is like for the alexithymic. The discussions of body feelings, body therapies, anhedonia and psychosomatics give the impression that the alexithymic’s experience of being in the body is quite unique. There were suggestions in various discussions that paying attention to body sensations may help the alexithymic to recognize emotions and that body therapy may help in the experience of physical pleasure but as Adam points out:

Of course it is the meaning of emotional sensations that is the important thing .... Take an emotional feeling like a sudden increase in pulse. Suppose I feel that now: how do I calculate its meaning? .... Next it is not enough simply to know what a feeling means: there has to be a perceptual association, so that the feeling is perceived with emotional significance.

Below you will see that another poster describes a similar dilemma around experiencing pleasure. Adam however has a more basic problem than this around his experience in his body:

.... when I focus on bodily sensations I tend to feel itches, throbs and aches, or generally disoriented and unwell. In fact I spend more time than I would like feeling uncomfortable bodily sensations like nausea or twinging pains. It can interfere with my work and even confine me to bed. I don’t know the meaning of any of this stuff. It could be recurrent flu, perhaps. Possibly the symptoms coincide with depression or anxiety.
Figure 6  Theme Cluster: Unique Experiences in the Body

Lack of pleasure

There was much discussion around the inability to experience pleasure or anhedonia. We have seen above that inability to experience sexual pleasure is prevalent in the lives of posters, but here we see that other pleasures also elude them.

Triton, who states that his ex partner Anne is alexithymic, writes:

I’ve come across this term ‘anhedonia’ in relation to alexithymia many times, and Anne has told me that this is very central to her alexithymia, ie, she has unpleasant psychosomatic affects if she indulges in hedonistic pleasure and feels guilty, confused, and “bad” if she allows this experience.

Triton continues this thread with references to the psychoanalytic literature and his ex partner suggesting that defense mechanisms are at the core of alexithymic behaviour.

Others see and experience the anhedonia issue in a different way.

Are Alex people more likely to establish a lot of rules for themselves, about what to eat and drink and how to keep house ... is this a control issue? Or is it just a complete non-recognition that there can be pleasure in food, drinks and sex .... Is it because I reflect less, or not at all, on my pleasure feelings that I have less pleasure? Or do I know how in the first place? ... I was told by a friend after a busy work week to “do something nice for myself.” I’m not sure what to do, isn’t that funny? Feels aimless (Micahmallo).
Living by rules and principles has already been discussed above. Adam in particular related to Micahmallo’s posting and answers his question: “It isn’t a control issue in my case; it is very much the second possibility you outlined: a non-recognition of pleasure possibilities.” Adam argues that anhedonia is a facet of alexithymia. He and Triton have quite a discussion on where the concepts of anhedonia and alexithymia overlap and diverge. Micahmallo brings the discussion back to experience somewhat: “I seem to see it as having a pleasure affect (yes) but having no identifiers/ having no cognition of the affect as being pleasurable …. Maybe I do have joy and I don’t recognize it? This does not make me anhedonic, really.”

Alice adds to this discussion:

Anhedonia? I'm a manager, banker/consultant/analyst, and a former academic and dancer. I serve on four community not for profit boards. I try to eat well and I stay out of the sun. I have never smoked or done drugs. I have been denying myself pleasure for my whole life. I'll take my straight A report card, my very full bookshelves, and the wonderful friends I am blessed with, any day.

Simply having a sense of enjoyment seems to elude those who identify as alexithymic.

Incidentally, when my last therapist was discussing personal rewards and goals, he told me to imagine doing something I enjoyed. During the rest of the session we went through the options of food, sex, music, holidays, movies etc. I could not identify anything I "enjoyed" in any normal sense, and I could call up plenty of anecdotes to illustrate the fact that these things weren't motivating for me. He was baffled. I had to confront the fact that I was anhedonic. Actually something similar has happened when I was at school and had to answer an essay question entitled "What makes my life worth living." I really couldn't think of anything. I took three weeks off school to avoid that essay. It sparked a period of intense self-examination and that lasted years, producing only a state of anhedonic depression and psychosomatic illness (Adam).
Pain

Greentea started a thread wondering if others had similar experiences in the body

“I am always bumping into things because my touch input is so low. Sometimes people
touch me and I don’t register what they are doing. … I don’t mind very hot water and
cold water compared to my friends. When I get bruises, scrapes, external injuries I don’t
feel it very much either.” Others also had experiences of not feeling pain, having
mysterious bruises and not being ticklish. Greentea’s experience seems to be unique in
that sometimes the hyposensitivity becomes the opposite.

In a strange and unusual turn, sometimes when people touch me I feel a shock and
pain, although the touch is light. It is very disturbing. It seems I turn on my
senses occasionally, and then the input is overwhelming. … I’m not ticklish,
usually. Only once in a while. Whenever I can feel body sensations, I’m ticklish.
The rest of the time I feel nothing. Maybe I learned to ignore pain from sports or
fighting. But I think I should be able to feel it if it is a surprise, when my mind
isn’t expecting it.

Hal joined in this discussion by providing some information about pain-blindness
and anosognosia. He notes: “Incidentally, there is an explanation for alexithymia based
on the same sort of interhemispheric transfer deficit, building on the observation that split
brain patients are markedly alexithymic. I wonder if there may be an empirical link?”

Illness symptoms

A partner of an alexithymic posted a question concerning psychosomatic
symptoms: “Does anyone experience, or have a partner who experienced disturbing
psychosomatic symptoms …. And if yes, what was their nature? (Triton). He was aware
of the literature which indicates a relationship between psychosomatic illness and
alexithymia. He also had a personal reason for asking. “I’m curious about this subject,
partly because my ex partner did not show any such disturbance, other than obsessing

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about having ‘worms’ living in her anus all the time, and taking worming tablets on a regular basis.” Hal, who identifies as alexithymic, recounted his story of life long illnesses.

I spent much of my teens crippled with mystery illnesses, mostly IBS, fatigue and fevers. I often felt like I had been kicked in the stomach by a mule. It was horrible. I was off school about a quarter of the time … Sometimes I was told it was all in the mind, or that I was malingering or exaggerating. My family’s frustration was obvious …. The medical troubles continued when I went to university, only calming down in my fifth year of study when I finally settled into my first relationship.

He describes his symptoms settling down in that relationship because of the support it provided but later recurring in various difficult situations. “…. I was fine for the next few years, until a massive and prolonged dispute with my PhD supervisors triggered a nasty bout of mononucleosis.”

Other references to illness came in different threads. Someone recently diagnosed alexithymic by a “psych friend” commented “Most Alex’s don’t seem to need to see psych’s (not in Australia, anyway!) … no feelings to get hurt and the somatic issues don’t lead to a diagnosis by an MD … they are hard pressed to deal with usual customers” (Markiskaya). Alice asked if anyone else had flu like symptoms when attracted to someone. She also states “when a guy tries to guide me into the emotional realm I feel physically ill.”

**Conclusion**

In this study I set out to examine the data to answer the questions: What is the lived experience for those who self identify as being alexithymic? How is alexithymia experienced and described by those closest to people who self-identify alexithymia? The analysis yielded six theme clusters, the central cluster being Varying Levels of Emotional
Awareness. Posters to the alexithymia chat site range from those who are not aware of any experience of emotion to those who experience emotion as an afterthought and engage in delayed processing of emotion and delayed identification of subjective feelings. Posters use different strategies for processing feelings and for coping with the various limitations in their emotional awareness.

The analysis suggests that lack of awareness of emotion creates difficulties and challenges in the lives of those who identify as alexithymic. Five theme clusters are presented as emanating from the first theme cluster because this is how the participants seem to view their experiences. These theme clusters capture the perceived effects of alexithymia in the lives of alexithymics and their partners. Both alexithymics and their partners attest to profound problems with interpersonal relationships experienced by alexithymics. Alexithymics also report sexual difficulties and disinterest. They report some unique experiences in the body related to pain, lack of pleasure and illness symptoms.
CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Researcher’s Stance

As I discuss the interpretation and implications of this analysis it seems appropriate to mention my stance on the topic of alexithymia. I believe that psychoanalytical theory, within which alexithymia was first explained, has outlived its usefulness. I believe that any theory of personality or of human behaviour has to provide a cogent argument that is cognizant of possible neurobiological pathways that underlie a behaviour or personality pattern. As I studied cognitive neuroscience at the graduate level, I came to doubt that the self report measure that is most used to identify alexithymia (Lumley, 2004), the Toronto Alexithymic Scale 20 (TAS 20) (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) could possibly be measuring a condition thought to implicate the interhemispheric transfer of information in the brain, the prefrontal cortex, the limbic system, as well as the language, memory and attentional processes of the brain.

The factor structure of the TAS-20 has been called into question by a number of recent studies for example (Kooiman, Spinhoven, & Trijsburg, 2002) There is also some evidence that it lacks criterion validity (Kooiman, Spinhoven, & Trijsburg, 2002) and has been criticized for not measuring the paucity of fantasy dimension of alexithymia by Sifnoes (1996) among others. However, the nomological process undertaken with the various developments of the TAS suggests that it is capturing something relevant regarding difficulties experienced by people; difficulties with identifying and describing feelings.

When I happened on the Alexithymia chatsite I found an alternative way to examine what alexithymia was about which did not depend on the TAS 20, thus
bypassing the constraints and limitations which I (and others) perceived existed with this instrument. The qualitative approach I used for this study had the potential to uncover areas of experience not captured by the TAS 20 or other measures of alexithymia. It also provided an avenue to explore some of the controversies found in the alexithymia literature.

**The Experience of Alexithymia**

**Varying levels of emotional awareness**

The descriptions of self identified alexithymics found in this study highlight that some have no awareness of emotion; some have awareness of emotion at a physiological level while others report difficulties with the cognitive processing of emotions. The study also finds that people can be more or less alexithymic depending on the circumstances. These data bring to mind the finding by Bermond (1996) that the neurobiological evidence suggests that concept of alexithymia may represent a collection of syndromes. There is some evidence in this study that supports his proposal of three types of alexithymic.

In his analysis three types of alexithymia were differentiated: Type 1 alexithymia is, in its extreme form, characterized by the absence of the emotional experience and, consequently by the absence of the emotion accompanying cognitions. Studies suggest that this type of alexithymia is caused by decreased functioning of the orbito-prefrontal cortex, a reduced neural or dopaminergic innervation of this area, reduced function of the right hemisphere or, possibly, reduced function of the anterior commissure. Type 2 alexithymia is, in its extreme form, characterized by the presence of the emotional experience in absence of the accompanying cognitions. This type can be caused by
reduced functioning of the corpus callosum. Type 3, Bermond suggests (1996), is pseudo-alexithymia which is characterized by the presence of all aspects of the emotional experience together with the lack of motivation to do something with this type of information. This type might be related to an impaired functioning of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.

Converging evidence within the neurobiological literature reviewed by Lane and his colleagues (Lane, Ahern, Schwartz & Kasniak, 1997) suggests that alexithymia may be a limited, or in extreme cases nonexistent, ability to consciously experience emotion – the emotional equivalent of blindsight or “blindfeel.” This theory, yet to be tested, suggests a dissociation between emotional arousal and conscious awareness of emotion, implicating the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) as a site that mediates conscious attention to both cognitive and emotional stimuli. The ACC is already known to orchestrate the autonomic, neuroendocrine and behavioural expression of emotion and a malfunction at this level of the brain may mean that emotional information is not brought to conscious awareness to be cognitively processed (Lane et al, 1997).

**Delayed processing**

Central to the experience of alexithymia, as uncovered in this data, are various limitations in experiencing subjective feeling states. The postings analyzed here suggest that the difficulty lies in not having the facility to identify and name feelings during an emotional event. This data seems to capture the same difficulty as TAS-20 factor 1; difficulty identifying feelings (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994). However, based on this study the factor may need to be modified to difficulty identifying ‘current’ feelings or feelings ‘during an emotional event’ or feelings ‘in the moment’. TAS-20 factors 2,
difficulty describing feelings and factor 3, externally oriented thinking could be explained as corollary effects of not being able to identify feelings.

Whether this is a question of variable processing speed applied to peoples’ own emotional response to stimuli, with alexithymics being on the slower end of the continuum needs to be determined in empirical testing. There is some evidence of temporal effects in the perception of emotion. For example, Parker, Prkachin & Prkachin (in press) found that high alexithymics, determined by the TAS-20, were significantly less accurate in the recognition of emotion presented in photographs, in a temporal constraint condition.

The delayed processing of emotions described on the web site begs the question: when is an emotion not an emotion? Current definitions of affective states describe emotion as an event or episode of high intensity and brief duration. For example, Scherer (2000) defines emotion as “a relatively brief episode of synchronized responses by all or most organismic subsystems to the evaluation of an external or internal event as being of major significance (e.g., anger, sadness, joy, fear, shame, pride, elation, desperation)” (p 141). In contrast a mood would be a more diffuse affect state of lower intensity but longer duration while other affect states include interpersonal stances, attitudes and personality traits (Scherer, 2000). It seems that for the alexithymic, the synchronization is not there and the person is looking back to try to pinpoint what they were feeling during the event. However the emotional event is long over and as this process is described by some, it is more like remembering an event in order to guess the feeling one may have had. This is surely experiencing feelings as an afterthought rather than really feeling ones feelings. This would explain why there is incongruence between the
alexithymic’s reports of their subjective experiences and their facial expressions of emotion.

A question arising out of this description of emotion processing in alexithymia is whether remembering the triggering event and the physiological changes that go with it is in itself an internal event that elicits emotion rather than a logical consideration of contextual cues. Needing time, space and freedom from pressure in order to tune into their emotions is how some posters described their experience. Here too is an avenue for further empirical exploration that may provide greater understanding of the difficulty encountered in alexithymia. It would be interesting to explore whether there are conditions, as implied above, under which the physiological activation, motor express and subjective cognitive aspects of emotion are synchronized in those who claim to be alexithymic.

**Somatosensory amplification**

A possible explanation for the delay in processing is somatosensory amplification. As we have seen alexithymics do experience the physiological correlates of emotion but seem to be confused by or misinterpret these signals. Some also reported illness symptoms in emotional or sexual situations and some alexithymics experienced psychosomatic illnesses. The descriptions of these experiences bring to mind the concept of somatosensory amplification as found in one line of research from Japan. While studying psychosomatic illness the construct of somatosensory amplification was found to be relevant to the perceptual style of psychosomatic patients. Somatosensory amplification refers to a perceptual style where the patient experiences somatic sensation as intense, noxious and disturbing. The Somatosensory Amplification Scale (SSAS) was
created and validated to measure this phenomenon (Nakao, Barsky, Kumano & Kuboki, 2002). The SSAS was found to be positively associated with two factors of alexithymia measured by the TAS-20 (difficulty identifying feelings and difficulty describing feelings), controlling for age, sex and mood.

**Anger and mood issues**

The occasional surprising experience of spontaneous feelings particularly anger, and the experiences of mood issues attest to the alexithymic’s ability to experience affect. These intense outbursts have been reported in the literature from the beginning (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). Scherer (2000) defined mood as a diffuse affect state, less intense but of longer duration than an emotion, experienced largely as a change in subjective feeling, without an apparent cause (e.g., cheerful, gloomy, irritable, listless, depressed, buoyant). Perhaps the lack of synchronization and delayed processing leads to awareness of a mood state rather than an emotional state. Only some of the posters made a deliberate effort to record the physiological changes they experienced in their everyday interactions in the hope of naming their feelings later. Those who did not make this deliberate effort may be naming moods arising from emotional events which they have not processed or have forgotten about. There are a lot of references in the posts to depression, irritability, frustration and other mood states.

**Anhedonia**

Some alexithymics report difficulty in the conscious experiencing of pain, touch and pleasure. These findings expand the idea of blindfeel to include ‘blindpain’, ‘blindtouch’ and ‘pleasureblindness’. In this study anhedonia seemed widespread and more pronounced than the issues of pain and touch. Pleasureblindness or anhedonia
implicate the brain reward system (BRS) in the experience of alexithymia. Sexual disinterest, discussed further below, also implicates the BRS in alexithymia.

There is emerging evidence that altered BRS function may be an underlying brain mechanism of the loss of pleasure experienced in major depressive disorder (MDD) (Naranjo, Tremblay, & Busto, 2001). In presenting and testing this hypothesis Naranjo et al. reviewed the existing literature and observed that the pathophysiology of MDD and the neurobiology of the reward system contain common neuropharmacological and neuroanatomical substrates including dopamine, serotonin, acetylcholine, the amygdala, anterior cingulate, left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, orbital cortex and subgenual prefrontal cortex. Interestingly, neurobiological reviews associated with alexithymia implicate many of the same substrates and structures, for example Bermond (1996) and Lane et al. (1997). Keeping in mind that the diagnostic criteria for MDD in the DSM-IV-TR (A.P.A., 2000) involve depressed mood or a markedly diminished interest and pleasure in most activities, the anhedonia of alexithymia could be explained as MDD.

Current researchers, like others before them, have found that the construct of alexithymia has not been clearly differentiated from negative affect (Waller & Scheidt, 2004), or depression (Hintikka, Honkalampi, Lehtonen & Viinamaki, 2001). What is described by participants in the current study is: some people who identify as alexithymic have felt totally cut off from their feelings until they were treated with an anti-depressant. After anti-depressant treatment their mood is not necessarily non depressed but they become more aware of their mood. Others have mentioned depression in terms of anhedonia as distinct from depressed mood. Their experiences may be accounted for in converging evidence cited below and suggests that one consider further whether one type
of alexithymia is an anhedonic type of depression which would respond to pharmacological intervention targeting the BRS. Naranjo et al. (2001) found that depressed participants reported greater euphoria from a d-amphetamine probe than non depressed participants. Their review of the current literature and study supports the involvement of the BRS in the pathophysiology of depression.

The effects of Alexithymia

Dating and maintaining relationships are huge challenges for the alexithymic. While alexithymics stumble along in relationships, sometimes by faking appropriate feeling responses, their partners burn out from lack of real emotional connection. Partners often find themselves thrust into the role of interpreting the interpersonal world for the alexithymic. Beyond the burden of being the vicarious feeler, sexual disinterest is another aspect of alexithymia that contributes to the failure of alexithymics interpersonal relationships.

There is some previous research on sexuality in relation to alexithymia which illustrates coexisting dysfunction similar to the findings here. Individuals attending a sexual disorders clinic were considered to be categorically alexithymic, though further study was needed to control for depressed mood (Wise, Osborne, Stand, Fagan & Schmidt, 2002). In their first study Wise et al found that individuals with sexual drive disorders or erectile disorders were significantly more alexithymic than other sexually disordered patients. The second study examined alexithymia in people attending a sexual disorder clinic of which 114 were diagnosed with a sexual dysfunction and 56 with paraphilic disorders. When using the TAS as a categorical measure 20 percent of those in the dysfunctional group and 27% in the paraphilic group were found to be alexithymic.
Using the TAS as a dimensional variable the group with paraphilias has significantly higher scores on the TAS, only when depressed mood was covaried (Wise et al, 2002).

Brody (2003) found that for women but not for men alexithymia was inversely associated with frequency of vaginal intercourse (FSI) but not other sexual behaviour. Other studies conducted by Brody did not involve the measurement of alexithymia, but he connects his earlier findings with the alexithymia study as follows:

There would appear to be an overlap between behavioral manifestations of awareness of vaginal physiological changes (greater FSI or intercourse orgasmic consistency) and awareness of and expression of emotional and sexual states (lower alexithymia scores or concordance of objective and subjective indices of sexual arousal, suggesting that the realm of alexithymia extends to sexual sensations and behavior, and providing further support for viewing sex as an emotion (Brody, 2003, p 77).

Planning, prioritizing, decision making and sticking to commitments are difficult for alexithymics because they do not intuitively connect with their feelings and because they are not motivated by their feelings. There can be some advantages to their logical, principle based decision making but they can also be lost, confused and gullible when in new situations. Alexithymia affects all dimensions of life, not just the interpersonal domain. Interpersonal relationships suffer most, for those with this condition, but their social and work worlds are also affected despite their ability to be high functioning, successful people.

An explanation for the problems with daily living experienced by alexithymics is found in the work of two leading neuroscientists Adolphs and Damasio (2000). They suggest that converging evidence, leading to an understanding of emotion at a systems level, has led them to conclude that cognition without emotion is impossible. For human beings, information processing without motivation and emotion has no intrinsic value.
They point out that attention, memory and decision-making all require selectivity by which we are able to distinguish between inputs and outputs that are important and those that are irrelevant. Emotion provides this guidance in everyday life and is seen as indispensable for the adaptive functioning of higher organisms (Adolphs & Damasio, 2000).

**A Fresh Look at Alexithymia**

**Comparison to major defining features**

This study has provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at alexithymia through the eyes of those who believe they experience it. There is a different emphasis found in the theme clusters uncovered in this study when compared with the major defining features provided in the literature to date: 1) difficulty in labeling and describing feelings; 2) difficulty in distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations of emotional arousal; 3) impoverishment of fantasy life; 4) a concrete, externally oriented thinking style (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997).

In this study we found support for features 1 and 2 as perhaps different types of alexithymia. The alexithymic’s inability to be consciously aware of what they are feeling is qualified in this study to suggest inability to be aware of their feelings ‘in the moment’. There was some discussion about dreams and creativity on the chat site, relevant to the impoverishment of fantasy, but not enough to consider it an essential theme in the data. The concrete, externally oriented thinking style is reported in posts by alexithymics of feedback they receive from partners. It comes across in various discussions not as a separate feature of alexithymia but more as a corollary to the difficulty with knowing
current feeling states: for example, when participants describe being concrete, detail oriented and pedantic.

Early descriptions of alexithymic patients referred to their wooden or rigid posture, diminished facial expressions and boring attention to detail (Krystal, 1988). Krystal’s psychodynamic view suggested that alexithymia results from affects which never matured or from a regression into affect immaturity. The lack of maturation of affects was thought to be due to infantile psychic trauma arising from parental inability or from the infant’s sense of overwhelming danger. Adult traumatization was thought to cause a regression in both the cognitive and expressive aspects of affects and a return to an infantile state where there is undifferentiated emotion and just two basic feelings, either contentment or distress (Krystal, 1988). There are some suggestions of childhood trauma in the experiences recounted on the chat site, but the data could not be said to illustrate the kind of regression suggested by Krystal. Some participants mention that their development in terms of self expression and expression of emotion was stunted by overbearing mothers. Others discuss cold and empty childhoods while others still remark on their lack of memory of childhood. It is possible that their non emotionality as children did in fact lead to what could be perceived as a cold, empty childhood. It would be interesting to compare some groups matched on similar upbringings, socioeconomic status and corroborating accounts of their childhood from a family member to determine how alexithymia is related to these factors.
Comparison to the California Q-Set Alexithymia prototype

A California Q-Set Alexithymia Prototype has been created, as a description of the alexithymic personality, using professional judges to identify the common characteristics seen in this personality (Haviland & Reise, 1996). An observer rated scale, that can be used by acquaintances and relatives has also been developed by expanding on the prototype (Haviland, Warren & Riggs, 2000). The prototype is believed to capture unique features of the alexithymia personality not captured within other personality models (Haviland & Reise, 1996). The following table lists the characteristics identified by the judges. Items with an asterisk are supported to some extent in this study.
**Table 2 – The most characteristic items from the CAQ Alexithymia Prototype**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Extremely characteristic or salient</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Is emotionally bland; has flattened affect</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Anxiety and tension find outlet in bodily symptoms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is concerned with own body and the adequacy of its physiological functioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasizes communication through action and nonverbal behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Keeps people at a distance; avoids close interpersonal relationships</td>
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<th>Quite characteristic or salient</th>
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<tr>
<td>Has a brittle ego-defense system: has a small reserve of integration; would be disorganized and maladaptive when under stress or trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Judges self and others in conventional terms like “popularity”, “the correct thing to do”, social pressure, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Is uncomfortable with uncertainty and complexities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Handles anxiety and conflicts by, in effect, refusing to recognize their presence; repressive or dissociative tendencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Feels a lack of personal meaning in life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does not vary roles; relates to everyone in the same way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Prides self on being “objective”, rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tends toward overcontrol of needs and impulses; binds tensions excessively; delays gratification unnecessarily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Haviland & Reise, 1996)*

* These items are all supported to some extent in the current study.
The wording of some of these characteristics seems to imply intentionality; for instance, "Keeps people at a distance; avoids close interpersonal relationships." The data suggest that alexithymia makes interpersonal relationships so difficult for alexithymics that close relationships often elude them. Other characteristics are understandably inferred from alexithymic behaviour such as: "Tends toward overcontrol of needs and impulses; binds tensions excessively; delays gratification unnecessarily." However the chat site posting would suggest that anhedonia, indecisiveness and lack of personal preferences may be at play here.

Though the method used to establish the alexithymia prototype avoids the hazards of self-report scales, there is also potential for erroneous interpretation of behaviour where observers are concerned; for example a professional may interpret the non-emotional communication of a patient in a medical setting as indicative of a personality trait, when in fact it may reflect the stress the patient is experiencing in trying to come to terms with illness or pain (Lundh, Johnsson, Sundqvist, Olsson, 2002). Triton made interpretations of his alexithymic ex-wife’s behaviour as reflective of ‘defence’ theories of alexithymia. Adam argued with Triton’s interpretation as follows:

Let me suggest that friends of those with “deficit alexithymia” will always assume that the alex person has the ‘defence’ kind (i.e., refusing to or having reason not to acknowledge their emotions, etc.) because they see him or her refusing to admit to emotions which are clearly visible to other people. This form of explicit denial of observable phenomena is consistent with known psychoanalytic avoidance theories and no deeper explanation seems to be required. Hence observant friends are strongly tempted to erroneously conclude that an alexithymic with a physical lesion in the brain is in fact manifesting a series of subconscious defences.

These comments are also relevant to the Observer Alexithymia Scale (OAS). The OAS identifies 5 subscales thought to capture the features of alexithymia from an observer’s vantage point. The subscales are Distant, Uninsightful, Somatizing,
Humorless, and Rigid (Haviland, Warren & Riggs, 2000). This study supports the Distant and Somatizing subscales and some items of the Uninsightful, Humorless and Rigid scales. However the OAS does not appear to capture the problems with daily living or difficulties with sexuality uncovered in this study. Besides it does not adequately capture the theme: Difficulty with emotions. There are only three questions out of 33 that are related to this theme. The Uninsightful subscale has eight statements including: Has strong emotions that he or she cannot explain and Has trouble finding the right words to describe his or her feelings. The Distant subscale has ten questions, one related to feelings; Likes to explore his or her feelings. These questions do not capture what alexithymics have described in this study regarding their difficulty with feeling their feelings as they occur, the mood issues or the sudden surprising outburst of anger.

**Suggestions for further study**

I would like to follow up this study by getting feedback from the Alexithymia chatsite participants on the analysis provided here. Such feedback may elaborate on what it is like to process feelings after the fact and whether this process leads to certain moods and attitudes in alexithymics. I would also like to elicit more from participants about their somatic experiences to determine if their experiences correspond to somatosensory amplification.

Two issues identified in this study could be examined in empirical studies. Firstly a paradigm should be set up to measure how quickly non-alexithymics versus alexithymics can identify their own emotions during an emotion provoking event. Secondly, it would be interesting to measure physiologically and through self report
whether emotions are generated after the fact when alexithymics are engaging in delayed processing; when they are undertaking what they have identified as outside-in processing. It would also be interesting to examine childhood influences on the degree of alexithymia.

The link between alexithymia and depression using the suggested model of brain reward system dysfunction should be studied further as a possible explanation for the anhedonia and sexual dysfunction uncovered in this study. An investigation of this kind may also help clarify the overlap between depression and alexithymia mentioned in numerous studies.

Limitations

While the alexithymia chatsite provided me with a unique resource to uncover the experience of living with alexithymia, this study has some important limitations. By Internet standards this would be considered a small and relatively inactive group, and therefore is a small sample which yields a limited amount of data (Michalak & Szabo, 1998). Without follow-up empirical study as suggested above, the findings are not generalizable to any population beyond the group studied.

I had no information to verify that those who claim to be living with alexithymia are being genuine. This concern is offset a little by the fact that the concept of alexithymia is not in common usage. Further, I had no information (unless mentioned in a posting) as to who provided the label alexithymia for participants or how the determination was made that they are alexithymic.
The study is also limited by the nature of the communication being studied. Written communication does not allow for the interpretation of tone, non-verbal language or other subtle cues which are part of face to face dialogue.

Finally, by remaining as a participant observer I precluded the opportunity to return to participants with my initial analysis. I hoped that the chat site participants’ discussions with each other would be an adequate substitute for getting feedback from them in the process of interpretation. This step now seems important as a follow up to the current findings.

**Summary**

This chapter presented an interpretation of the qualitative study of the alexithymia chatsite and considered the implications of the study. Central to the interpretation of the data is support for different types of alexithymia based on varying levels of emotional awareness. A particularly interesting finding is that a more nuanced understanding of the difficulty in processing emotions characteristic of alexithymia whereby the difficulty is described as being unable to identify and name feelings during an emotional event. The delayed processing implied raises the questions of whether this is an issue of variable processing speed in alexithymia and when is an emotion not an emotion? Some of the findings here point to somatosensory amplification as a possible explanation for the delayed processing in alexithymia.

Surprising outbursts of anger and mood issues are indicated in this study and attest to alexithymics’ ability to experience affect. Other features of alexithymia reported in this study such as anhedonia and pain blindness as well as the suggested association between depression, negative affect and alexithymia are considered in the light of a
newer theory of depression that implicates the pleasure centre of the brain. This is a potential overarching theory for alexithymia that needs to be studied further.

The effects of alexithymia on interpersonal relationships and sexuality are considered in the light of previous findings as well as those of this study. The effects of alexithymia on daily living are explained in the light of a neurobiological systems approach to emotion.
References


Morse, J. A. (2003). The adjudication of qualitative proposals. *Qualitative Health


