

Alexithymia

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Do you ever had difficulties ever finding the words for what you're feeling or thinking? Most of us have been faced with this difficulty at some point of time or another.

It usually happens just when we most need to be able to explain ourselves – when we're feeling something particularly strongly or in a crisis or just want to communicate a strong feeling. If it happens to you more than it seems to happen to other people you know, you may be part of the 10% of the population who suffers from a problem called “ alexithymia.” It's a fancy name that comes from Greek and means an inability to find words for emotions. The psychoanalyst Peter Sifneos came up with the term in the early 1970's. Although a very large deal of research has been done on the problem of alexithymia since Sifneos named it, it has generally been considered highly unresponsive to traditional psychotherapy. Yet alexithymia is believed to be an important part of many different diagnostic groups, including schizophrenia, autism, drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, personality disorders, and a tendency to engage in dangerous and/or impulsive behaviors.

And there is great proof that if you suffer from any of these disorders, you will benefit from learning to pay attention to and find language to express your feelings, both to yourself and to other people. Three social scientists have now released a book showing that even research, which is traditionally supposed to be done without feeling, is often done with unacknowledged feeling. They say that when these emotions are recognized, the research benefits. The same is true for you, no matter how difficult it may be for you to begin to think and talk about your feelings in words. I have long believed <https://assignbuster.com/alexithymia/>

that alexithymia can and should be treated in talk therapy with some slight changes in the therapeutic stance. Stijn Vanheule, Paul Verhaeghe and Mattias Desmet, clinicians and researchers at Ghent University in Belgium, have come up with a successful system for working with alexithymia in psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

But you do not have to be a psychotherapist to use this system. If you have difficulty finding words for your own feelings, these three suggestions can help you begin to make that connection; and when you are making connections between your feelings and language, you will start to find better ways to manage both the feelings and difficult situations. You can also use these three techniques with loved ones and children who you want to help learn to talk about their feelings. Two things before you start. First, these three techniques do not have to be done in any particular order, although the first step is the best place to begin this work.

Once you've been doing it for a while, you may want to mix it up, sometimes doing them as they are written, and sometimes doing them in another order. That's okay. However feels most useful to you is how you should do it. And second, it's very important not to focus on the idea that you can't do this, but to think instead about the experience that you are trying to name. Feelings can be powerful, and you may have a strong reaction to putting some of them into words.

When this happens, it is vital to find ways to back off. Go back to step one, get yourself something to eat or drink, or distract yourself with television, something on your computer, music, or a walk around the block. But also

remind yourself that these emotions are not bad, no matter how bad they feel. And you are not bad for feeling them. What is most likely going on is that you are feeling something that you cannot picture in your mind and that you cannot find words for.

Like a small child who becomes frightened because he or she doesn't know what's going on, you might feel a bit overwhelmed by experience. The work that you are doing is to find a way to represent the feelings in your mind's eye so that you can know what you need to do to manage them successfully. Like anything else in life, this takes practice. Three ways to get better at knowing, thinking and saying what you are feeling: 1. Think about concrete situations you would like to change.

Focus on one or two specific recent situations – an argument at home, an incident at work. Try to put into words for yourself (or ask your child or your loved one, if you are trying to help someone else, to put into words for you) the chain of events that led up to the situation. Be very specific. For instance, if you had an argument with your husband, wife, child, or parent before you left the house this morning, start with the first event of the morning – the moment when you woke up. Did the alarm take you by surprise? Did you stay in bed longer than you meant to? Did you get up and take a shower? How did that go? Was the shower long enough? Too long? How was the water – hot, cold, neutral? Then keep going.

What happened next? Who did you see? What did you say to them? What did they say to you? Did you make your own breakfast? What did you eat? What clothes did you put on? The goal here is to get yourself (or your child or

partner or whoever) to develop mental representations of those moments that gradually led up to the argument. Putting them into words is only part of the process. Naming them and imagining them are often connected activities. If you can, try to develop a mental image of each of these moments. 2. Spell out to yourself how you understand the problematic situation.

The idea is not to blame yourself or the other person, but to put into words what you think has actually happened. Then try to put into words what is distressing about what happened. So, for instance, if you and your daughter argued this morning before she left the house, your goal in this step is to put into words what happened, what you argued about, and what you think might have been the reason for the argument. Then try to say what it is about the argument that distressed you. Maybe you feel frustrated and worried that she insists on going outside in the cold without socks or tights.

Maybe you're worried that she's going to get sick. But maybe you're also bothered because she talks back to you and you feels like she should be more respectful? If you were that disrespectful to your parents, what would have happened? She just shouldn't talk to you like that! Don't try to solve the problem and don't try to change things in this step. It's okay that you've come up with a couple of different answers. It can be both of these things – and more. Most arguments have several different, overlapping meanings.

The goal here is not to solve the problem, but to find a way to put it into words and pictures – that is, to mentally represent it – inside your own head. Gradually, those words and pictures will begin to evolve into feelings that

make sense, even if they are not comfortable. 3. Try to put your emotional responses into words, and then to think about how you handled the situation and how else you might handle it. So now you've got several thoughts and images of both what led up to and also what happened in the argument with your daughter. Now, try to put into words what you understand about your emotional response.

This part will include words and thoughts, but also physical sensations. For instance, you might try to notice if your stomach clenched or the muscles in your arms tensed. Did you grind your teeth or clench your jaw? Did you feel a heaviness in your chest? There are many mindfulness exercises that can help you pay attention to what you're feeling in your body. One of them asks you to start with your toes and travel up your body, asking yourself over and over again, "What do I feel there (in my toes; my ankles; my shins; my calves; and on up to the top of your head)." The important thing is not to make judgments about these feelings, but again to try to find ways to represent them in words and mental images. Often feelings in our bodies feel so wordless that we can't even imagine naming them.

But as with any exercise, the more you pay attention to and name these physical sensations, the easier it will get. And you will have more information about what is going on inside of you, since physical feelings are often linked to emotions. Next, try to understand why you might be feeling these emotions. Perhaps your resentment that your daughter is being so disrespectful has something to do with bad feelings that you carry around about yourself. Do you worry that other people in your life don't respect you?

If so, why? And what if you separate those worries from your concern with your daughter.

What else might be going on here? You know she is rebelling against you, but is that all bad? Maybe it is a sign that she feels secure enough in your love for her that she can allow herself to begin to take an important developmental step towards being more independent and self-directed. If you think that might be going on, does that change how you deal with your frustration? Now you can problem solve. Based on these mental representations, you may find that a solution comes fairly easily. Or, if you feel that you still don't know what to do, it will be easier to get some support or guidance from a friend, older sibling, or even a counselor, because you've already started the process of describing the situation and putting your concerns into words. In summary, then, this three step process helps you begin to identify not only what you are feeling, but also the specific events and experiences that led up to that feeling. You are, in other words, learning to develop mental representations of the details that go into any emotional experience.

Once you have a more detailed and meaningful picture of and words to describe any experience, you can often find more successful ways to manage your feelings and respond more effectively to any situation.