

What to Do if You Struggle with Expressing and Understanding Your Emotions

Objective

To increase your ability to connect with your own and others' emotions.

What to Know

Alexithymia is the reduced ability, or complete inability, to connect with and understand your own and others' feelings and emotions. You may be highly sensitive, but because of this challenge, others might think you are cold, aloof, or arrogant. As a result, you are more likely to suffer from social isolation and loneliness.

Do you suffer from alexithymia? Check off any of the following statements that apply to you.

- You generally cannot identify what you are feeling.
- When others ask how you are doing, you have a hard time answering them.
- You are socially awkward.
- You have a hard time describing feelings to others.
- You have difficulty distinguishing between feelings and body sensations.
- Usually, you can only tell if you are feeling "good" or "bad," or "happy" or "unhappy."
- You tend to define things logically.
- You speak in a monotone.
- When you tell stories, you may include so many facts and sequential details that others have a difficult time following and understanding them.
- You are disconnected from your own needs and desires.
- You are a concrete thinker.
- You have social anxiety.
- Other people do not know what you want, leading to relationship and interpersonal problems.
- You have sudden, unpredictable physical symptoms like racing heartbeat, difficulty breathing, body pain, and headaches.
- You have a limited imagination and are unable to enjoy anything that has to do with fantasy.
- You are unable to communicate any emotion – even to family and close friends.

- You have limited drive and motivation.
- You tend to procrastinate.
- You do not find joy or pleasure in leisure activities.
- You do not have a solid sense of self and experience identity confusion.
- You are unsure what you want for the future.
- You feel like you are a distant observer of your own life.
- Sometimes you worry that you are wasting your life.
- You do not like feeling out of control.
- You may feel things inside, but you struggle to feel connected to your feelings or you cannot express them to others.
- Total number of checked statements.

If you checked off more than five statements, you might have alexithymia.

There are three steps to manage and overcome alexithymia.

1. Learn to identify and express your feelings.
2. Increase self-awareness while developing emotion regulation skills.
3. Build a connection between your thoughts and feelings.

Here are techniques to practice the three steps:

- practice daily journaling to connect thoughts, experiences, and feelings
- enroll in expressive classes (acting, dance, art, music, or movement therapy)
- listen to emotionally stimulating music
- read novels, especially ones that describe personal narratives
- cultivate a therapeutic relationship with someone you trust

This worksheet will help you increase your ability to connect with your own and others' emotions.

What to Do

For the next week, write down situations or experiences when you notice your feelings. By labeling your emotions, you can assess what you are feeling (physically and emotionally). Take time each day to write about your experience. In the last column, note whether you did so.

Day	Situation/experience when you noticed a feeling	Label your feelings	Physical sensations associated with feelings	Write about it Y / N
Sunday				
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				

Now, over the next week write down situations or experiences when you notice others' feelings. By labeling others' emotions and how they express them, you will learn to be more in touch with what other people are feeling. Describe the emotions you observe. Write down additional details, including how you responded to the person. Take time each day to write about your experience. In the last column, note whether you did so.

Day	Situation/experience when you noticed someone else's feelings	Describe what you observed	Additional details/how did you respond?	Write about it Y / N
Sunday				
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				

Saturday				
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Did this worksheet increase your ability to connect with your own and others' emotions? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

What emotions did you become aware of that you were not previously aware of?

What was the main obstacle you encountered in identifying your emotions?

What was the main obstacle you encountered in identifying others' emotions?

What was easy about this activity? Difficult? What would you like to do to continue practicing naming and noticing emotions? Be specific.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
