

Emotional Maturity: Therapeutic Implications

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Abstract : *Alexithymia is characterized by difficulty in recognizing and describing emotions. Emotional Maturity is the ultimate goal for optimum psychological functioning in any individual that can be attained only if one is able to recognize and describe one's emotions. The current study aimed to assess alexithymia among high emotionally mature and low emotionally mature individuals. 74 males and 74 females of the age groups (22-25 years) were selected and assessed with the help of Emotional Maturity Questionnaire and Toronto Alexithymia Scale. The sample was divided into two equal halves i.e. 74 low emotionally mature and 74 high emotionally mature by applying median split half technique on emotional maturity score. A 2x2 analysis of variance with 2 levels of emotional maturity and 2 levels of gender was applied to evaluate the differences. There was significant difference on alexithymia in high and low emotionally mature individuals. No gender differences were observed. It can be observed from the results that persons who are emotionally mature, experience less difficulty in identifying and communicating feelings as compared to low emotionally mature individuals. The implications of management of alexithymia for efficient therapeutic intervention and steps for same are also proposed.*

Key words: Alexithymia, emotional maturity

Alexithymia refers to a personality construct that is characterized by, a difficulty in identifying and communicating feelings; a difficulty in distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations; impaired symbolization, as evidenced by paucity of fantasies and other imaginative activity; and a preference for focusing on external events rather than inner experiences.^{1,2} It has been suggested that the features comprising the alexithymia construct reflect deficits in the cognitive processing and regulation of emotions.³ It is not that the alexithymics are unable to express emotions verbally or that they fail to acknowledge that they experience emotions. The distinguishing factor is their inability to elaborate beyond a few limited adjectives such as "happy" or "unhappy" when describing these feelings.⁴ The core issue is that alexithymics have poorly differentiated emotions limiting their ability to distinguish and describe them to others.⁵ Thus

the range and depth of emotionality are adversely affected.

The concept evolved from clinical observations to empirical quantification in psychosomatic patients. Later it was evident even among patients with a variety of psychiatric disorders that involve disturbances in emotion regulation, including substance use disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, somatoform disorders, and eating disorders^{3, 6, 7}. Alexithymia has also been associated with hypertension,⁸ inflammatory bowel disease,⁹ functional gastrointestinal disorders,¹⁰ somatoform disorders,¹¹ panic disorder¹² and eating disorders.¹³ As an individual difference, alexithymia overlaps conceptually with the emotional intelligence construct. Latter encompasses the ability to perceive and appraise one's own and other's feelings and emotions, the ability to access and use feelings to guide one's thinking and action, and the ability to regulate

emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.¹⁴ There is empirical evidence that the two constructs are strongly and inversely related.^{15, 16}

Emotional maturity means, controlling one's emotions rather than allowing emotions to control the individual. It is a relative freedom from the constellation of inferiority, egotism and competitiveness. The important attribute of maturity is a sense of reality. Its characteristics are flexibility and adaptability.¹⁷ The more mature the individual is the more stable and flexible his/her adjustment is. Emotionally mature person has the capacity to withstand delaying in satisfaction of needs. He/she has ability to tolerate a reasonable amount of frustration.¹⁸ He/she has belief in long term planning and is capable of delaying or revising his expectations in terms of demands of situations. He has the courage to express his/her feelings and convictions, balanced with consideration for the feelings and convictions of other people.¹⁹

Emotional maturity is a significant predictor of the level of success that an individual would achieve in his lifetime. It also predicts general level of happiness, self confidence, success in relationships, the level of wellbeing in terms of emotional and physical health, the health of one's family, degree of leadership and responsibility taken in one's community and the world as a whole.²⁰ Emotional maturity is thus the ultimate goal for every individual aspiring for positive mental health. Yet the presence of alexithymia would be a significant deterrent towards that goal as it would not be possible to master emotions when the insight into it is limited.

The objectives of the current study were (1) to assess alexithymia among high emotionally mature and low emotionally mature post graduate students; (2) to study the relationship between emotional maturity and alexithymia.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of the study comprised of 148 post graduate students (74 males & 74 females), selected randomly from various teaching departments (including science and arts faculties) of Punjabi University, Patiala, between the age-range of 22-25 years. All participants were unmarried and belonged to urban background.

The participants were assessed individually using Emotional Maturity Questionnaire²⁰ and Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20).²¹ The sample was further divided into two equal halves (74 high emotionally mature and 74 low emotionally mature individuals) by applying median split half technique on emotional maturity scores. A 2 X 2 Analyses of Variances, with 2 levels of Emotional Maturity and 2 levels of Gender, was applied to evaluate the differences.

Tools

Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20, Hindi Adaptation)²¹: It is 20-item, 5-point likert type scale. It has three-factors namely: (a) Factor 1 – difficulty identifying feelings and distinguishing them from bodily sensations of emotion (b) Factor 2 – difficulty describing feelings, and (c) Factor 3 – externally-oriented thinking. Evidence of reliability and factorial validity has been well established. It has been demonstrated to be a psychometrically sound measure of alexithymia.²² The TAS and TAS-20 are now the most widely used measures of alexithymia.⁷ The Hindi standardized version was used in the current study.

Emotional Maturity Questionnaire²⁰: Emotional Maturity Questionnaire is a 40-item, 3-point likert type scale ranging from 'Rarely' to 'Often', measuring emotional maturity quotient. Subjects are to respond according to the applicability of each item in their life. 'Rarely', 'sometime' and 'Often' responses get '1', '0.5' and '0' marks respectively and by adding up the marks, total EMQ score is obtained.

Table- 1
Means and Standard Deviations (SD) of Alexithymia in relation to emotional maturity and gender.

VARIABLES	LEVELS	TAS-20 TOTAL MEAN (SD)	TAS-20 FACTOR 1 MEAN (SD)	TAS-20 FACTOR 2 MEAN (SD)	TAS-20 FACTOR 3 MEAN (SD)
EMOTIONAL MATURITY	HEM*	45.54 (9.14)	13.98 (4.66)	11.43 (2.99)	19.58 (3.87)
	LEM**	56.08 (7.63)	19.84 (4.94)	14.73 (3.46)	22.58 (4.06)
GENDER	MALE	51.12 (7.36)	16.95 (4.36)	12.89 (3.27)	21.36 (4.56)
	FEMALE	50.495 (9.41)	16.87 (5.24)	13.27 (3.19)	20.79 (3.37)

*HEM- High Emotionally Mature; **LEM- Low Emotionally Mature; Factor 1- Difficulty in identifying feelings and distinguishing them from bodily sensations of emotion; Factor 2- Difficulty in describing feelings; Factor 3- Externally-oriented thinking.

Table- 2
Summary of Analysis of variance for Alexithymia in relation to emotional maturity and gender

ALEXITHYMIA		EMOTIONAL MATURITY (A)	GENDER (B)	AB	ERROR
TAS-20FACTOR 1	SS	1266.82	0.17	86.28	3330.59
	MS	1266.82	0.17	86.28	23.13
	F-ratio	54.772**	0.007 (NS)	3.730 (NS)	
TAS-20FACTOR 2	SS	402.27	5.30	0.11	1875.35
	MS	402.27	5.30	0.11	13.02
	F-ratio	30.889**	0.407 (NS)	0.008 (NS)	
TAS-20FACTOR 3	SS	333.00	11.92	0.43	2689.68
	MS	333.00	11.92	0.43	18.68
	F-ratio	17.828**	0.638 (NS)	0.023 (NS)	
TAS-20TOTALSCORES	SS	4110.8	14.3	87.8	10515.8
	MS	4110.8	14.3	87.8	73
	F-ratio	56.29**	0.196 (NS)	1.202 (NS)	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; NS- Non-Significant; Factor 1- Difficulty in identifying feelings and distinguishing them from bodily sensations of emotion; Factor 2- Difficulty in describing feelings; Factor 3- Externally-oriented thinking.

RESULTS

Results revealed that less emotionally mature individuals scored more on alexithymia (total scores), ($M=56.08$) as compared to high emotionally mature individuals ($M=45.54$) Table 1. It implies that those individuals who are emotionally mature tend to be less alexithymic. Table II provides the summary of Analysis of Variance for alexithymia (total scores, Factor 1,

Factor 2 & Factor 3) in relation to emotional maturity and gender. There was significant difference ($F=56.29$, $p < 0.001$) between high emotionally mature and low emotionally mature individuals on alexithymia. High emotionally mature individuals were significantly lower on alexithymia as compared to low emotionally mature individuals. Same results were evident when high emotionally mature individuals were

compared with low emotionally mature individuals on the three factors of alexithymia separately. As evident in Table 2 high emotionally mature individuals scored less on all the three factors of TAS-20 as compared to low emotionally mature individuals. There was significant difference between high emotionally mature and low emotionally mature individuals on Factor 1 ($F=54.772$, $p < 0.001$), on Factor 2 ($F=30.889$, $p < 0.001$) and on Factor 3 ($F= 17.828$, $p < 0.001$). The mean score on alexithymia of male participants came out to be 51.12 and females' mean score was 50.495. There was no significant difference between males and females on alexithymia.

DISCUSSION

From the results, we can observe that the mean score on alexithymia of male participants came out to be 51.12 and females' mean score was 50.495. These mean alexithymia scores closely resemble the findings of Pandey et al. on Indian young adults which were 49.57 and 52.46 for males and females respectively.²¹ Parker et. al. in a comparative work with psychiatric population found that the normal controls scored less than or equal to 51 on TAS-20.²³ The scores thus are comparable with the Indian sample; indicating the cross cultural validity of the construct of alexithymia.

In the present study, no significant difference was found between males and females on alexithymia. Same results were found when gender differences were studied across each factor separately. In a study on 417 normal adults using TAS-26, Pasini et. al. had found no significant gender differences in total TAS scores²⁴. Cox et. al. had studied 55 somatoform patients using TAS-20 and found alexithymia unrelated to age and gender.¹¹ However, the significant effect of gender is consistent with the literature on the design and validation of the TAS-20.²⁵ A study by Parker et. al. reported that men tended to have significantly

higher TAS-20 scores than did women.²³ This contrasts with three earlier studies that had used the original TAS, and demonstrated no significant gender difference.²⁶⁻²⁸ Thus, no consistent pattern in gender differences has been reported in literature on alexithymia.^{22,29-31} The present study adds weight to the lack of gender difference in alexithymia. We present a case for equal distribution of the alexithymic characteristics in young normal adults pursuing post graduation, irrespective of their gender. Alexithymia has been related to social origin and degree of psychological sophistication of the clients.^{32,33} In the urban area, due to proactive role of women and equal parenting, both males and females are provided with homogenous social environment that facilitate similar psychological sophistication among them. It may be due to this equality that no significance gender differences are found in present study.

Less emotionally mature individuals scored more on alexithymia as a whole as compared to high emotionally mature individuals i.e. persons who are emotionally mature tend to be less alexithymic. In other words, persons who are emotionally mature experience less difficulty in identifying and communicating feelings as compared to low emotionally mature individuals. A significant inverse relationship was also found between alexithymia and emotional maturity that means more a person is alexithymic, less is his emotional maturity.

Emotional maturity is a mental state in which a person is able to make effective adjustment with himself/herself, members of his/her family, his/her peers in school, work place, society and culture. When a person reaches high level of emotional maturity, he realizes that he can no longer view his emotional states as the responsibility of external forces such as people, places, things, forces, fate and spirits. He learns to drop ex-pressions from his speech that show disownership of feelings, and a helplessness or

victimization of feelings. Emotional maturity consists of emotional responsibility, emotional honesty, emotional openness, emotional assertiveness, emotional understandings and emotional detachment. Emotional Openness is the person's willingness and skill in sharing his/her feelings in an appropriate manner and at appropriate times. Such individuals experience and learn the value of ventilating feelings and also the dangers involved in hiding feelings from self and others. Emotional assertiveness is concerned with positive self-expression. This is the ability to ask for and receive the nurturing that one needs and wants- first from self and then from others, and to express all feelings appropriate to any situation without aggressive overtones. These two characteristics i.e. emotional openness and emotional assertiveness are two important parts of emotional maturity and emotional maturity is a necessary step to self-understanding and acceptance, which leads to optimum psychological functioning. But alexithymics must be low on these two characteristics because if one is unable to identify one's feelings; self-understanding and acceptance would not be feasible for him/her. Alexithymics tend to be less emotionally mature because they can't identify & communicate their feelings which inhibit self-understanding and acceptance that is essential part of emotional maturity. So if we want our clients to be emotionally mature, which is the ultimate goal of counselling and psychotherapy, we must take into account the alexithymic level of the client.

Persons who are emotionally mature are stable and realistic about life, possessing good ego-strength. They can tolerate frustration for unsatisfactory conditions which is very important part of successful life. They don't get annoyed easily. Everybody faces problems in life but those who are emotionally mature possess the ability to deal with them and they accept all the problems and solve them without getting too

emotionally involved in them. All these are qualities that are essential for psychological well-being and mental health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Mental health is the emotional and spiritual resilience which allows us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of well being and an underlying belief in our own, and others' dignity and worth" and to help the clients in achieving these qualities alexithymia must be conquered.

Alexithymia has also been associated with hypertension,⁸ inflammatory bowel disease,⁹ functional gastrointestinal disorders,¹⁰ somatoform disorders,¹¹ panic disorder¹² and eating disorders.¹³ It has been noted that in these psychosomatic and somatoform disorders wherein alexithymia presence is well established, the therapist tends to develop strong negative counter-transference during therapeutic interactions. Hence focused attention to alexithymia would be significant for any effective psychological intervention through good therapeutic alliance.

If we can reduce or modify the alexithymic characteristics then we can proceed further towards symptom management and enhancement of overall well being of the clients. It is suggested that for handling alexithymia, the following four stages must be included in therapy sessions with clients.

1. Make the client an observer of his inner states and non-verbal cues.
2. Develop affect tolerance and hence decrease the perceived frightening nature of affect.
3. Recognize the emotions as signals that are self-limited in duration and controllability.
4. Begin to verbalize the emotional states with the counsellor/therapist as teacher or guide, providing feedback and enhancing self-esteem and consequently self-reliance and independence in thought and action.

To conclude, emotional maturity which is a known component of psychological well-being and mental health is an essential condition for successful life. Those who are emotionally mature are more content or satisfied with life and live "fully"²⁷. Further, handling alexithymia as an integral part of therapy would enhance the management of any dysfunction, particularly because if a person is unable to express his/her emotions, a healthy relationship is near to impossible to make, without which rapport building and therapeutic relationship would be incomplete; and personal growth towards psychological health & well-being would be stunted.

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