

Eating disorders and Emotions

One common trait of people who experience disordered eating is difficulty in identifying and/or regulating emotions. In fact, in many cases people will experience one of two fairly extreme responses:

1. very strong emotions, such as anger or rage, that are difficult to manage; or
2. no emotional response at all to incidents that would usually provoke a response in others.

Alexithymia is a term that literally means “without words for emotions” and is often experienced by people with eating disorders. Undoubtedly it contributes to these extreme emotional responses as it reflects an inability to recognise, label, express and tolerate emotions. It also sometimes results in internalisation of feelings which subsequently manifests as somatic symptoms such as heart palpitations, stomach ache etc. Alexithymia is also correlated with other mental health issues such as personality disorders and substance abuse; physical illnesses such as irritable bowel syndrome; and disorders such as Aspergers Syndrome.

Essentially, alexithymia impacts on a person’s ability to:

- Identify emotions;
- Describe or verbalise feelings;
- Understand the triggers of various feelings;
- Understand the function of emotions;
- Regulate emotions (and tolerate distress);
- Distinguishing between bodily functions and emotional feelings;
- Interpret and understand other people’s emotions.

Needless to say, this poses a significant handicap for people who are recovering from eating disorders. Emotional responses are a road map for many of us as they provide us with valuable information regarding how we should make sense of interactions and experiences. Thus, learning to recognise, label and understand emotions is paramount for recovery and re-engagement with normal life.

Four activities to reduce alexithymia:

1. Develop a feelings workbook or journal. Include a feelings vocabulary [[link to feelings vocabulary](#)]. Include information about feelings: draw them, name them, stick in magazine cut-outs of people exhibiting various emotions;
2. Write about feelings in a personal diary. Consider your own response to feelings: what physiological experiences accompany the feeling? How does your behaviour change?;
3. Discuss feelings/ emotions with other people. Reflect with them about your experience. Ask them about their experience. Notice their connection between feelings and behaviour cues;
4. Externalise the feeling from yourself. What does it look like? If it could talk, how would it sound? Where is it located in space? What colour would it be?