**Role of Expressive Art Therapies in Alexithymic Individuals**

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**Introduction**

**Alexithymia** is the inability to identify and express or describe one's feelings. People with alexithymia typically display a lack of imaginative thought, face difficulty in distinguishing between emotions and bodily sensations, and engage in logical externally oriented thought. In other words, individuals with high levels of alexithymia are usually aware of their emotional arousal; however, they have difficulty differentiating emotions and verbalizing them.

Alexithymia is a broad term to describe [problems with feeling emotions](https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/emotional-detachment). This Greek term used in Freudian psychodynamic theories loosely translates to “no words for emotion.” While Freudian theories are largely considered dated, this condition seems to be increasing in awareness. It’s often seen as a secondary diagnosis in other preexisting mental health conditions and disabilities, including depression and autism.

People who do have alexithymia may describe themselves as having difficulties with expressing emotions that are deemed socially appropriate, such as happiness on a joyous occasion. Others may furthermore have trouble identifying their emotions. Such individuals don’t necessarily have apathy. They instead may not have as strong of emotions as their peers and may have difficulties feeling empathy.

Its possible **causes** aren’t well understood. There’s a possibility it may be genetic. As the condition may also be a result of brain damage to the insula. This part of the brain is known for its role in social skills, empathy, and emotions, linking insula lesions to apathy and anxiety.

Additionally, this condition may be seen in people who have experienced depression, autism, and [trauma](https://www.healthline.com/health/traumatic-events), especially during early childhood. Trauma and neglect at this stage may cause changes in the brain that can make it difficult to feel and identify emotions later in life. [Research](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.neuropsych.14070169) also indicates that this condition may be present in certain neurological diseases and injuries. These include: [Alzheimer’s disease](https://www.healthline.com/health/alzheimers-disease), [dystonia](https://www.healthline.com/health/movement-uncontrolled-or-slow), epilepsy, [Huntington’s disease](https://www.healthline.com/health/huntingtons-disease), [multiple sclerosis](https://www.healthline.com/health/multiple-sclerosis), [Parkinson’s disease](https://www.healthline.com/health/parkinsons), [stroke](https://www.healthline.com/health/stroke), and [traumatic brain injury](https://www.healthline.com/health/head-injury)

To date, there isn’t a single individual treatment for alexithymia. The exact treatment approach depends on the individual's overall health needs. **Therapies** may also be helpful for this condition. These allow one to participate in exercises to help improve mental health. Possible therapy options include [cognitive behavioral therapy](https://www.healthline.com/health/cognitive-behavioral-therapy) (CBT), [group therapy](https://www.healthline.com/health/therapy-for-every-budget), [psychotherapy](https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health-professionals-types) (also known as “talk therapy”), and expressive art therapies.

**Expressive arts therapy** is an integrative, multimodal approach that utilizes a variety of methods including writing, music, visual arts, drama, and dance to help people achieve personal growth. In this type of treatment, people work with a trained therapist who helps them explore and understand their reactions to their experience with different forms of expressive art. It has been defined as a process of self-discovery that relies on artistic self-expression as a way to achieve emotional release.

This type of therapy is characterized by a focus on the creative process itself, utilizing a wide range of materials, and exploring several different techniques as part of a therapeutic intervention. People who are experiencing mental health problems may have a difficult time interpreting or describing how they are feeling. The use of expressive arts can help people learn more about themselves and share what they are feeling in a therapeutic context. That’s the reason it can contribute a lot to helping the alexithymic people.

As a multimodal therapy, expressive arts therapy draws on a few different types of single-modal approaches. Some of the main types of creative arts that are often used in expressive arts therapy include:

* [**Art therapy**](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-art-therapy-2795755)**:** This approach involves utilizing the visual arts such as drawing, painting, and sculpting, to work through emotions, thoughts, or experiences.
* **Dance therapy:** This type of therapy involves utilizing physical movement and dance to help people cope with mental health symptoms such as anxiety, stress, and depression.
* [**Music therapy**](https://www.verywellmind.com/benefits-of-music-therapy-89829)**:** This approach utilizes listening to or creating music to help improve mood and ease anxiety.
* [**Writing therapy**](https://www.verywellmind.com/writing-therapy-for-troubled-teens-2610441)**:** This approach involves exploring thoughts and emotions through writing. For example, people may write in a journal about their life or create expressive works such as poems or fictional stories.
* **Drama therapy:** An active approach with the systematic and intentional use of drama/ theatre processes through role-play, and associations to achieve the therapeutic goals of symptom relief, emotional and physical integration, and personal growth.
* **Play therapy:** The systematic use of a theoretical model, especially within the pediatric population, to establish an interpersonal process as a means to help children prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.
* **Sandplay therapy**: A creative form of play therapy that uses a sandbox and a large collection of miniatures and/or other objects to enable a child to explore the deeper layers within their psyche.
* **Waterplay therapy:** Another form of play therapy, through the use of water helps children grow and develop in essential ways. Water is an important natural material that provides a multitude of wonderful development and learning opportunities.

It is important to note that the types of expressive arts used above are examples of single therapeutic modalities when used on their own. Expressive arts therapy is different because it integrates many of these techniques and incorporates a variety of tools instead of being limited to a single approach. By drawing on different modalities and integrating them in ways that are beneficial to each individual’s needs, this approach to treatment can create unique experiences that allow people to better understand their emotions, thoughts, memories, and experiences.

There’s a fine line difference between expressive arts therapy and art therapy, which is that expressive arts therapy draws from a variety of art forms such as writing, psychodrama, dance, movement, painting, drawing, sculpting, play, and music (or a combination of them), while art therapy is based on one particular art form.

Therapists who practice expressive art therapy may draw on a wide **variety of techniques** to create a treatment that is best suited to the individual's needs. Such techniques can include Painting or finger painting with acrylics or watercolor, Clay sculpting, Mask making, Dancing, [Journal writing](https://www.verywellmind.com/journaling-a-great-tool-for-coping-with-anxiety-3144672), [Psychodrama](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-psychodrama-5193006), Role-playing, Improvisation, Sketching Mandala coloring, and more.

In addition to utilizing the healing properties of self-expression through expressive art, professionals also incorporate psychotherapeutic modalities including [psychodynamic](https://www.verywellmind.com/psychodynamic-therapy-definition-uses-effectiveness-5094933), [cognitive-behavioral](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-cognitive-behavior-therapy-2795747), and mindfulness-based approaches.

Expressive arts therapy may be **beneficial** for several different mental health conditions. It can be used with both adults and children. Some conditions or concerns it may help include: Anxiety, ADHD, interpersonal problems, emotional problems, alexithymic conditions, and more. This approach may also be useful when treating children who may not yet have the ability to describe what they are thinking or feeling.

The use of expressive arts can augment the benefits of talk therapy by allowing people to use the strategies that work best for them. For some people, talking about their experiences may be their preferred form of self-exploration. Other people, however, may benefit more from activities such as drawing a picture or writing in a journal. According to the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA), this involves integrating arts processes with psychology and community education to help people improve creativity, gain clarity, and achieve deep healing, by establishing proper understanding and expression of one’s emotions and feelings.

Other than this it includes various **benefits** like developing strengths and skills, personal growth, symptom reduction, improved communication, and making meaning of personal experiences.

Expressive art therapies because of all the above-stated reasons are one of the most effective ways of dealing with alexithymia. As people with the help of these therapies and techniques can gradually learn the way of expressing their emotions and feelings.

**Significance of the study**

As we know some people find it difficult to express their emotions and they find it even harder to put meaning and words to their feelings and emotions. These people are not able to tell other people what they are going through at the emotional level. This may lead them towards trouble and fluctuations in their life be it personal, professional, or social. All these can also hamper one’s mental and physical health as this can also interfere with individuals’ efficiency and capabilities over time. Here comes the role of psychology, as with the help of various therapies this issue can be dealt with easily. So, if there’s a therapy that is very generalized and effective with least or no money and time consumption will be greater acceptance, which has led our focus toward the use of expressive art therapies. Expressive art therapies are widely in use nowadays. It can be done by using dance movement, doodling, drawing, writing, and more. These can be done with a little guidance. When one is made able to express their emotions while using some specific skills or techniques then that can help them overcome the issues one encounters while expressing their emotions. So, the more effective the therapies will be, the better the individual will become with their expression of emotions. The study is quite significant in the present scenario as people tend to have a lot of fluctuation in their personal life and various aspects of life, but when the individual will be able to express their emotions and become more vigilant, then most of the problems will be decreased or can be minimized. So, because of all these reasons, I believe that the topic is more relevant and important for the study.

**Review of Literature**

*Akram & Arshad (2022)* conducted an experimental study for the remediation of alexithymia and its consequent effects on the general mental health of university students. The help of statistical analysis showed a significant reduction in the participants' alexithymia, as well as depression and anxiety, in the treatment group, they also found ART to be efficacious in reducing alexithymia. Subsequently, with the study, they found that the treatment modality has proved to be useful in improving the participants' general psychological distress (anxiety, depressive symptoms).

*Ashori & Shamsi (2022)* have studied the effect of Adlerian play therapy on the alexithymia and social isolation of deaf students. By proper research conduction, the results revealed that the intervention significantly and positively influenced the individuals with alexithymia and social isolation of deaf students as it has been found that AdPT improved the alexithymia and social isolation of deaf students which has brought changes and improvements in the individual’s life.

*Begotaraj, Sambucini, Ciacchella, Pellicano, Pierro, & et.al. (2022)* studied the effectiveness of expressive writing on the psychological distress and traumatic symptoms of migrants through a prospective study multi-arm randomized controlled trial. In this, they found that Trauma-focused EW was related to an immediate improvement in phobic anxiety and positive total symptoms and improvement in somatization, global severity index, hope, and alexithymia.

*Akbari, Amiri, & Mehrabi (2021)* studied the effectiveness of music therapy in reducing alexithymia symptoms and improvement of peer relationships. By conducting research they found that music therapy is an effective way of reducing the alexithymic symptoms of female preadolescents.

*Renzi, Mariani, Trani, & Tambelli (2020)* researched giving words to emotions with the use of linguistic analysis to explore the role of alexithymia in an expressive writing intervention and after the completion of the research, they found that alexithymia affects the effectiveness of expressive writing creates a difficulty in becoming involved in the writing process and also lacks the symbolizing processes. Subsequently, they concluded that with the help of expressive writing intervention one can start or learn to develop the skill of giving words to the emotions being experienced.

*Savidaki, Demirtoka & Jiménez (2020)* conducted a study on Re-inhabiting one’s body which was a pilot study on the effects of dance movement therapy on body image and alexithymia in eating disorders with this they found that the participants who received dance movement therapy have reported improvements in their mood states and an increase in their self-awareness.

*Renzi, Solano, Trani, Ginobbi, Minutolo & Tambelli (2019)* studied the effects of an expressive writing intervention on pregnancy rates, alexithymia, and psychophysical health during an assisted reproductive treatment. Findings have suggested that these interventions can contribute a lot in dealing with individuals going through the issues of alexithymia and have supported the usefulness of the writing technique during ART in promoting treatment success.

*Metzner, Jaeger, Masuhr, Olschewski, Gräfe, & et.al. (2018)* researched the forms of attunement during the initial stages of music therapy for patients with acute psychosis or individuals with alexithymia. The study has shown evidence of carefully organized rhythmic attunement which has further suggested the beneficial effects on patients with psychosis and alexithymic individuals through improvisational music therapy.

*Erkkilä, Punkanen, Fachner, Ruona, Pöntiö, & et.al. (2018)* studied individual music therapy for depression or alexithymia symptoms through a randomized controlled trial. With this, they have found that the combination of individual music therapy with standard care is effective for depression among working-age people with depression or alexithymia. The results of this study along with the previous research indicate that music therapy with its specific qualities is a valuable enhancement to established treatment practices for various mental health issues.

*Blomdahl, Gunnarsson, Guregård, & Björklund (2013)* reviewed various studies to find out the efficiency of art therapies in helping individuals with clinical diagnosis and mental health-related issues. After the review found that art therapy can be performed successfully in a wide variety of clinical situations.

*Pykh (2013)* conducted a study to find out the effectiveness of rhythmic movement therapy (RMT) on individuals with alexithymia based on this the results have indicated that significant improvement in alexithymia level as well as several other personal variables in subjects of the RMT group compared with unimproved subjects of the control group, although the results of between-group comparison did not show any significant changes in extraversion and neuroticism in RMT group.

*Ogrodniczuk, Piper, & Joyce (2011)* reviewed a study on the effect of alexithymia on the process and outcome of psychotherapy. Based on the review they have summarized that alexithymia has little effect on patients' treatment preferences, yet there was some tendency for alexithymic patients to prefer group therapy.

*Allen, & Heaton (2010)* researched Autism, Music, and the Therapeutic Potential of Music in Alexithymia. Under this they have explored those possible mechanisms for musical mood induction in listeners, hypothesizing that the simulation theory of empathy may illuminate current controversies over the nature of emotion in music. By working on these ideas, they have stated that using a simple associative learning process between musically induced emotions and their cognition was found to be significantly correlated for the clinical treatment of alexithymia.

*Stingla, Bauscha, Walter, Kagerer, Leichsenringa, & Leweke (2008)* have tried to study the effects of inpatient psychotherapy on the stability of alexithymia characteristics. The results in this have depicted that during inpatient multimodal psychodynamic treatment, the symptom load and alexithymia in the patients are decreased as the high relative stability of alexithymia shown supports a view that alexithymia is a relatively stable personality trait that can be altered or modified with proper techniques and therapies.

*Degen & Lansen (2006)* worked on a case study of a client with alexithymia and applied art therapy to the client to find out the effectiveness of the therapy. In this context, they found that this made the client able to recognize and name emotional reactions after the treatment with art therapy, and thus, art therapy seems to be a promising form of treatment for traumatized patients suffering from alexithymia, even in cases of severe self-pathology.

**Research Methodology**

This is a type of theoretical research in which a detailed study about alexithymic individuals and the role of expressive art therapies in overcoming the issues or problems faced by alexithymic people. To collect the information qualitative study was done based on the reviews of the previous studies available on PubMed, google scholar, Taylor & Francis, research gate, springer, and various magazine articles. In this case, expressive art therapies work as an independent variable i.e. it can be manipulated and alexithymic individuals are the dependent variable i.e. we tend to see the effect of an independent variable on the dependent. To study these variables review of the research was also done under the guidance of my supervisor on the various research papers and articles on alexithymic individuals, and expressive art therapies respectively, and collectively. Then the conclusion was framed based on the findings of the various studies.

**Discussion**

Alexithymia is a condition marked by a lack of feelings; it can be difficult to recognize the symptoms as well. Since this condition is associated with an inability to express feelings, an affected person might come across as being out of touch or apathetic. However, a person with alexithymia might personally experience the following in social contexts: anger, confusion, difficulty “reading faces”, discomfort, emptiness, increased heart rate, lack of affection, and panic. This condition may also make it difficult for a person to interpret body changes as emotional responses. This after a time tends to hamper one’s personal, professional, and social life to a great extent. This condition can also be associated with various disorders like autism, depression, epilepsy, and more. As this condition is nowadays found to be very prevalent, the treatment for this needs to be figured out. As there’s no specific cause to it, this condition can be improved with the use of expressive art therapies. Expressive art therapy is conducted by professional therapists and psychologists in varied combinations of other therapies like drama, play, art, dance, writing, and more. These therapies are used in combination to treat a particular problem or issue.

Studies have shown that expressive art therapies, when used in combination can be better able to make people aware of their emotions and feelings. Many researchers have found that dance therapy, writing therapy, music therapy, or various such therapies can be used to create insight among individuals with alexithymia. As these therapies can contribute a lot to making people aware of the feelings and emotions they experience and go through in certain situations now and then.

Expressive art therapies can be used to deal with several mental health-related issues be it depression, anxiety, and more. As these therapies contribute a lot to making individuals aware and insightful about their feelings and emotions. As it’s known that alexithymic people face difficulties in expressing their emotions and feelings. So, these therapies can be of a lot of use for them to make them aware of their stuff. With proper techniques therapies can make people a lot more independent and confident in expressing their emotions and feelings.

**Conclusion**

Expressive art therapy is a way of creating insight among individuals about their emotions and feelings one is going through. It includes several therapies of a different kinds be it drama, play, music, writing, sketching, and more. These therapies hold some capabilities in terms of enhancing the individuals’ lifestyle. It tends to make an individual’s life a successful one by contributing their utmost skills under the guidance of a therapist and psychologist to become aware of their feelings and emotions. When one gets aware of their thought, feelings, and emotions then on the same continuum they become able to express their emotions and feelings more effectively. Based on the review it can be concluded that dance movement therapies, art therapies, writing therapies, and drama therapies can contribute a lot to helping alexithymic people. As individuals with the condition of alexithymia can receive a lot of benefits because of expressive art therapies and related techniques. Subsequently, these help the individual in recognizing, expressing, and analyzing one’s emotions and feelings.

So, with this, it can conclude that expressive art therapies are of great use for the recognition, analysis, and expression of emotions effectively.

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