A fact sheet about

Alexithymia and naming feelings

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Alexithymia and naming feelings

What alexithymia is, why clues can help, and three clues to check.



Key points

- Some people find it hard to notice and name their own feelings. This is called alexithymia (definition below), and it can mean a feeling shows up only as "bad", "off" or "too much".
- You can often work a feeling out from the clues around it, rather than from the feeling itself.
- The three clues are what just happened, what your body is doing, and what you want to do or stop doing.
- Hunger, tiredness and pain can feel like a bad mood, so your body is worth checking first.

Why a feeling can show up only as "bad", "off" or "too much"

Someone asks how you are, and the honest answer is "bad". You cannot tell if that means sad, cross, worried or worn out. Or a phone call with a relative leaves you feeling wrong all evening, but you cannot say how, even hours later.

The feeling is real, and it may be strong. What is hard is the step that turns it into a word. Looking straight at the feeling may not help, but the things around it often can.

Alexithymia means finding it hard to notice, name and describe your own feelings. It is not a flaw, and it comes in degrees, from a little to a lot. It is about naming feelings, not about having fewer of them.

Studies suggest that about half of autistic people have alexithymia, and it is much less common in other people. So it is common in autistic people, but it is not part of being autistic, and many autistic people name their feelings with ease. Most of this research is with autistic people. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of this too.

Feelings are closely tied to signals inside your body, like a tight chest or a hot face. You can read more about how body signals shape your feelings here.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

Why the clues around a feeling can help

Your brain makes sense of a feeling partly from what is going on around it. The same churning stomach can feel like worry before a phone call and like hunger before lunch. So if the feeling itself is hard to read, the setting can tell you a lot.

Body states can also get mixed up with feelings. In a set of studies with adults in general, being hungry made people feel worse and judge others more harshly. But this mostly happened when they did not stop to notice their own state. Once they paid attention to how they felt, hunger had less pull on their mood.

So feeling ""too much", “bad” or “off” may be an emotion, or it may be hunger, thirst, tiredness, pain, being too hot or cold, or too much noise and light. Often it is a mix, and the clues help you sort it out.

The one thing to try: check three clues

When you feel "off" (or "bad", "too much", or any feeling that is hard to name), look at what sits around the feeling before you look for a word. You can do this in your head, or in a few words on your phone.

- What just happened? A message, a noise, a change of plan, something someone said, or nothing you can name.
- What is your body doing? A tight jaw, heavy arms, a fast heart, an empty stomach, a hot face, or "nothing I can feel".
- What do you want to do, or stop doing? Hide, leave the room, shout, cry, eat, lie down, or be with someone.

Then, if you like, make a guess at the word. A short list is easier than a long one: sad, cross, worried, hurt, lonely, embarrassed, overloaded or tired. "I don't know" is a fine answer.

Often the three clues are enough to act on, even with no word: "Plan changed, jaw tight, want to be alone" tells you what may help, even if you never call it frustration. You can share the clues with someone else too: "that call threw me, I need an hour".

You can keep these few words in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app. After a few weeks you may see the same clues come up together, and that can show you what a feeling is like for you.

This step is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. On some days every clue will be "no idea". That still helps, because it tells you to check food, drink, rest and pain first.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the

cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you work out what you are feeling, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if "bad" has been there most days. Tell them too if what you notice is flatness, where nothing feels good, even the things you usually enjoy. That is a different thing, and it needs its own conversation.

If you are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night.

Sources

Kinnaird, Stewart and Tchanturia (2019). "Investigating alexithymia in autism: a systematic review and meta-analysis." European Psychiatry 55, 80-89. doi:10.1016/j.eurpsy.2018.09.004

MacCormack and Lindquist (2019). "Feeling hangry? When hunger is conceptualised as emotion." Emotion 19(2), 301-319. doi:10.1037/emo0000422

UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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