

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

“Not Being Able to Describe Your Feelings”

Some people have difficulty recognising or describing their emotions. They have feelings, and the feelings can often be overwhelming, but working out what they are and naming them can take a lot of effort.

If that sounds like you, then you may have *Alexithymia* – which means “no words for emotions”. It is thought that 10% of the general population has alexithymia, but that percentage increases greatly if you are autistic.

I can describe my emotions most of the time, (*I struggle to work out what’s happening if a situation is new to me*), but many of my clients are Alexithymic and this post has been written with their assistance.

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO HAVE ALEXITHYMIA?

One client says that it’s as if their emotions are being held back behind a wall, and they have a small hole they can look through to try and see what’s on the other side.

Another says it’s as if their emotions are behind a sheet of frosted glass, so they can’t see them clearly.

Someone else said they might be able to name their emotions if they put a lot of work into it. Tidying and organising where they live helps. Doing things like washing up dishes and putting them away can help them work out what they were feeling – but it can take days or a week of effort.

Another client added “*since discovering I have alexithymia I’ve learned that I feel some emotions literally as bodily sensations. For example an ache in my limbs usually means a negative emotion like grief or feeling hurt by another person.*”

That can mean that identifying your feelings is a two-stage process. Another client agrees with this: “*first I have to work out if the sensations in my body are physiological, e.g. indigestion, or emotional. If they are emotional then I need to spend time working out what the emotion is.*”

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My favourite description was someone who said *"I can tell you how big my feelings are – but not their context. I know the amplitude of the waves but not their frequency."*

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW IF YOU HAVE ALEXITHYMIA?

Not knowing if you have alexithymia can lead to extra stress in life.

A simple question such as *"How are you?"* can be very costly in terms of personal energy.

Do you lie and say *"I'm fine"*? (Lying can be very costly for autistic folk.)

Do you tell the truth and say *"I don't know"*, which often leads to the reply: *"Really? You don't know how you are?"* (Not being believed can also be very costly.)

Or do you spend time and effort working out how you are, only to find there's no closure as the other person has moved on and doesn't want to hear your delayed reply. (Not having closure on a conversation can also be costly.)

I know people who have been pushed into burnout just by the repeated daily question of *"how are you?"* or *"how are you feeling?"*

Another client said they had struggled in therapy for many years – and now they realised it's because every session was interrogating them on how they felt about things, which they could never answer without a great deal of effort.

THE BENEFITS OF KNOWING

I've seen a huge boost in self-esteem and self-acceptance when people find out that there's a reason and a name for why they are the way they are. They are not alone, and there's no reason to feel shame about it. They get to reframe their life with this information and find it now makes a lot more sense.

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After reading this blog someone wrote to say: "Now that I know I have trouble identifying and accessing my feelings, it has been massively helpful to consciously focus on trying to identify what they are. If I can identify how I'm feeling, especially if the feelings are negative or I'm going through a hard time, it helps me manage my well-being by recognising my limits. I used to burn out all the time in my 'previous life', and I think it was because I kept pushing myself past my physical and emotional limits due to alexithymia. If I have negative feelings it usually means I need to try and stop and deal with a problem of some kind - otherwise I just keep banging my head against a metaphorical wall I can't even see and that leads to constant burnouts."

EXTERNAL QUESTIONS

If you are struggling to name an emotion or internal sensation, one strategy is to use external questions rather than internal ones. This can be questions from other people, or questions for yourself.

For example, instead of asking *"am I thirsty?"* ask yourself *"when did I last drink something?"*

Instead of people asking *"how are you?"* they could ask *"what did you do this week?"*

(One client found many questions about how they were feeling from strangers or work colleagues could be answered with *"I've just had a coffee"* or *"I need a coffee"* – and that seemed to satisfy them.)

DO YOU FEEL SAFE?

It's possible that even if you can't tell what emotion you are feeling, you might be able to tell if you feel safe. One way of testing this is to think of something that happened to you and see if you can tell if you felt safe at the time.

A client remarked: *"Safety is very physical. It feels okay. I'm able to move. Able to turn, instead of locked. I either feel safe or I don't."*

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If you have access to that information, that is data that you can use. For instance, instead of asking *"do I feel afraid or excited?"* ask *"do I feel safe or unsafe?"*

If you have a fluttery feeling in your stomach, that might mean anticipation or anxiety. By combining the fluttery feeling with the safety question, you might be able to work out that *"fluttery + knowing I'm safe"* means anticipation or excitement, and *"fluttery + feeling unsafe"* is anxiety or fear.

If this doesn't work for you – are there any other signifiers you can look out for which provide context clues?

SENSORY DATA

A third strategy is to look at what your raw body data is telling you. One client wasn't able to answer the question *"am I in love with my partner?"* with talk of their feelings, but they were able to describe their raw sensory data: *"my body wants to be touched by you, when it doesn't want to be touched by anyone else, and since I met you I sing more when I'm alone."*

(I don't know about you, but I much prefer their answer using sensory data.)

LOOK TO THE PAST

If you struggle to answer questions about what you'd like to do in the future, try looking into the past for clues.

So if someone asks *"would you to go to a bar with friends tonight?"* and you have no idea, try asking yourself *"have I ever liked being in a bar with my friends?"*

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"WHEEL OF EMOTIONS"

There are many examples of *"emotion wheels"* using google images.

Some people have found working with an *"emotions wheel"* has helped them – but I know as many people who found it unhelpful.

For instance, *"courageous"* might be next to *"happy"* on the wheel, but one client puts *"courageous"* next to *"fear"*. I associate *"surprise"* with *"anxiety"*.

Any exercise where you are being told what emotions look like or how they relate to each other may be teaching someone how to suppress their natural responses and pretend to be someone they are not, so use with caution.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF LOOKING AT ALEXITHYMIA

One of my clients found it helped to think of alexithymia as similar to colour blindness. It's not an absence or lack of something, it's that you experience the world differently. As a result, you might process things that other people cannot see.

Another client was frustrated saying *"if only I could name my emotions life would be so much easier!"*

I said *"that sounds like someone saying, if only I had the recipe I'd be able to bake the cake!"*

"Yes," they said, *"that's exactly it."*

Unfortunately, being able to name your feelings is a lot like being able to name the ingredients of a cake. Being able to tell if I'm happy or sad is like being able to name flour, eggs, butter and sugar. It still doesn't given me a method, oven temperature or cooking times. That's why people who can name their feelings still go to see therapists – we are all trying to work out the recipe.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

A video on alexithymia by Autistic YouTuber "Yo Samdy Sam":
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3tD94tB6T4>

A free test to find out if you have alexithymia:
<https://www.alexithymia.us/alexithymia-questionnaire-online-test>

A blog post by Michaela Morgan on what it's like to have alexithymia:
<https://neuroclastic.com/no-really-im-fine-on-alexithymia/>

I hope that helps. Please get in touch if you have any questions or would like to book an introductory call.

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