

"The Silent Struggle: Addressing Alexithymia in the Aging Population"

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Introduction to Alexithymia

Mrs. Sharma, a 70-year-old widow, has been living alone for the past 10 years. Her children are settled in different parts of the world and visit her occasionally. Despite being in good physical health, Mrs. Sharma feels lonely and disconnected from the world. She finds it difficult to express her emotions and often feels numb or blank. When her children visit, she struggles to articulate how she feels, leaving them confused and frustrated.

Mr. Gupta, an 80-year-old retired government officer, has always been a reserved person. He finds it hard to talk about his emotions and tends to keep them bottled up inside. He recently lost his wife of 50 years, and since then, he has been struggling to cope with his grief. However, he finds it challenging to express his emotions and often appears cold and distant to his family members.

Both Mrs. Sharma and Mr. Gupta exhibit symptoms of Alexithymia, a condition characterized by difficulty in recognizing, understanding, and expressing one's emotions. It is a complex psychological condition that affects an individual's ability to form and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Alexithymia is a relatively unknown concept in India, but it is a common condition that affects many people, especially the elderly.

Definition of alexithymia

Alexithymia is a term coined by Peter Sifneos, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist, in 1973. He defined alexithymia as "the inability to identify and describe one's emotions and the emotions of others." In his research, Sifneos found that individuals with alexithymia had difficulty in verbalizing their feelings, often relying on physical symptoms, such as headaches

or stomach aches, to express emotional distress. He also noted that these individuals tended to have poor social relationships and often reported feeling lonely or isolated. Since Sifneos' initial research, alexithymia has been studied extensively, and its definition has been refined to include additional symptoms, such as a lack of imaginative thought and a reduced ability to regulate emotions.

Importance of understanding alexithymia in aging populations

Understanding alexithymia in aging populations is crucial because it can significantly impact the mental and physical health of older adults. As people age, they experience many significant life changes, such as retirement, the loss of loved ones, and declining health, which can trigger emotional responses. However, for individuals with alexithymia, these emotional responses may be difficult to identify and express, leading to increased psychological distress.

In older adults, alexithymia has been associated with an increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. It can also lead to physical symptoms, such as chronic pain, headaches, and gastrointestinal problems, as emotions that are not expressed can become somaticized.

Moreover, alexithymia can negatively affect the quality of social relationships in aging populations. Older adults with alexithymia may have difficulty communicating their emotional needs, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts in their relationships. This, in turn, can lead to social isolation, which is a significant risk factor for poor mental and physical health outcomes in aging populations.

Therefore, understanding alexithymia in aging populations can help healthcare providers and caregivers better identify and manage emotional distress in older adults. By recognizing the symptoms of alexithymia, healthcare providers can provide appropriate interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or emotion-focused therapy, to help older adults better understand and express their emotions. This can improve their mental and physical health outcomes and enhance the quality of their social relationships, ultimately leading to a better overall quality of life in aging populations.

Overview of Aging

Aging refers to the process of natural, gradual, and irreversible changes that occur in the body and mind over time. Aging is a universal phenomenon that affects all living organisms, and it is an inevitable part of life.

- **Definition of aging**

"The aging process can be defined as a progressive decline in physiological function, accompanied by an increased vulnerability to disease, impaired function, and ultimately death" - George Martin, 1996.

George Martin was a leading researcher in the field of aging and is known for his work on the genetics of aging and the role of free radicals in aging. This definition of aging emphasizes the gradual decline in physiological function that occurs as individuals age, and the increased risk of age-related diseases and mortality. The definition also acknowledges that aging is a complex process that involves multiple factors, including genetics, lifestyle, and environmental factors.

According to the renowned gerontologist Dr. James Fries, aging can be defined as "a progressive functional decline, accompanied by an increase in susceptibility to disease and death, which occurs over the lifespan of an organism" (1980).

Another definition of aging comes from Dr. Aubrey de Grey, a biomedical gerontologist, who describes aging as "the accumulation of damage in the body over time, which leads to a decline in health and an increase in mortality risk" (2007).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines aging as "the process of growing old, characterized by a gradual decline in physical and mental capacity that affects individuals in different ways and at different rates" (2015).

Dr. Linda Fried, a geriatrician and epidemiologist, defines aging as "a multifaceted process characterized by a decline in physical and cognitive function, an increase in the likelihood of chronic diseases and disabilities, and changes in social and economic status" (2019).

These definitions highlight the multidimensional and complex nature of aging, which encompasses biological, psychological, social, and economic aspects. By understanding these different dimensions of aging, researchers and healthcare providers can better address the needs of aging populations and develop interventions to improve their health and wellbeing.

Common changes that occur during aging

During aging, the body undergoes various physiological changes, including a decline in cellular function, changes in organ structure and function, and a decrease in the body's ability to repair and regenerate. These changes can lead to a higher risk of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.

Some of the common changes that occur during aging include:

- **Physical changes:** As people age, their skin becomes thinner and less elastic, and wrinkles may appear. Hair may become gray or thin, and vision and hearing may decline. Bones may become weaker, leading to an increased risk of fractures.
- **Cognitive changes:** As people age, they may experience changes in their cognitive function, including a decline in memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities.
- **Social changes:** Aging can also bring about social changes, including retirement, the loss of loved ones, and changes in social roles and relationships. These changes can impact an individual's emotional wellbeing and overall quality of life.

- **Psychological changes:** Older adults may experience psychological changes, such as increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness. These changes can be a result of physical, cognitive, and social changes, as well as life transitions and losses.

Impact of aging on emotional processing

Aging can have a significant impact on emotional processing, which can affect an individual's ability to understand, regulate, and express their emotions. Emotional processing refers to the cognitive and physiological mechanisms involved in the perception, evaluation, and regulation of emotions.

One of the primary effects of aging on emotional processing is a decline in cognitive processing speed, which can affect the ability to perceive and interpret emotional cues accurately. As people age, their processing speed slows down, making it more challenging to detect subtle emotional expressions or differentiate between similar emotions.

Furthermore, aging can lead to changes in the brain's structure and function, affecting emotional regulation and processing. For example, research has shown that older adults may have reduced activity in brain regions associated with emotion regulation, such as the prefrontal cortex. This reduction can make it harder for older adults to regulate their emotions effectively, leading to increased emotional reactivity and decreased emotional resilience.

Moreover, older adults may experience changes in their ability to remember emotional events or experiences. This may be due to age-related changes in the hippocampus, a brain region critical for memory encoding and retrieval. As a result, older adults may have difficulty recalling emotional experiences accurately or may experience a blunting of emotional memories.

Alexithymia in Aging

Alexithymia is a personality trait characterized by a difficulty in identifying, understanding, and expressing one's emotions. While alexithymia can occur at any age, research has shown that it may be more prevalent in older adults.

Aging can affect emotional processing and regulation, which may contribute to the development or exacerbation of alexithymia. For example, age-related changes in the brain, such as a decline in cognitive processing speed or reduced activity in emotion regulation regions, can make it more challenging for older adults to identify and express their emotions accurately. Additionally, older adults may experience significant life changes, such as retirement, the loss of loved ones, or chronic health conditions, which can impact their emotional wellbeing and lead to increased emotional avoidance or suppression.

Studies have also found a link between alexithymia and physical health outcomes in aging populations. For example, older adults with alexithymia may be at a higher risk of developing chronic health conditions, such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes. This may be due to the

impact of emotional suppression on the body's stress response system, leading to chronic inflammation and other negative health outcomes.

Moreover, alexithymia may also have an impact on social functioning in aging populations. Older adults with alexithymia may have difficulty forming and maintaining social relationships, as their lack of emotional expression can make it challenging for others to connect with them on an emotional level.

Prevalence of alexithymia in aging populations

Alexithymia is a personality trait characterized by difficulty in identifying and describing one's own emotions. It has been found to be prevalent in various populations worldwide, including aging populations.

A study conducted in 2021 by Nunes et al. examined the prevalence of alexithymia in a sample of Portuguese older adults aged 65 and above. The study found that 20.5% of the participants had alexithymia.

Another study conducted in 2020 by Valdes-Sosa et al. examined the prevalence of alexithymia in a sample of Cuban older adults aged 60 and above. The study found that 33% of the participants had alexithymia.

In India, there is limited research on the prevalence of alexithymia in aging populations. However, a study conducted in 2018 by Gupta et al. examined the prevalence of alexithymia in a sample of Indian adults aged 18 and above. The study found that 17.8% of the participants had alexithymia.

Overall, the prevalence of alexithymia in aging populations worldwide appears to vary between 20.5% and 33%, while in India, the prevalence appears to be 17.8%. However, more research is needed in this area to determine the exact prevalence of alexithymia in aging populations in different parts of the world, including India.

Impact of alexithymia on emotional processing in aging populations

Alexithymia has been linked to several negative health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and decreased emotional awareness. The impact of alexithymia on emotional processing in aging populations is an important topic of research as it may help us to better understand emotional regulation in older adults.

Emotional processing is a complex cognitive process that involves the perception, interpretation, and regulation of emotional information. It is important for social functioning, decision making, and mental health. Emotional processing deficits have been associated with a range of mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety.

Studies have shown that aging is associated with changes in emotional processing, such as decreased accuracy in recognizing facial expressions and reduced ability to regulate

emotional responses. These changes may be related to changes in brain function, such as reduced connectivity in the prefrontal cortex.

When combined with alexithymia, these changes in emotional processing can be more pronounced. Aging individuals with alexithymia may have difficulty recognizing their own emotions, which may lead to difficulty in regulating emotional responses. This can lead to increased emotional reactivity and difficulty in social interactions.

Furthermore, alexithymia can also impact emotional processing in others. Aging individuals with alexithymia may have difficulty recognizing and interpreting emotional cues in others, leading to social isolation and communication difficulties. They may also have difficulty empathizing with others, which can impact their relationships and social support networks.

Studies have shown that alexithymia is prevalent in older adults, and it can lead to difficulty in understanding and expressing emotions. Older adults with alexithymia may have difficulty recognizing their own emotions and those of others, leading to a reduced ability to communicate effectively and to form meaningful relationships. This can have significant implications for the social and emotional well-being of older adults.

Research has also shown that older adults with alexithymia may have difficulty regulating their emotions, leading to increased negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. This can further impact their overall mental and physical health, as well as their quality of life.

In terms of brain function, studies have suggested that older adults with alexithymia may have reduced activation in brain regions associated with emotional processing, including the amygdala and insula. This may suggest that older adults with alexithymia have difficulty processing and regulating emotions, leading to reduced emotional awareness.

Thus, the impact of alexithymia on emotional processing in aging populations is significant, particularly in the domain of recognizing and understanding emotions in others. This can lead to increased emotional reactivity, communication difficulties, social isolation, and decreased mental health. Understanding these issues is important for developing interventions to improve emotional processing and social functioning in aging individuals with alexithymia.

Comparison of alexithymia in young and aging populations

Several studies have found that alexithymia is more prevalent in older adults compared to younger adults. One study conducted in Germany found that the prevalence of alexithymia increased with age, with 9.3% of participants aged 18-24 exhibiting alexithymia, compared to 14.5% of those aged 55-64, and 21.6% of those aged 65-74. Another study conducted in Spain found that the prevalence of alexithymia increased from 9.9% in young adults (aged 18-29) to 18.3% in older adults (aged 60-89).

Furthermore, studies have found that alexithymia scores are generally higher in older adults compared to younger adults. A study conducted in Italy found that older adults had higher levels of alexithymia compared to younger adults, with mean scores of 54.54 for older adults

(aged 60-85) compared to 50.24 for younger adults (aged 20-35). Similarly, a study conducted in Finland found that older adults (aged 60-85) had significantly higher levels of alexithymia compared to younger adults (aged 18-34), with mean scores of 66.3 and 61.8, respectively.

Overall, these studies suggest that alexithymia is more prevalent and more severe in aging populations compared to young populations. This may be due to changes in emotional processing and regulation that occur with aging, as well as age-related changes in brain function.

It is important to note that the statistics presented here are from specific studies and may not be representative of all populations. However, they do provide evidence for the differences in alexithymia between young and aging populations.

There have been several studies conducted in India that have examined the prevalence and characteristics of alexithymia in different populations. Here are a few examples:

In a study published in the Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, researchers assessed the prevalence of alexithymia in patients with depression. They found that 42.9% of patients with depression had alexithymia, compared to only 16.7% of healthy controls.

Another study published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry examined the relationship between alexithymia and somatic symptoms in patients with panic disorder. The study found that patients with panic disorder and high levels of alexithymia had more severe somatic symptoms compared to those with low levels of alexithymia.

A study published in the Journal of Geriatric Mental Health examined the prevalence of alexithymia in older adults (aged 60 years and above). The study found that 42.4% of older adults had alexithymia, with significantly higher rates in women compared to men.

In a study published in the Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, researchers assessed alexithymia in patients with eating disorders. They found that 56% of patients with eating disorders had alexithymia, compared to only 11% of healthy controls.

Overall, these studies suggest that alexithymia is prevalent in various clinical and non-clinical populations in India, and may be associated with a range of mental health issues. Further research is needed to better understand the prevalence and impact of alexithymia in Indian populations.

Causes of Alexithymia in Aging

While the causes of alexithymia are not fully understood, research suggests that there may be multiple factors that contribute to its development, including biological, psychological, and social factors.

Here are some possible causes of alexithymia in aging populations:

- **Biological factors:** Age-related changes in brain structure and function may contribute to alexithymia. Studies have shown that there are differences in brain function and connectivity in individuals with alexithymia, particularly in areas of the brain involved in emotional processing and regulation.
- **Psychological factors:** Older adults may be more likely to experience negative life events, such as the loss of a loved one or declining health, which can lead to emotional distress and difficulty in emotional processing. Additionally, cognitive changes that occur with aging, such as declines in working memory and attention, may also contribute to alexithymia.
- **Social factors:** Social isolation and loneliness are common issues in aging populations and may contribute to alexithymia. Lack of social support and meaningful social interactions may lead to feelings of emotional disconnection and difficulty in expressing emotions.

Overall, the development of alexithymia in aging populations is likely to be multifactorial, with contributions from biological, psychological, and social factors. Further research is needed to better understand the complex interplay between these factors and their impact on emotional processing in aging populations.

Impact of Alexithymia on Health and Well-being

Alexithymia, a personality trait characterized by difficulty identifying and describing one's own emotions, can have a significant impact on an individual's health and well-being. Here are some ways in which alexithymia can affect physical health, mental health, and social functioning:

- **Physical health:** Studies have shown that individuals with alexithymia are at increased risk of developing physical health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, and gastrointestinal disorders. This may be due to the fact that alexithymia is associated with difficulty in identifying and managing stress and emotions, which can lead to physiological dysregulation.
- **Mental health:** Alexithymia has been linked to several mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Difficulty in processing and regulating emotions may contribute to the development and maintenance of these conditions.
- **Social functioning:** Alexithymia can also affect an individual's social functioning, as it may make it difficult for them to understand and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. This can lead to social isolation, difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships, and poor communication skills.

Overall, alexithymia can have a significant impact on an individual's health and well-being, affecting physical health, mental health, and social functioning. Treatment approaches, such as psychotherapy and mindfulness-based interventions, may help individuals with alexithymia to better understand and manage their emotions, and improve their overall quality of life.

Assessment and Diagnosis of Alexithymia in Aging Populations

Assessing and diagnosing alexithymia in aging populations can be challenging due to various factors, such as age-related cognitive decline, physical limitations, and cultural differences. Here are some points related to the assessment and diagnosis of alexithymia in aging populations:

Challenges in assessing alexithymia in aging populations:

As individuals age, they may experience cognitive decline, which can make it challenging to accurately assess their emotional experiences. For example, older adults may have difficulty recalling specific emotions or may confuse emotions with physical sensations. Additionally, physical limitations such as vision or hearing impairment may make it difficult for older adults to complete assessments that rely on visual or auditory stimuli. Cultural differences may also affect the way that older adults perceive and express emotions, as some cultures may place less emphasis on verbal expression of emotions.

To address these challenges, clinicians may use alternative assessment methods, such as interviews or observations, that take into account the older adult's individual circumstances and communication style. They may also use adapted assessment tools that are specifically designed for older adults, such as the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) or the Geriatric Anxiety Inventory (GAI).

Screening tools for alexithymia in aging populations:

Screening tools are used to identify individuals who may be at risk of experiencing alexithymia. The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) is a commonly used self-report measure that assesses three dimensions of alexithymia: difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally-oriented thinking. The TAS-20 has been used extensively in research studies and has been validated in various languages, making it a useful tool for cross-cultural studies.

The Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) and the Geriatric Anxiety Inventory (GAI) are other screening tools that may be used to identify alexithymia in older adults. These measures assess symptoms of depression and anxiety, which are often comorbid with alexithymia.

Diagnostic criteria for alexithymia in aging populations:

Alexithymia is not currently recognized as a separate disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). However, alexithymia can be assessed as a personality trait using self-report measures such as the TAS-20. Clinicians may also use clinical interviews and observations to assess the presence of alexithymia in older adults.

Diagnosis of alexithymia requires careful consideration of the individual's emotional experiences and the impact of alexithymia on their functioning. Clinicians may use diagnostic criteria from other disorders, such as depression or anxiety, to inform their diagnosis of

alexithymia. Additionally, they may consider the individual's history of trauma or other factors that may contribute to their alexithymia.

Treatment and Management of Alexithymia in Aging Populations

Alexithymia can be a challenging condition to treat in aging populations, as it may be related to underlying medical or psychological conditions, as well as cognitive or physical changes associated with aging. However, several treatment options may be effective in managing alexithymia in older adults.

- **Psychotherapeutic interventions:**

Psychotherapy can be a useful intervention for older adults with alexithymia. Psychotherapeutic interventions, such as talk therapy, can help individuals explore their emotions, develop coping strategies for managing emotions, and improve their ability to recognize and express emotions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a commonly used psychotherapeutic approach for treating alexithymia in older adults. CBT aims to help individuals recognize and change negative thoughts and behaviors that contribute to alexithymia.

Another useful psychotherapeutic intervention for alexithymia in aging populations is psychodynamic therapy. Psychodynamic therapy is a form of talk therapy that focuses on exploring the unconscious thoughts and emotions that may be contributing to alexithymia. This approach can be particularly helpful for older adults who may have experienced past traumas or life events that contribute to their alexithymia.

- **Pharmacological interventions:**

There are no medications specifically approved for the treatment of alexithymia. However, medications used to treat related conditions, such as depression or anxiety, may also help manage alexithymia symptoms. For example, antidepressant medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), can be effective in managing symptoms of depression and anxiety, which are often comorbid with alexithymia.

- **Alternative treatments:**

Alternative treatments, such as mindfulness meditation and yoga, may also be useful in managing alexithymia in aging populations. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on the present moment and becoming aware of one's thoughts and emotions without judgment. This practice can help individuals become more aware of their emotions and improve their ability to recognize and express them. Yoga is a physical and mental practice that combines movement, breathing exercises, and meditation. It can help individuals reduce stress, improve their emotional regulation, and develop a greater sense of self-awareness.

It's important to note that treatment for alexithymia should be tailored to the individual's specific needs and circumstances. Some individuals may respond better to one type of treatment than another, and it may take time to find the right combination of interventions that works best for each individual. Additionally, it's important for individuals with alexithymia to have a supportive healthcare team that can provide ongoing support and guidance.

Future Directions and Implications

- **Research gaps and future directions:**

Although there has been some research on alexithymia in aging populations, there are still many unanswered questions and gaps in the literature. For example, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that track changes in alexithymia over time in aging populations. Additionally, there is a need for more research on the neural mechanisms underlying alexithymia in aging populations, as well as on the relationship between alexithymia and other age-related conditions, such as dementia and Parkinson's disease.

- **Clinical implications:**

The presence of alexithymia in aging populations can have important clinical implications. For example, healthcare professionals working with older adults should be aware of the potential for alexithymia and should consider assessing for this condition as part of routine care. Additionally, healthcare professionals should be prepared to work with older adults with alexithymia to develop individualized treatment plans that address their specific needs and goals.

- **Social implications:**

Alexithymia can have social implications as well. For example, individuals with alexithymia may have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships, as they may struggle to express and understand their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Additionally, alexithymia may contribute to social isolation and loneliness in aging populations, which can have negative effects on physical and mental health. Therefore, it is important for healthcare professionals and caregivers to be aware of the potential social implications of alexithymia in aging populations and to work with individuals to develop strategies to address these challenges.

Overall, the study of alexithymia in aging populations has important implications for both research and clinical practice. As the population ages, it is important to understand the impact of alexithymia on emotional processing and overall well-being in order to develop effective interventions and provide the best possible care for older adults.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, alexithymia is a condition characterized by difficulty identifying and expressing emotions. While research on alexithymia has traditionally focused on younger populations, there is growing recognition of the importance of studying this condition in aging populations as well.

Key points related to alexithymia in aging populations include the higher prevalence of alexithymia in older adults, the impact of alexithymia on emotional processing, and the potential implications of alexithymia for physical and mental health. Additionally, there are challenges associated with assessing and diagnosing alexithymia in aging populations, and there is a need for more research on effective interventions for this condition in older adults.

The implications of these findings for practice and policy are significant. Healthcare professionals and caregivers working with older adults should be aware of the potential for alexithymia and should consider assessing for this condition as part of routine care. Additionally, there is a need for policy changes that prioritize research on alexithymia in aging populations and support the development of effective interventions for this condition. By addressing the unique needs and challenges associated with alexithymia in aging populations, we can improve the emotional well-being and overall quality of life of older adults.

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