

Alexithymia as a multidimensional construct and its relationship with cognitive emotion regulation, flexibility of coping with stress and psycho-emotional disorders

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Alexithymia is a multidimensional construct, which consists of two components – affective and cognitive. The affective component of alexithymia is represented by the two alexithymic features, which are low emotional arousability and the poverty of fantasy and imagination. The cognitive component of alexithymia includes three features and is expressed in difficulty identifying emotions, difficulty verbalizing emotional states and the poor level of analyzing person's own emotions. The affective and cognitive components of alexithymia are based on various neuropsychological mechanisms [3; 5]. B. Bermond et al. tend to believe that there are several types of alexithymia. Type I alexithymia is expressed in cognitive and emotional deficits (severity of all alexithymic traits). Type II alexithymia is observed within the absence of any deficit in the emotional sphere, but in the presence of a deficit in the cognitive one (the personality has three strongly expressed alexithymic features related to the cognitive component of the alexithymia construct). Alexithymia type III is diagnosed in the presence of deficits in the emotional sphere and their absence in the cognitive one [3].

On the one hand, scholars consider alexithymia to be a personality risk factor for psychosomatic diseases [4]. On the other hand, alexithymia is more likely to be a personality trait that can be shown in both normal and pathological conditions [1]. The role of alexithymia in psychosomatic health is determined depending on the alexithymic personality's living conditions, the characteristics of their activity and the system of relationships.

Taking into consideration the multidimensionality and heterogeneity of the alexithymia construct, which consists of five different features, this study attempts to research the role of the cognitive and affective components of alexithymia and particular alexithymic traits in the process of a person's coping behavior and cognitive emotion regulation. It is assumed that the cognitive component of alexithymia determines the quality of a person's psycho-

logical functioning (including the presence of psychological and emotional symptoms), whereas the key feature of alexithymia, which has negative consequences for a person, is the difficulty identifying emotions.

Methods

109 young people (82.6 % of women) in the age of 19 to 34 filled out the following questionnaires: the Bermond-Vorst Alexithymia Questionnaire (BVAQ), the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), and the Flexibility of Coping with Stress Questionnaire (FCSQ-14) and the Four-Dimensional Symptom Questionnaire (4DSQ) for assessing distress, depression, anxiety and somatization.

Results

1. Among all the alexithymic traits, difficulty identifying one's own emotions is the only negative predictor of the adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies: the worse a person understands their emotions, the less he/she uses such adaptive emotion regulation strategies as acceptance, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, positive reappraisal and putting into perspective.
2. Two of the alexithymic traits – low emotional arousability and the low level of analyzing one's own emotions – are negative predictors of maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies: the less a person is emotionally arousable and the more a person is inclined to analyze their emotions, the less he/she uses such maladaptive emotion regulation strategies as rumination, catastrophizing, self-blame and blaming others.
3. Difficulty identifying one's own emotions is a negative predictor of coping flexibility (CF), whereas low emotional arousability is a positive one: the better a person understands their emotions and the less emotionally arousable he/she is, the more flexible (functional) their coping is.
4. It is assumed that among the two features related to the affective component of alexithymia, the most important role is played by the emotional arousability, rather than by the poverty of fantasy, since it is high or low emotional arousability that determines the “amount” of the emotions which a person needs to process at the cognitive level.
5. People without alexithymia and people with type III alexithymia are characterized by favorable coping behavior, expressed in the more frequent use of adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies and higher CF, that is, a high capability for adaptive behavior under stress. People with type I and II alexithymia are characterized by the opposite tendency.
6. The main relationship between the cognitive and affective components of alexithymia is as follows: the more emotionally reactive a person is and the less he/she is able to process their emotions cognitively (to analyze, identify and verbalize them), the less adaptive such a person is and the more prone to maladjustment as well as to the development of psycho-emotional disorders he/she is.

Conclusion

Alexithymia is a multidimensional heterogeneous construct, the components of which play various roles in the processes of individual's adaptation to the changing environmental conditions [2].

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