

A Study on Alexithymia, Attachment Styles & Emotional Regulations in Adults

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ABSTRACT

The attachment theory helps us understand that for a stable and conscious individual to develop, it takes secure attachment. Only when an individual can explore and learn in a healthy and loving environment it is then, that it will grow into a personality that can handle emotions well. Emotional Regulation is the ability to exert control over one's emotional state and on the other hand deficiency in identifying and describing feelings is termed as Alexithymia. The current research aims to study the relationship between emotional regulation and alexithymia among adults based on their Attachment style. A sample of 60 individuals were collected for the same. Standardised scales were used. The results found that significant positive correlation between alexithymia and emotional regulation (expressive suppression facet). Also there exists a significant negative correlation among subscales of attachment (closeness) and alexithymia. The study suggests that expression of emotions and venting out of the feelings is useful in maintaining a warm cosy relation amongst individuals. Also, being aware of one's mental framework consequently decreases the level of anxiety.

Keywords: Attachment Style, Alexithymia, Emotional Regulation

"True artistic expression lies in expressing emotions"

-Angel Haze

Everything beautiful is not just seen or touched many times the beauty is expressed in regards to the emotions as well. Expression of our feelings and sentiments facilitates our consciousness to grow and leads to the discovery of our better self. Declaration of our affective component makes us more aware, not only of our surroundings but also of the chaos that is held within us. A large part of our behaviour is the reflection of our relations, be it with friends or family. Attachment is considered as the "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" Bowlby, (1969). The kind of bond one shares with their significant others or caregivers plays a cardinal role in their development. The adults who have had sound relations with their caregivers during their childhood i.e., had a secure attachment, will not fear being on their own, will have high self-esteem, seek out social support, enjoy intimate relations, and will not have issues expressing what they feel. Also, these types of people can understand and communicate their feelings and can use explicit

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and implicit strategies to react to an emotional experience and control its intensity, i.e., they are good at regulating their emotions. Unlike those who are high on Alexithymia, a personality trait where one is unable to identify and describe its emotions and have constricted their imaginations fantasies and lack emotional awareness. "At the extreme, alexithymia individuals are virtually organismic automatons functioning in a one- to a two-dimensional world, one that is deprived of the fullness of feelings. (Taylor et al., 1997). A study found out that adaptive strategies of emotional regulation show significant negative correlations with alexithymia and maladaptive emotional regulation strategies show a significant positive correlation with alexithymia (Ali et al., 2014).

Attachment style

The attachment theory claims that the quality of an individual's relationships during infancy sets the bar for consequent development. These relations are when secure, they promote confident exploration of the environment and better emotional well-being of the individual (Bowlby, 1979). On the other hand, lack of secure attachment can lead to an inflated sense of sentiments, poor emotional regulation, loneliness, psychological distress and depression (Ouellette & Di Placido, 2001). Attachment theory underlines that attachment is a life span phenomenon Bowlby (1980). Attachment is considered a basic necessity throughout the entire life cycle (Gómez-Zapiain., 2012). According to Ainsworth (1970), there are three main attachment styles: - secure attachment, anxious- insecure attachment, avoidant-insecure attachment. A fourth attachment style known as disorganized was later identified (Main & Solomon, 1990).

A study by Andersson & Perris (2000) found the association between the adult attachment styles and dysfunctional assumptions and states that, there is a positive correlation between insecure attachment and dysfunctional assumptions. Further a negative relation between secure attachment and dysfunctional assumptions.

A study by AliBesharat & Khajavi (2013) shows that both secure attachment style and alexithymia have negative significant correlations. On the other hand, avoidant and ambivalent styles of attachment have significant positive relations. It was also seen through regression analysis that defence mechanisms of humans have an important intervening role concerning attachment styles and alexithymia.

Emotional Regulation

Gross (2015), defines emotional regulation as, "a process by which individuals influence what emotions they have when they have them, and how they experience and express them." He further claims that emotion regulation results in changes in the dynamics, duration, and speed of emotion occurrence as well as changes in the consequences of elicited emotion (in behaviour, experience and physiology). Emotional regulation can be aimed at reducing, strengthening, or maintaining the experience of either positive or negative emotions depending on the current needs or goals of an individual (Kobylińska & Kusev, 2019). A study conducted by Cote et al., (2010) states that the kind of association between emotion regulation ability and well-being is positive. Higher emotion regulation ability might lead to higher well-being, and vice-versa. It does not seem that being happy decreases the motivation of people to develop abilities to regulate their emotions.

Cole (1994) Emotional regulation is the ability to respond to the ongoing demands of experience with the range of emotions in a manner that is socially tolerable and sufficiently flexible to permit spontaneous reactions as well as the ability to delay spontaneous reactions

as needed. It can also be defined as intrinsic and extrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions (Thompson, 1994).

In a study by Thayer (2003) it was seen that emotional regulation is a possible factor in the gender difference in depressive symptom reporting and also that women pay greater attention to emotions.

Alexithymia

The term alexithymia was coined by Sifneos (1973) and the term means "lacking words for feelings". Alexithymia is driven from Greek words of - a(no) – lexis (words) – thymos (emotion) meaning "no words for feeling" to describe this, "specific difficulty which appears more likely to be due to a combination of neurophysiological and psychological defects rather than to purely psychological ones." Its most important features are : (1) difficulty identifying feelings (DIF) and distinguishing between feelings and the bodily sensations of emotional arousal; (2) difficulty describing feelings (DDF) to other people; (3) constricted imagination, as shown by the scarcity of fantasy; and (4) very practical i.e. externally oriented cognitive style Taylor et al., (1988) A study by Chen et al., (2011) showed that there are four subtypes of alexithymia, namely extrovert-high alexithymia (EHA), general-high alexithymia (GHA), introvert-high alexithymia (IHA) and non-alexithymia (NA). Another study done by Kooiman et al., (2004) explained that optimal parenting by a parent protects against the spurt of alexithymia when the parenting style of the other parent involved is not optimal. A study by Bach & Bach (1995) also claims that the prevalence of alexithymia, predicts poorer outcomes of treatment for anxiety and somatoform disorders.

Purpose

The aim of the current research is to study Alexithymia, Attachment Styles & Emotional Regulations in Adults.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant positive correlation between alexithymia and emotional regulation.
- There will be no relationship between attachment and alexithymia.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 60 participants were taken ranging from 18 to 35 years of age from the city of Amritsar.

Measures

- **Adult Attachment Scale (AAS)** by Collin & Read (1990) consisted of 18 items each on a 5-point rating scale ranging from "not at all characteristic of me" to "very characteristic of me". Used as an assessment for attachment.
- **The Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)** by Gross and John (2003) consisted of 10 items each on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (3) "neutral" to (7) "strongly disagree". The measure was used to assess emotional regulation.
- **Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire (PAQ)** by Preece et al., (2018) is a 24-item self-report measure of alexithymia. Each question ranges from (1) strongly disagree to (4) neither agree nor disagree to (7) strongly agree. It is a 7-point Likert.

Procedure

The responses were collected through google forms. They were informed about the research and were asked to fill in the forms honestly. Standardised measures were used for collecting the data and a promise to maintain confidentiality was done.

RESULT

Table 1: shows N, Mean & Standard deviation of all variables

	Gender	Cr	Es	Close	Depend	Anxiety	N-DIF	P-DIF	N-DDF	P-DDF	Eot	G.Total
N	F	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43
	M	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17
Mean	F	27.7	16.7	17.6	15.3	17.0	17.3	12.6	18.4	14.0	26.0	89.2
	M	26.2	16.7	17.8	14.1	16.0	18.1	14.1	19.9	15.4	29.6	96.9
Standard deviation	F	9.00	6.74	3.64	4.07	6.07	7.07	6.52	7.80	6.02	11.4	32.8
	M	6.33	6.45	3.88	4.34	5.05	6.60	6.71	6.20	7.04	12.4	32.8

Table 2: shows correlation of all variables

	CR	ES	CLOSE	DEPEND	ANXIETY	N-DIF	P-DIF	N-DDF	P-DDF	EOT	G.TOTAL
CR	—										
ES	0.352 **	—									
CLOSE	0.143	0.218	—								
DEPEND	0.031	0.311 *	0.264 *	—							
ANXIETY	0.072	0.291 *	0.217	-0.073	—						
N-DIF	0.083	0.384 **	0.311 *	-0.084	0.231	—					
P-DIF	0.178	0.500 ***	0.136	-0.280 *	0.315 *	0.560 ***	—				
N-DDF	0.255 *	0.511 ***	0.155	-0.148	0.143	0.732 ***	0.578 ***	—			
P-DDF	0.236	0.423 ***	0.098	-0.231	0.100	0.600 ***	0.865 ***	0.573 ***	—		
EOT	0.148	0.541 ***	0.422 ***	-0.289 *	0.299 *	0.477 ***	0.692 ***	0.544 ***	0.672 ***	—	
G.TOTAL	0.232	0.540 ***	0.261 *	-0.234	0.252	0.763 ***	0.862 ***	0.798 ***	0.873 ***	0.841 ***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The current research findings offered that there is a significant positive correlation between alexithymia and emotional regulation (expressive suppression facet) ($r = 0.540$, $p < .001$). This means that emotionally numb individuals will also have low levels of outward emotional expression. There is also a significant negative correlation between alexithymia and attachment (closeness) ($r = -0.261$, $p < .05$), which states that people high on alexithymia will be less comfortable being in an intimate relationship. Further, based on subscales of the emotional regulation questionnaire and adult attachment scale, there exists a significant negative correlation between Expressive Suppression and Depend on scale respectively ($r = -0.311$, $p < .05$), implying that individuals who are high on expressive suppression will possess a less dependent personality to wit, they would believe that others will be less available when needed. Also, a significant positive correlation was found between the subscales of emotional regulation i.e., expressive suppression and adult attachment scale i.e., anxiety ($r = 0.291$, $p < .05$), proclaiming that people who have decreased level of emotional expression will be of an anxious nature meaning that, they

might fear of being left unloved. Research suggested that all the factors namely; fearful and preoccupied attachment styles along with negative affectivity and alexithymia were notably linked with high symptom reporting whilst dismissing attachment style was not associated. Also, it was seen that relation between fearful attachment and symptom reporting was moderate, not completely intervened by negative affectivity and alexithymia (Wearden et al., 2005). A study by Besharat & Rizi (2014) states that secure attachment style is the main effective factor for the development of excellent emotional regulation skills and it provides us with a better manner of expression, identification and exchange of our emotions in any kind of interactions whereby emotional regulation acts as a reinforcing agent. In contrast to this insecure attachment styles lack potential chances for learning emotional regulation skills in context to the mother-child and child-environment bond, which also decreases the ability of identification, expression and exchange of emotions.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between attachment styles of adults, alexithymia and their capacity to regulate emotions. The results of the study revealed that there is a significant correlation between the three variables and that these are interrelated. Anybody who has had or is having a secure attachment style in their romantic relationship will have more chances of being able to recognise and express their emotions. Showing up the affective side of self makes us more aware and confident, also will lower the levels of anxiety and fear of being unloved. Identification and expression of feelings hold utmost importance in the life of any individual who seeks to have a healthy mind and relation.

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Conflict of Interest

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