

**ALEXITHYMIA AND LONELINESS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS IN EDUCATED YOUTH**



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# ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE**

Toinvestigate thenature ofrelationship ofalexithymiaand loneliness under the moderating effect of interpersonal problemsinuniversitystudents.

# STUDY DESIGN

Cross sectional study.

# PLACE AND DURATION OF STUDY

Thisstudy wasconducted indifferent government, private, and semi-government universitiesofLahore, Pakistan from February toAugust 2014.

# SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Thesamplecomprisedof276 students,enrolledin different

universities of Lahorecity. Sample included both men and women aged between 18 to 25 years.Toronto Alexithymia Scale,UniversityofCalifornia-LosAngelesLonelinessScale- Version 3, and Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Short Circumplex were used in this study along with a demographic form. The data was analyzed using Pearson Product Moment CorrelationandModeration.

# RESULTS

The results indicated that there was a significant positive correlation betweenalexithymiaand loneliness{r = .53,p<

.01), alexithymia and interpersonal problems (r = .52, p<

.01),andlonelinessandinterpersonal problems(r=.563,p<

.01). Alexithymiaand interpersonal problems were found to be significant predictors of loneliness. The conditional effects on loneliness at different levels of interpersonal problemswerealso significant (p<.001).

# CONCLUSION

The subjective experience of loneliness is enhanced by interpersonal problems for the individuals high on alexithymia. The results can be useful in designing interventional programs for treatment keeping in view difficultywithemotionsand expressions.

# KEYWORDS

Alexithymia,Loneliness,Interpersonalproblems

# INlRODUCTION

Pakiltan is a country with an estimated population of adolescents and youngadultsasonefourthof thetotal.Theburden ofsocial andeconomic development, political stability, consolidation and glorification of the future lies on the shoulders of youth. These years of young adulthood comes with challenging social values and norms, and later on It helps building the foundation of the world's future. Along with this the adults start going in to intimaterelationships and developnetwork of supportive friendsand thismutuality in relationships,socializable orientation propels youngadultsfromadolescence toward full maturity'.

Considering the challenges, a young adult is expected to conquer so emotional intelligence has gained prominence in the past decades. Emotional intelligence leads to wise behavior, high achievement, and mental health'. Assessment of alexithymia is considered as a potential method for the identification of individuals with low emotional intelligence'. Alexithymia is a personality construct associated with redvced ability to identify and describe feelings, limited fantasy and imaginal activity and concrete way of thinking. Alexithymia can also be defined as a deficit in experiencing and processing emotions'. The core characteristics of alexithymia are marked dysfunction in emotional awa·eness,socialattachment.andinterpersonal relating'.

Lonelinessis subjective psychological discomfort that occurs when one's social relationships are perceived as being less satisfying than what Is desi-ed.It significantlyaffectsyouthinmanyperspectives.Oneof themajor consequence of loneliness is that it negatively impacts the individual academic performance which can take the form of failure, decreasing graces,and/ordropout•.

Lonelinessresearcher Dr.William A.Sadlerdescribed the fivecategoriesof loneliness. Out of which the most common and prevalent type is interpersonal loneliness, this term is mostly used in terms of intimate relationships where the Individual starts missing a significant person for example aspouse ora friend. Another type issocial lonelinessinwhich the person feelsbeing left alone or cut off from a group, one wishes to be a memberof.Inthesamewaylonelinesscanbeat theculturallevel as wellin which theperson'straditionsorcultural beliefsdoesnot matchthoseof the dominant societyin which theindividual inlivingleading tothe feelingsof alienation.Ifanindividual startsfeelingbeing outof touchwithone'sselfor trueemotionsthiscanbetermed aspsychological loneliness7•

Talking about interpersonal relationshipsandloneliness,it canbesaid that

 

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everyone experiencesinterpersonal problems at some point in their life.Such interpersonal problem canbe short lived or chronic. These conflictscan bring discomfort and distressto the individual which if prolonged can make the person vulnerable to many psychological disorders including depression and anxiety etc. Such interpersonal conflicts can be a result of intolerance to the opinions of others, might beapersonality clash or at timesit canoriginatedueto some underlyingpsychologicalissueswhichnotonlyeffect theindividual's socialdealingbutalso one'sownsenseof self'.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in how alexithymia impacts loneliness, social judgment and social functioning of the individuals. Alexithymia being a sub clinical personality trait characterized by emotional disturbance hasan impact on anumber of areasof anindividual'sfunctioning whichincludeseffectivenessin communication,satisfactionin therelationships, psychological well­ being,productivity,and generalmentalhealth'·'•.

Informed by the existing literature, the present study advanced in investigating interpersonal problems as a moderator in the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness. Hypotheses were as follows:

Hl: There would be a correlation between alexithymia, loneliness andinterpersonalproblems.

H2: Alexithymia would predict loneliness and interpersonal

problems.

H3: Interpersonal problems would moderate the relationship betweenalexithymiaandloneliness.

# SUBJECTS AND METHODS

## Participants

The sample consisted of 276 university students both men and women.The students were enrolled indifferent undergraduateand masters programs and taken through convenient sampling technique. Inclusion criteria were enrollment in academic institutionsand agebetween 18-25.

## Instruments

Demographic information sheet included age, gender, education, birth order, no of siblings, socioeconomic status. general home atmosphere and questions related to relationships with family and friends.

***Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20):*** Alexithymia was measured using TAS-20". It is a 20 item self-report measure with three subscales i.e.Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty

Describing FeelingsandExternally Oriented Thinking.Responses are to begiven on5 point likert scaleranging from 1 (stronglydisagree)

to s (strongly agree). In the present study TAS-20 showed good

internalconsistency(a=.75).

***UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA):*** UCLA is a 20 item self-report measure usedto assess interpersonal loneliness". Responsesranges from 1 (never) to 4 (always).In the present study UCLA was found to

havehighinternalconsistency( *a* =.81).



***Inventory of Interpersonal Problems(IIP-SC):***

It is also a self-report measure which was initially developed for clinical populationlateritspsychometricproperties wereestablished oncollege studentsaswell".Foralltheitems,theresponsesaregiven

ranging fromO(notatall) to 4 (extremely).In thepresent studyIIP-SC showed excellentinternalconsistency( *a* = .89).

## Procedure

Thisstudyprotocol wasapprovedbyDoctoralProgramCoordination Committee (DPCC), Centre forClinical Psychology, and University of the Punjab. Written permissions were taken from the authors of the questionnaires and the administration of the universities. Sample was recruited using convenient sampling strategy. After providing all the necessary information to the participants, written informed consent was taken to participate in the study was taken and questionnairesweregiven to theparticipants.Thedata wascollected in classroom setting under the supervision of the researcher. No financialandotherinducementswere offered for participationinthis study.Thedata were analyzedusingSPSS 21.

# RESULTS

Thesampleconsisted of 147men(meanage,M=22.19,SD=1.14)and 129 women (M=21.27, SD=l.72). The students were enrolled in different undergraduate (84.15%) and masters (15.85%) programs. Almost 60% of the participants were day scholar, 27.5% were hostelites,and 10.8% hadother modeof residence.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was calculated to find out the relationship between alexithymia, loneliness, and interpersonal problems (Table 1). Preliminary analyses were performed to eliminate violationof theassumptions of normality.Results revealed that there was a moderate significant positive correlation between alexithyrniaandloneliness(r = .53,p< .01),between alexithymiaand interpersonal problems (r = .52,p< .01).andbetweenlonelinessand interpersonal problems (r = .57, p< .01). Moreover, all of the three factors of alexithymia i.e. difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking were found to havesignificant positivecorrelationwithloneliness(r=.44,p< .01,r=

.34,p< .01,r = .38,p< .01respectively)andinterpersonal problems (r

=.51,p< .01,r=.31,p< .01,r=.29,p<.01respectively.

Table!

Correlation amoDg Self-Conscious Emotions and Internalizing Disorders

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variiblet** | | I | **2** | 3 | 4 | **5** | **14** | **M** | **SD** |
| I | DlF | - | \_57•• | .21.. | .84\*\* | .44•• | .51"'\* | 18.6-0 | 5.61 |
| 2 | DDF |  |  |  | .77'0 | .34.,. | .31•• | 14.57 | 3.92 |
| 3 | EQT |  |  | . | .61... | .38•\* | *.29\*\** | 22.24 | 4.39 |
| 4 | TAS ·20 |  |  |  |  | .s2•• | .SJUc | 55.40 | 10.48 |
| *5* | UCLA |  |  |  |  |  | .56\*\* | 46.58 | 8.27 |
| 14 | JJP·sc |  |  |  |  |  | - | 54.91 | 21.51 |

/'v'me. *DIF= Difficulty Jdeuri}jing Feelings. DDF= Dijficulry De.rcribing Fel!lin\_gs.*

*£OT= Exrernul{v Oriented .Thinking. tAS-20= total score of Toronto Alexithymiu Swle, UCLA= t-01al scoreofU,,lversltyofC0Jifon1ia lo11(4,ness Scale, JJP-SC=lota/ s<:01-e of*

*/nve11tory1Q/'l111erp,!rso,ra/ Problems- Shor,Cfrt·ttmplex, M* =*Mea11. SD= Stand<1nf*

*Deviatio,r,*

*•p< ll.05. \*'p<.OJ*



h11, n Inf r2 1st

To understand the relative contribution of alexithymia and interpersonal problemsin predicting lonelinessand to figure out the moderating role of interpersonal problems in the relationship of alexithymia and loneliness, moderation analysis was run using Process Plugin.

Table 2

Regression Analysis Examiniog the lnteraclion Effect of Alexithymia and fnterpersonal f>roblems on Loneliness (N=240}

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Varlablet** |  | **B** | **Loneliness**  **SE** | | **95¾C.I** |
| **Constant** | 11.98\* | | 5.13 | (1.86, 22.10) | |
| !\lexilhymia | .48\*'" | | .10 | (.29, .68) | |
| lnlerper.Kmal Problems | **.4Q\*U** | | .10 | [.20•. 59] | |
| **Alexithymia x Interpersonal Problems** | **-.004n** | | .002 | (·.008:.004) | |
| **Low fn1,erpe "-On.al Problems** | .33\*0 | | .06 | [.23. ,44] | |
| **Modemtc lnfe(J)('.rsonal Probkms** | **,24\*U** | | .05 | [.15• | .33] |
| **High lnte.rpersonal Problems** | .15\* | | .06 | (.02, .30) | |
| *R'* |  | | .64 |  | |
| *F* | **54,90u•** |

*•p<.05, .. p<.01. ·••p<.001*

The resultsrevealed thatalexithymia and interpersonal problems are found to be significant predictors of loneliness. The interaction effects of alexithymia and interpersonal problemson loneliness was also significa,nt (Table 2). Moreover, the conditional effects on loneliness at different levels of interpersonal problems were also analyzed,the interaction plot showed that thenature of relationship betweenalexithymia and loneliness was significant at all of the three levelsinterpersonal problems that islow,moderate, and high (Figure 1).

Figure I

***/meraftion plot of Afexillrymia cmd lute.rper,wmol Problems o,r Umellnes:r***

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alexithymia wouldpredict interpersonal problemsand lonelinesshas also been accepted which turned out to be consistel'H with the previous literature"·'•. Interpersonal problems act as an enhancer in therelationship betweenalexithymiaand loneliness.

Few limitations of the studyincluded cross-sectionalresearch design and strictly relying on self-report measures. Future studies using experimental designs and interviews by clinicians would overcome thislimitation.To enhance the generalizabilityof the findings, young adults who are not enrolled in academic institutions can also be includedasa sample.

The present study posits several implications for educational and counseling practices. Interpersonal problems and loneliness are among the very prevalent issue of our youth. Based on this study intervention can be planned and delivered at community level focusing on improving the emotional regulation and social skills which is a pre-requisite for healthy interpersonal functioning and psychological wellbeing of individuals.Moreover, in clinical practice, anybody who is high on alexithymia would be resistant to identify andexpress his/her emotional experiences which in term hinder the therapeutic process. Awareness of the diverse consequences of alexithymia in the clinical practice would facilitate the clinicians to direct their intervention in a better way leading to improved outcomesof the therapy.

# CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that alexithymia, interpersonal problems, and loneliness are positively correlated. Further, the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness is moderated by interpersonal problems. The individuals who are suffering from high levels of alexithymia are more prone to experience intense feelings of loneliness and thisrelationship is strengthened due to interpersonal problems.

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lnt.crpersonal Problems

**-Moderate**

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-Low

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44 -High

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**Low** Moderate **High**

AlexitbJ'ml•

# DISCUSSION

The presentstudy wasconducted to investigate themoderating role of interpersonal problems in determining the relationship between alexithymia and loneliness. In the present study it was evident that increaseinalexithymia was associated withtheincrease inloneliness and interpersonal problems suggesting individuals low in alexithymia have better quality of their relationships. Moreover, individuals who have healthy socialrelationships do not experience the subjective feelings of loneliness. The findings supported the hypothesis and areconsistent with thepreviousliterature'""·".

The second hypothesis of the present study suggesting that

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