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NO WORDS FOR FEELINGS: THE BIOLOGICAL TOLL OF ALEXITHYMIA

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In outpatient therapy, we often encounter patients who seem "stuck." They describe their lives with a strange, detached logic, yet they are plagued by persistent headaches, digestive issues, or chronic fatigue that no medical test can fully explain. This is the hallmark of alexithymia—a literal "lack of words for emotions." It isn't that these individuals don't have feelings; it's that their brain lacks the internal translation layer to recognize them. Instead of experiencing sadness as a psychological state, they experience it as a heavy chest or a literal pain in the gut. This disconnect creates a dangerous loop where emotional stress is never processed or "offloaded" through conversation or reflection, leaving the body to carry the entire weight of the experience alone.

The physiological impact of this emotional silence is profound. Because an alexithymic person cannot identify a stressor, they can't take steps to mitigate it. This leads to what we call "unnoticed chronic stress," where the body's sympathetic nervous system stays stuck in a low-level "fight or flight" mode for weeks or even months. We see this reflected in a higher allostatic load—the cumulative wear and tear on the body. Their baseline cortisol levels remain elevated, and their autonomic nervous system loses its flexibility. Over time, this constant internal tension doesn't just cause discomfort; it actively erodes cardiovascular health, contributing to hypertension and a heightened risk of heart disease, as the body remains physically revved up with nowhere for that energy to go.

Perhaps most critically for long-term health, this internal pressure eventually dysregulates the immune system. When the mind cannot "speak," the immune system often takes the hit. Research shows that alexithymia is linked to a measurable decline in cellular immunity, specifically a drop in T-lymphocytes and key cytokines like Interleukin-2. This leaves the body more vulnerable to infections and may even slow down recovery from illness. Furthermore, the chronic elevation of stress hormones creates a pro-inflammatory environment. This explains why so many patients with alexithymia also struggle with inflammatory conditions like IBS or skin disorders; their immune system is essentially overreacting to the "silent" emotional storm happening within.

For those of us working in outpatient settings, recognizing alexithymia changes the entire goal of treatment. Traditional "talk therapy" can feel like a foreign language to these patients. Instead, our job is to act as a translator, helping them bridge the gap between their physical sensations and emotional labels. By teaching a patient that their "stomach knot" is actually a sign of social anxiety, we aren't just helping their mental health—we are literally lowering their blood pressure and giving their immune system a chance to recover. Addressing alexithymia is a vital medical intervention, proving that finding the right words can be just as healing as any physical prescription.