

## Alexithymia—A challenge to art therapy The story of Rita

Fiety Meijer-Degen (Art Therapist, Director of ICTEP)<sup>a,\*</sup>,<sup>1</sup> Johan Lansen,  
M.D. Psychiatry (Consultant to ICTEP, Emeritus Director of Sinai Centrum)<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> ICTEP – Institute for Art Therapy and Expressive Psychotherapy, Department of Art Therapy,  
Kon. Wilhelminalaan 28, 3818 HP Amersfoort, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Jewish Mental Health Service, Amsterdam/Amersfoort, The Netherlands

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### Abstract

Since Sifneos in 1973 introduced the term, “alexithymia” to describe the apparent incapacity of some of his patients to discern and verbally express their emotions, without finding a physical cause for it, this phenomenon has become the object of various studies and publications. In the pursuit of effective treatment methods, art therapy has been indicated as being among the possibly effective forms of treatment. But in the literature on art therapy alexithymia up to now has scarcely received the attention the authors believe it deserves. This paper focuses on the concept of alexithymia, especially in psychotrauma, and the usefulness of art therapy. A concise review of literature on the concept of alexithymia is included and an illustration of the use of art therapy by a detailed description of treatment of a case of alexithymia in a patient, Rita, with severe self-pathology, who had grown up in a traumatizing environment. The patient was able to recognize and name emotional reactions after the treatment with art therapy, and thus, art therapy seems to be a promising form of treatment for traumatized patients suffering from alexithymia, even in cases of severe self-pathology.

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In treating patients who survived concentration camps as children, we were struck by the fact that many of them were unable to verbally express their often-violent emotions. Verbal therapies are for many traumatized people insufficient, for the simple reason that they do not avail of the necessary words and concepts. It is our impression that for many patients with a history of violence, neglect, or humiliation in their early youth, the availability of words for their private emotions is remarkably limited. Can art therapy<sup>2</sup> offer an alternative for verbal therapy in those cases? The story of Rita is an illustration hereof. Rita suffered from a disorder of the self with alexithymia as a predominant symptom, which means she could neither name nor express her emotions verbally. However, in art therapy emotions of patients like Rita who suffer from alexithymia are visible in their artwork, if sometimes only in disguise. In the patients’ drawings, the outside world has color and form; the inner world often remains empty and undifferentiated. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate a non-verbal approach (art therapy) of the treatment of alexithymia in an early-traumatized person.

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\* Corresponding author.

*E-mail addresses:* fiety@ictep.com (F. Meijer-Degen),  
lansen@planet.nl (J. Lansen).

<sup>1</sup> Trainer Art Therapy and Trauma in low-income countries for several international organizations.

<sup>2</sup> Art therapy as described in this article is practiced as an autonomous therapy. In some cases consultation with a psychiatrist and co-therapy with other disciplines is advisable or even necessary.

## Alexithymia as a clinical phenomenon

In 1973, Sifneos reported on a study concerning the question of whether alexithymia could be the basis of medically unaccountable symptomatology. He observed that many of his patients displayed difficulty in verbally expressing emotions. They also showed the tendency to elaborate endlessly on factual matters without referring to inner, emotional meanings. He introduced the concept of alexithymia for this phenomenon (a: absent; lexis: word; thymos: feeling, emotion). In fact, this phenomenon had been a subject of discussion since 1948, particularly in dealing with patients suffering from psychosomatic diseases. Clinicians more and more agreed about the specific diagnostic features of alexithymia. A provisional definition of the clinical concept of alexithymia was accepted at the 11th European Psychosomatic Research Conference in Heidelberg in 1976. Alexithymia had specific features. On the cognitive level, thinking and verbalizing is concrete and factual, and is rich in details of events outside of the person. There is a limited or nearly absent capacity to symbolize, fantasize, and associate. Dreams are less frequent and are of a simple character. A dreamer with alexithymia has poor thoughts and associations about his or her dreams. With relation to affects, the incapacity causes failure to recognize feelings as such and to verbalize them. The usage of language is devoid of affective coloring. Many see reduplication as a characterizing phenomenon. This means that another person is perceived in terms of a broad translation of a self-image with few nuances, devoid of genuine personal features. This is supposed to be connected with the incapacity to form finely patterned introjections, identifications, and projections, which would be the consequence of the absence of affective discriminations that usually are involved (den Hollander, Bruijn, & Trijsburg, 1991; Fig. 1).

Alexithymia was found in different categories of patients with a broad range of medical and psychiatric pathology (Taylor, Parker, & Bagby, 1997). It was even found among non-clinical populations. Freyberger (1977) distinguished



Fig. 1. "Me, a puppet on a string" by J.S. (oil pastel on paper 20 cm × 45 cm). Made by a young man suffering from alexithymia. His comment on his drawing: "I feel just like a puppet on a string, my movements are determined by others. [How do you think or feel about that?] I always ask other people's opinions instead of saying what I think. For that matter, I do not know exactly what I think."

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