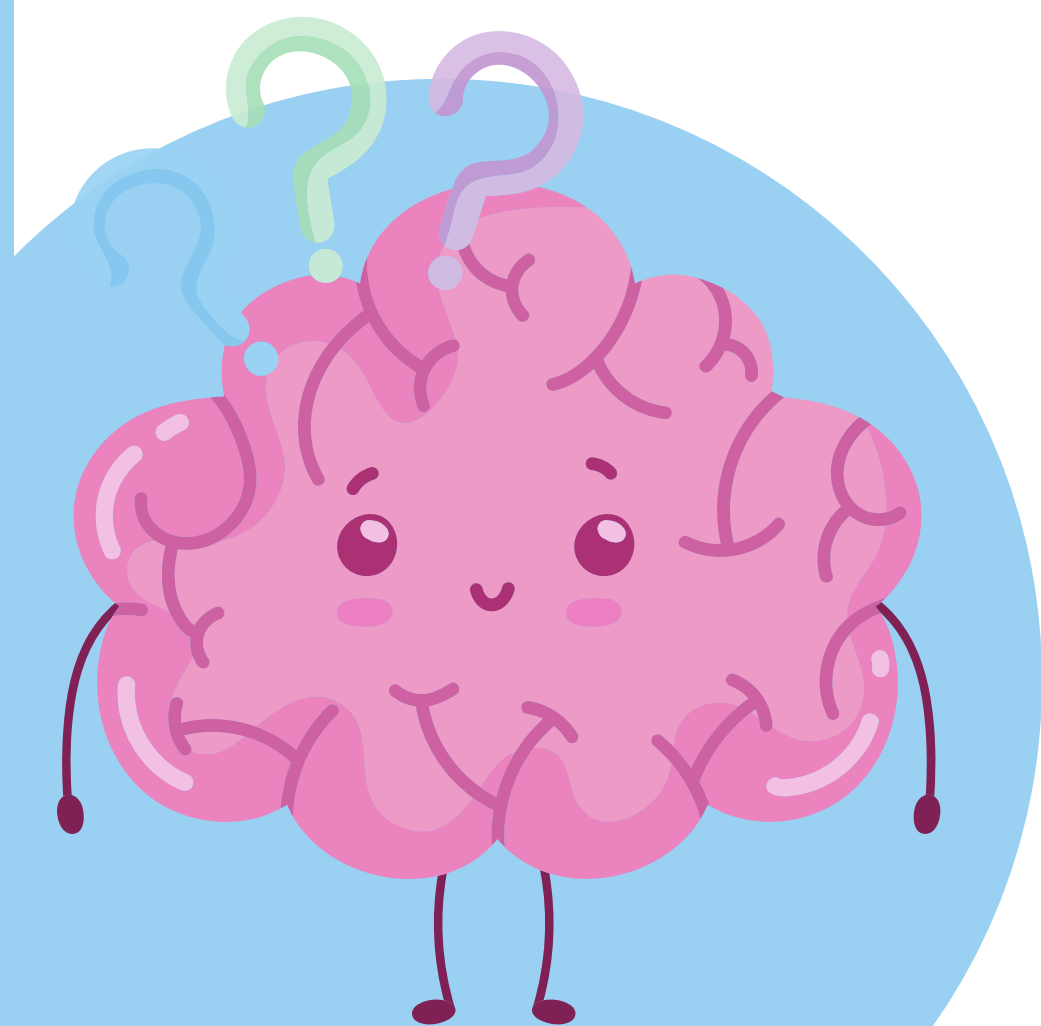


# The Alexithymia Workbook

Building Body Awareness and  
Cultivating Emotional Understanding

DR. MEGAN ANNA NEFF



**Neurodivergent**  
insights  
Dr. Neff

**Dr. Megan Anna Neff, PsyD**

## Thank You!

Thank you so much for purchasing this workbook. This workbook draws on many psychological principles but with the neurodivergent person in mind. Traditional mental health resources often do not consider the unique factors of being Autistic or ADHD. In creating these resources as an Autistic-ADHD psychologist, I hope you can see yourself recognized more fully.

I hope you will find this workbook useful and empowering on your journey towards greater self-awareness, self-acceptance, and integration of your neurodivergent identities.



**Supporting Neurodivergent Individuals:** A portion of every workbook's profit is redirected to mutual aid. To learn more about this project, [click here](#).

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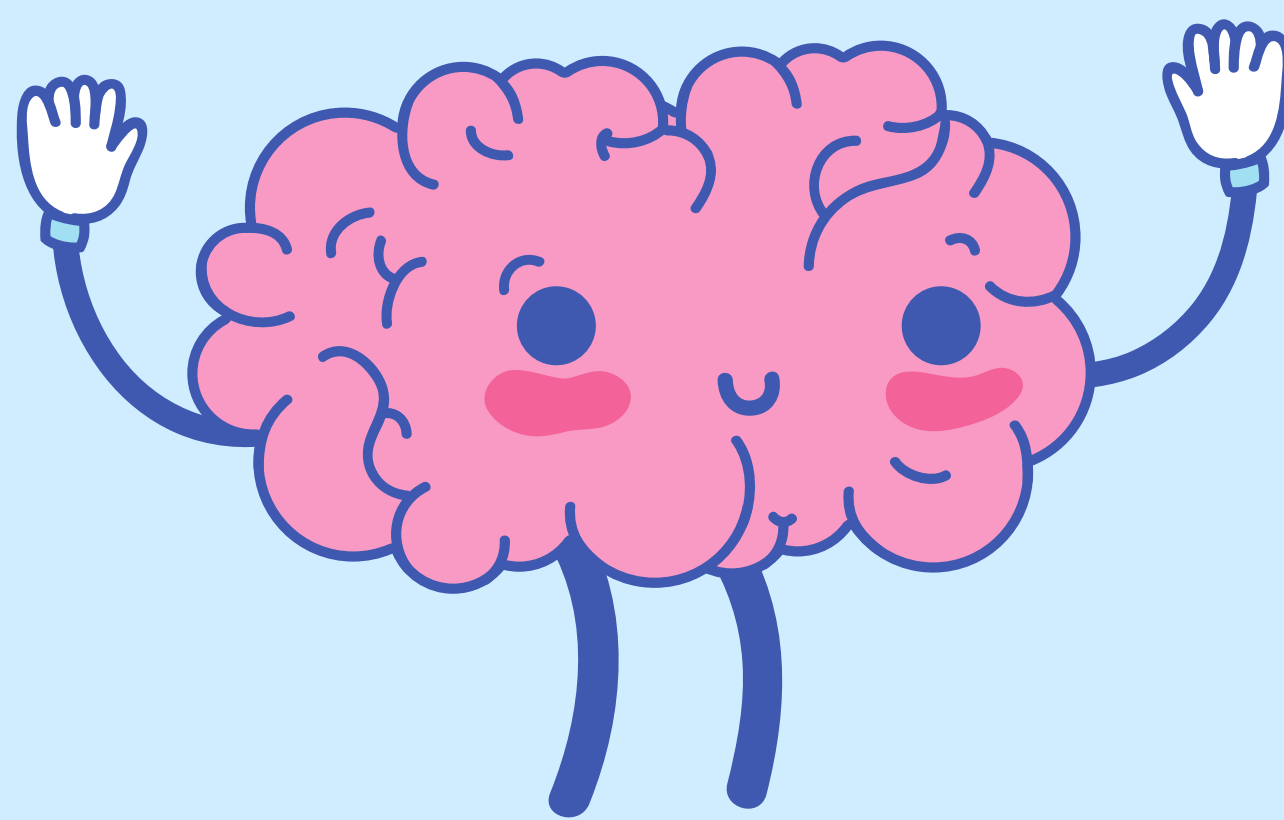
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# 1

## SECTION

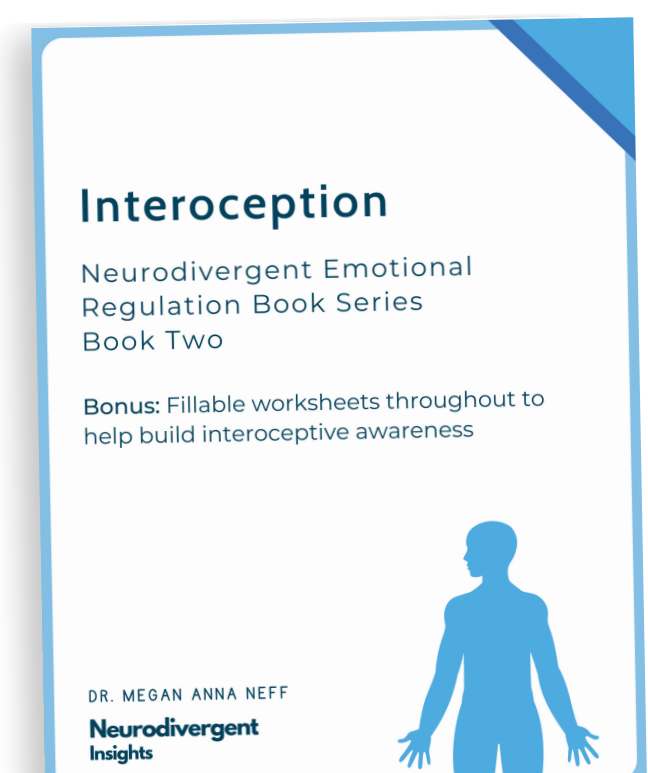
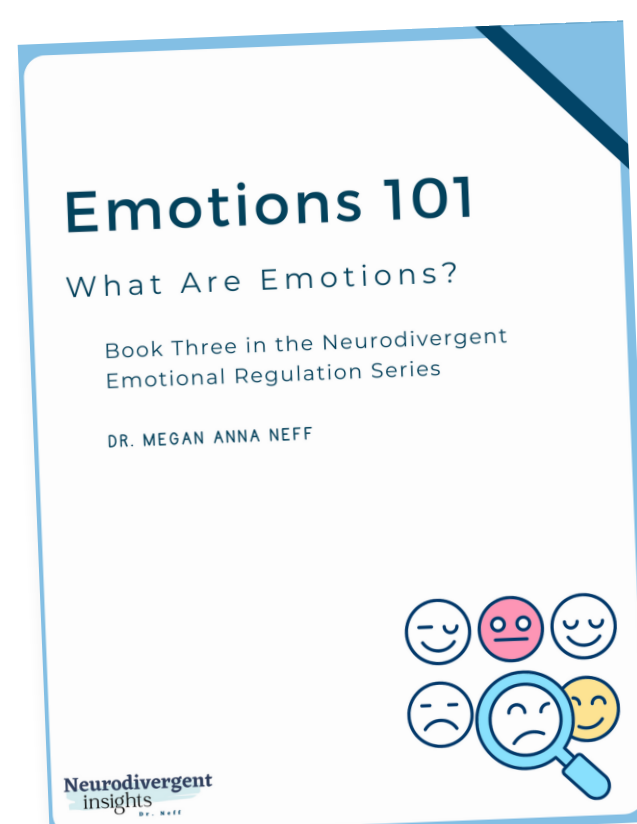
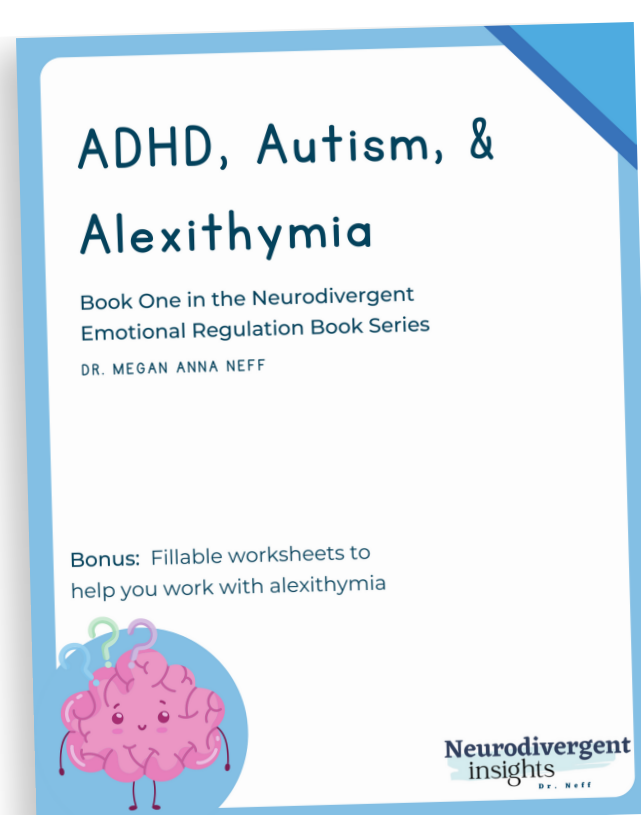
# WHAT IS ALEXITHYMIA?

# WELCOME

## Beyond the Surface: Understanding Neurodivergent Emotions Series

This workbook is part of a series on neurodivergence and emotions (one workbook will be released monthly from 2022-2023). So far, this series has included books on:

1. [Alexithymia](#)
2. [Interoception](#)
3. [Emotions 101: What Are Emotions?](#)
4. [Neurodivergent Emotions: A Body-Based Approach to Wellness and Resilience](#)
5. [Neurodivergent Emotions: Cognitive Factors](#)
6. [Neurodivergent Emotions: Interpersonal Factors](#)
7. [Neurodivergent Emotions: Personality Factors](#)



# Beyond the Surface: Understanding Neurodivergent Emotions Series

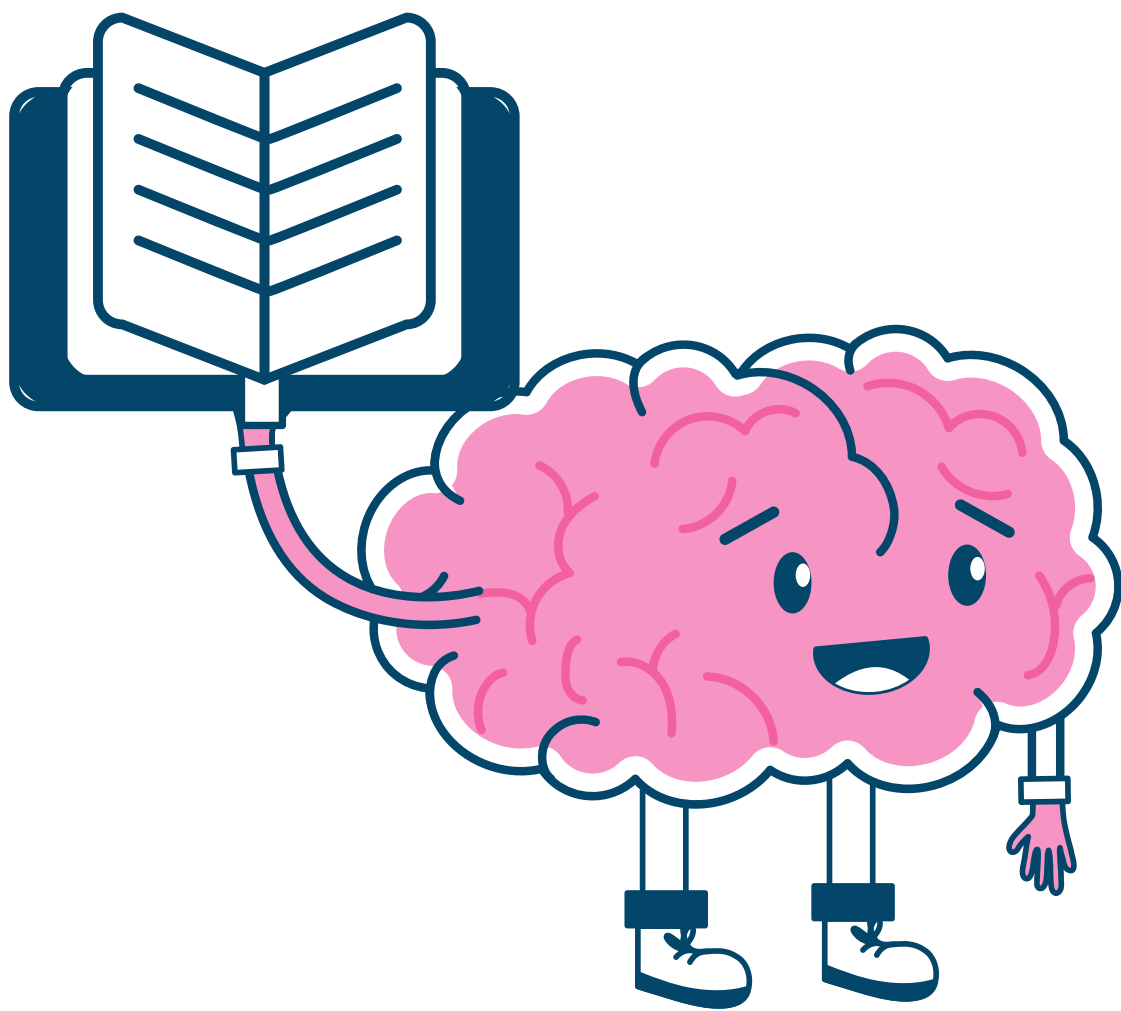


Each workbook will build off of the last one. However, each book can also be read independently. If you struggle with body awareness and emotional recognition, it's helpful to start with the books on Alexithymia (this one) and Interoception. Many emotional regulation strategies are ineffective when interoception difficulties and alexithymia haven't been addressed, which these first two workbooks cover.

Other workbooks in the series look more directly at what emotions are, the factors that influence them, and tools to work with different emotional factors that influence emotions with tools for building emotional resilience.



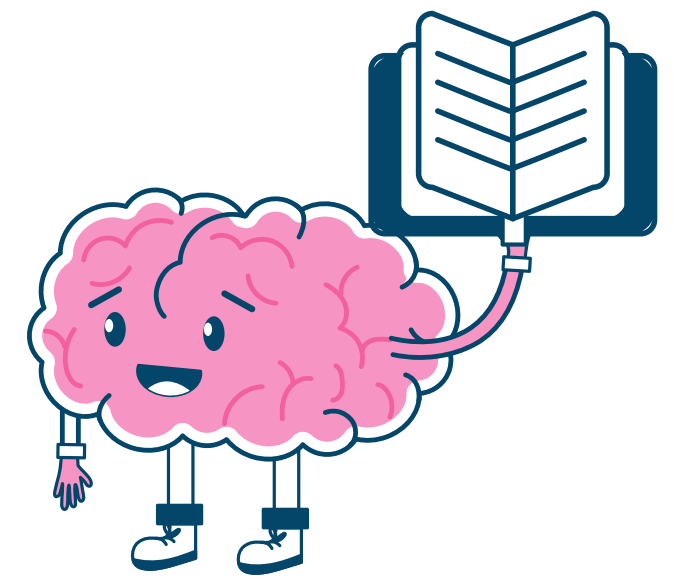
# WELCOME



Alexithymia is common among Autistic and ADHD people. Alexithymia makes it difficult to self-soothe and regulate painful emotions and requires special attention.

Several emotional regulation strategies don't make a lot of sense or are not as effective for people with alexithymia. For this reason, it feels important to start this series by doing a deep dive into alexithymia.

# How to Use This Workbook



## *Disclaimer:*

This workbook provides an introduction to alexithymia. It also introduces several practices to help increase emotional awareness and body awareness.

Increasing emotional awareness can help us to better regulate our painful emotions, feel more engaged, and can help us be more proactive in our health and wellness. However, it can also mean we are more in touch with our pain, sadness, and difficult feelings. When we begin increasing emotional awareness, it can bring more sensitive emotions to the surface. For this reason, it is recommended you work with a mental health professional or counselor when working to increase your body awareness.

If you have a history of complex or acute trauma, it is particularly important you work with a counselor while increasing emotion awareness. It is also wise to go slow with body-based practices (body scan, etc.), as this can cause unprocessed memories and emotions to resurface.

**Disclaimer:** This information is for education purposes only and should not be seen as a substitute for mental health or medical care.

## Definition and Origin

Alexithymia is a broad term that means difficulty identifying and describing emotions. The concept of alexithymia is relatively new in all things mental health history. And we have depth psychotherapy (the psychoanalytic tradition) to thank for its existence!

The term was coined by the psychoanalytic psychiatrist Peter Sifneos in 1972. He used this term to describe his patients who struggled to perceive and describe their emotions. Sifneos, born on the Greek island of Lesbos borrowed from his native language to coin this term.



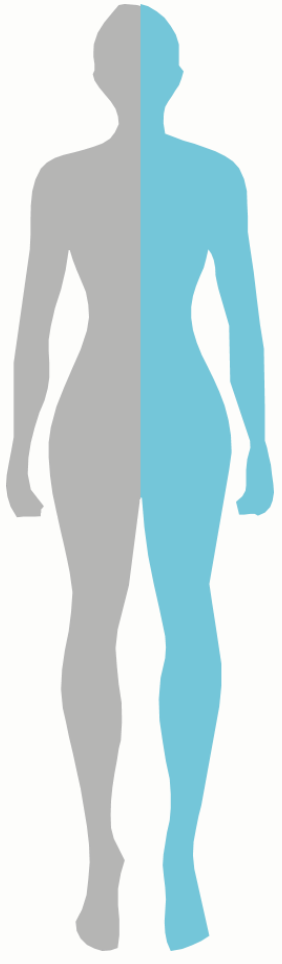
### Origin

Sifneos borrowed from his native language to coin this term. In Sifneos' native Greek, the word means "without words for emotion."

Sources used on this page: [Hughes, 2018](#)



# Definition and Prevalence



When a person has alexithymia, it means they struggle with distinguishing between emotions and bodily sensations. Alexithymia occurs on a spectrum, and a person can have mild to severe alexithymic traits.



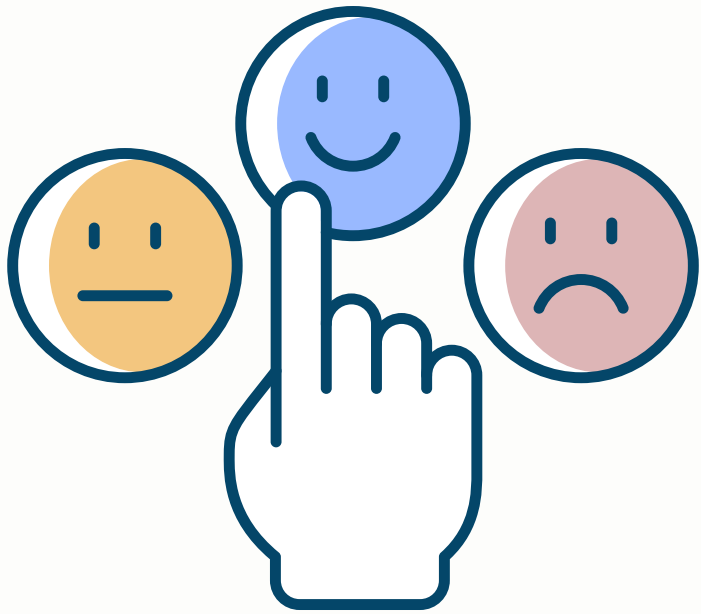
Alexithymia is broadly considered a personality trait. While it is not a medical diagnosis, alexithymia is associated with several medical and mental health conditions.



Studies vary regarding the prevalence of alexithymia. Roughly, an estimated 1 in 10 people experiences alexithymia ([Goerlich, 2018](#)). However, this rate is higher among neurodivergent people (including ADHD and Autism) and those experiencing mental health conditions (depression, anxiety, etc.).

Sources used on this page: [Hughes, 2016](#); [Young \(Spectrum News\) 2019](#)

# Core Characteristics of Alexithymia



Difficulties identifying and describing feelings



Difficulty differentiating between typical bodily processes (hunger cues, exhaustion) and emotions (anxiety, sadness)



An externally oriented cognitive style (paying more attention to external things happening around you than to internal experiences)



Challenges generating mental images and fantasies

---

# What Causes Alexithymia?

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## Understanding the Interoception-Alexithymia Link

While several factors go into alexithymia, interoception is a significant underlying factor (particularly in the context of ADHD and Autistic alexithymia)

Interoception is the 8th sensory system and speaks to our ability to perceive what is happening inside our body (bodily organs, thirst, hunger cues, heartbeat, and more). Many ADHDers and Autistic people struggle with interoception cues and signals.

One research team characterized alexithymia as a "generalized deficit of interoception." The ability to perceive a wide range of body signals (interoception) is vital for the ability to experience emotion (Bird, Brewer, and Cook, 2016). Therefore alexithymia is best seen as an underlying interoception issue.



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# What Causes Alexithymia?

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## Understanding the Interoception-Alexithymia Link

I suspect the interoception-alexithymia link is one reason why many neurodivergent people tend to access emotions through their minds. Personally, I struggle to answer how I'm doing in the moment, but I can write a long, in-depth essay about how I'm feeling.

Even before I learned I was Autistic, I often talked about my tendency to access my emotions through my mind. I attribute this both to my hyperconnected mind and my underlying interoception struggles, which make perceiving bodily emotions more difficult for me. This pattern of accessing emotions through the mind is quite common among Autistic people in particular.

# What Causes Alexithymia?

Alexithymia is primarily considered a personality trait, which results from the complex interplay of nature (family environment, early attachments) and nature (genetics).



## Nurture

### Environmental Factors:

Environmental factors such as the availability of early attachment figures, modeling of emotional vocabulary and identification, and having emotions reflected back by caregivers can impact a person's ability to perceive and register emotions.

~~vs.~~  
AND



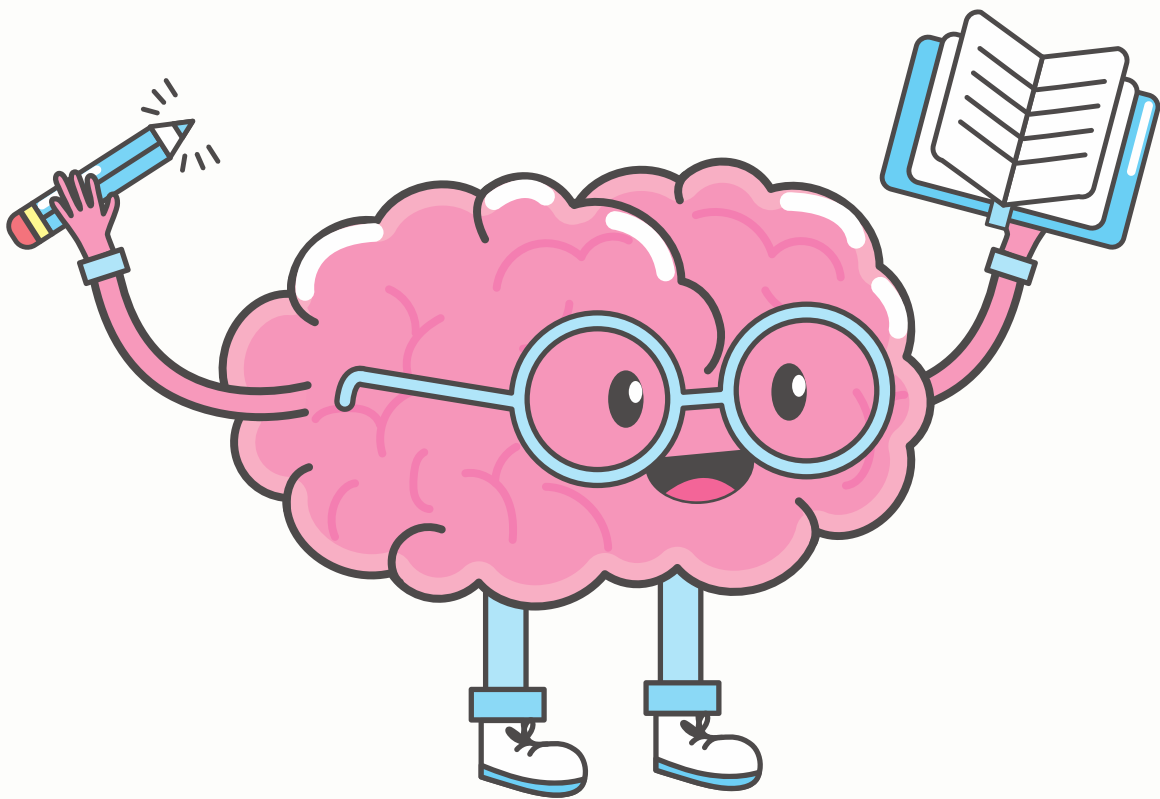
## Nature

### Genetic Factors:

Neurodevelopmental differences, sensory processing disorders, and interoception and proprioception issues are some of the genetic factors that can make it challenging for people to perceive and identify subtle shifts in the body, including emotions.

# Alexithymia Features

Alexithymia includes both cognitive and emotional elements.



## Cognitive (Thoughts)

Cognitive dimensions of alexithymia include:

- More likely to focus thoughts externally vs. internally (e.g., the outside world vs. what's happening internally)
- Difficulty describing and articulating emotions through verbal words



## Affective (Emotions)

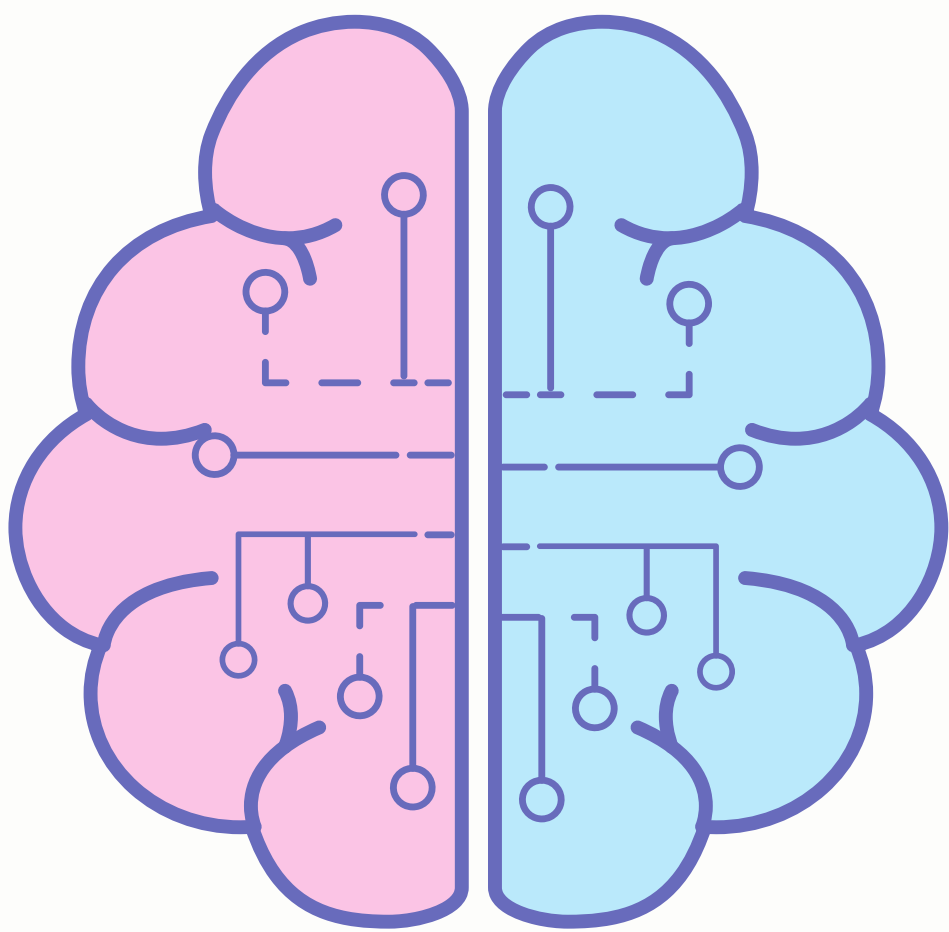
Emotional dimensions of alexithymia include:

- Difficulty perceiving and identifying emotions
- Experiences faint body signals
- Difficulty identifying the subtle differences between emotions (e.g., excitement vs. fear)



# Alexithymia Features

A person can have primary (trait) alexithymia, secondary (state situational, temporary) alexithymia or both.



## Primary Alexithymia (Trait Alexithymia)

Trait alexithymia (primary alexithymia) is an innate, stable personality trait. It is considered a part of a person's baseline personality. Trait alexithymia likely has environmental and genetic components.



## Secondary Alexithymia (State Alexithymia)

State alexithymia (secondary alexithymia) is temporary and/or situational alexithymia. State alexithymia results from life circumstances or a recent medical diagnosis (for example, in the case of PTSD, a person may have secondary alexithymia).

# Alexithymia Features



It's on a spectrum

Similar to how Autistic and ADHD traits exist on a spectrum, alexithymia also occurs on a spectrum. A person can have low to severe alexithymic traits.

There are also several different factors of alexithymia. The [Online Alexithymia Test](#) captures seven areas where a person may experience alexithymic traits. A person may have alexithymia in some areas but not in others.

The most common areas of alexithymia for Autistic and ADHD people are difficulties in identifying and describing feelings. The following pages provide an overview of the seven different areas a person may experience alexithymic traits.

# Alexithymia Features

## Difficulty Identifying Emotions

People with high alexithymic traits in this area have difficulty identifying internal experiences. They often experience confusion and disorientation when it comes to their emotions and body sensations. They may struggle to identify and differentiate between bodily sensations and emotions, such as mistaking anxiety for hunger or vice versa. This confusion and disorientation can lead to difficulty in understanding and regulating their emotions, as they may not even be aware of what they are feeling.

\*Note: This is often connected to underlying interoception difficulties.

Is that hunger,  
is that anxiety?  
Is that fear?



Difficulty in this area is linked with depression, non-suicidal self-harm, and suicidal behavior(Cerutti et al., 2018). Identifying emotions plays a crucial role in our ability to regulate emotions which is likely one of the reasons this is connected with more emotional turmoil and depression.



# Alexithymia Features

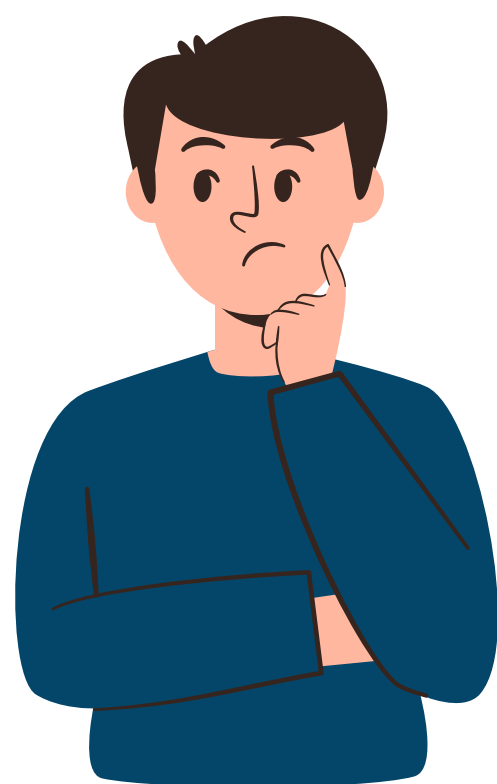
## Difficulty Describing Feelings

While difficulty describing feelings sounds similar to identifying feelings, it is slightly different.

Difficulty describing emotions may include struggles with finding the right words, expressing emotions in a socially appropriate manner, or feeling uncomfortable sharing emotions with others.

People who struggle with this experience difficulty labeling emotions and finding the right words to describe their feelings. Descriptors of emotions may be vague, general, and diffuse.

"How are you?"  
Internal monologue:  
I don't know how to  
answer that.



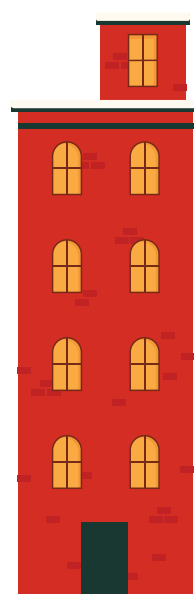
Difficulty describing emotions is associated with more relationship difficulty.

# Alexithymia Features

## Externally Oriented Thinking

Externally oriented thinking occurs when a person's thoughts are focused externally (vs. internally). An externally oriented thinker focuses their energy on external events and tends to avoid focusing on internal experiences.

When a person has high alexithymic traits in this area, they experience difficulty attending to their emotions and inner states. There is a lack of curiosity about what is happening internally for the person.



I wonder how old that building is? And how did they build it? What machinery did they use?



Externally oriented thinking is associated with a reduced ability to experience positive emotions, which can contribute to depression and other mood concerns.

# Alexithymia Features

## Restricted Imaginative Processes

A restricted imagination is characterized by diminished fantasy life with limited interest in or ability to engage the imagination. People with high alexithymic traits in this area tend to focus on the concrete aspects of the world, such as facts and practical considerations, rather than engaging with more abstract or imaginative ideas.



More interested in the concrete world of facts and pragmatics with little interest in fantasy and imaginative processes.

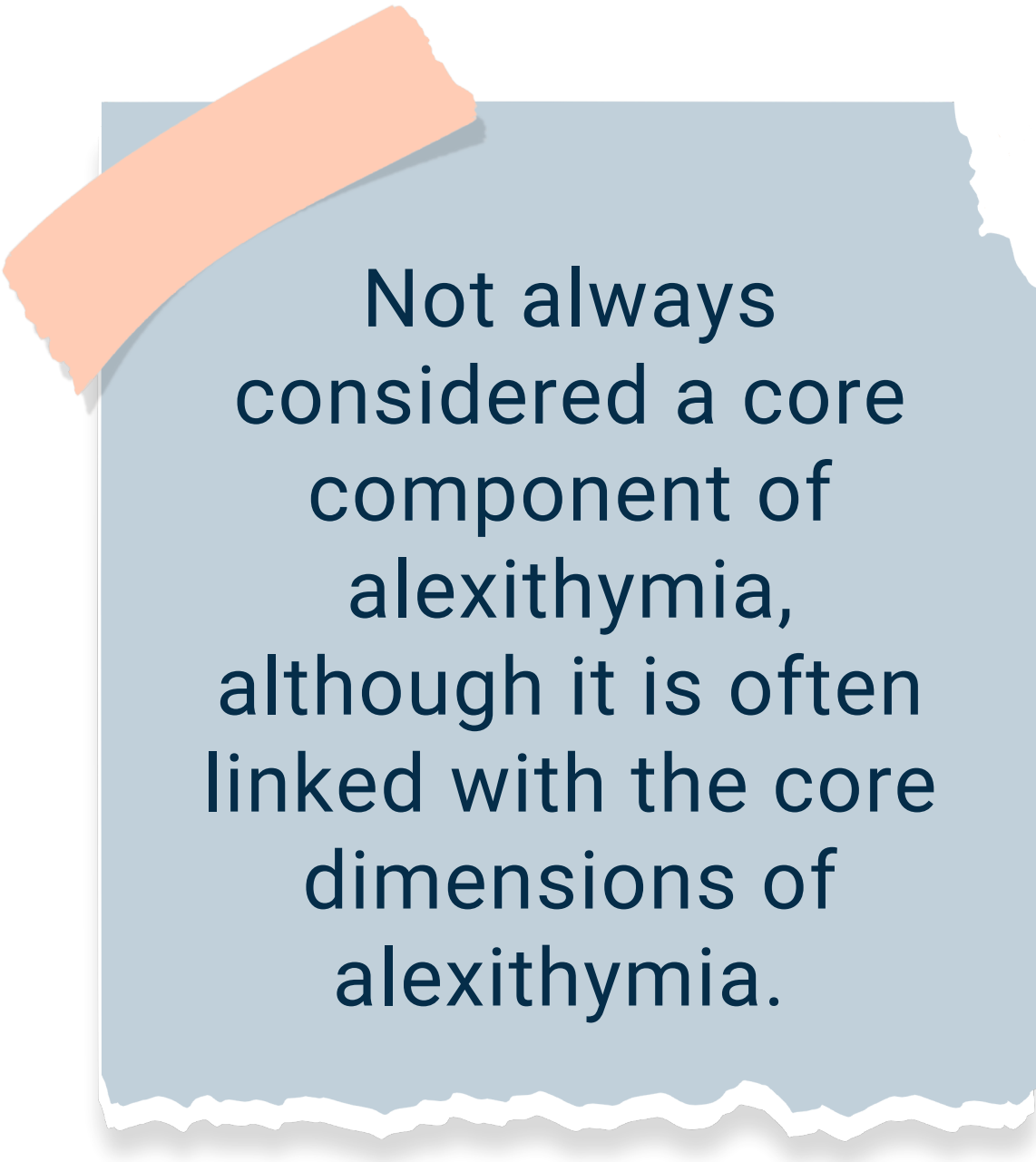
Not always considered a core component of alexithymia, although it is often linked with the core dimensions of alexithymia.

# Alexithymia Features

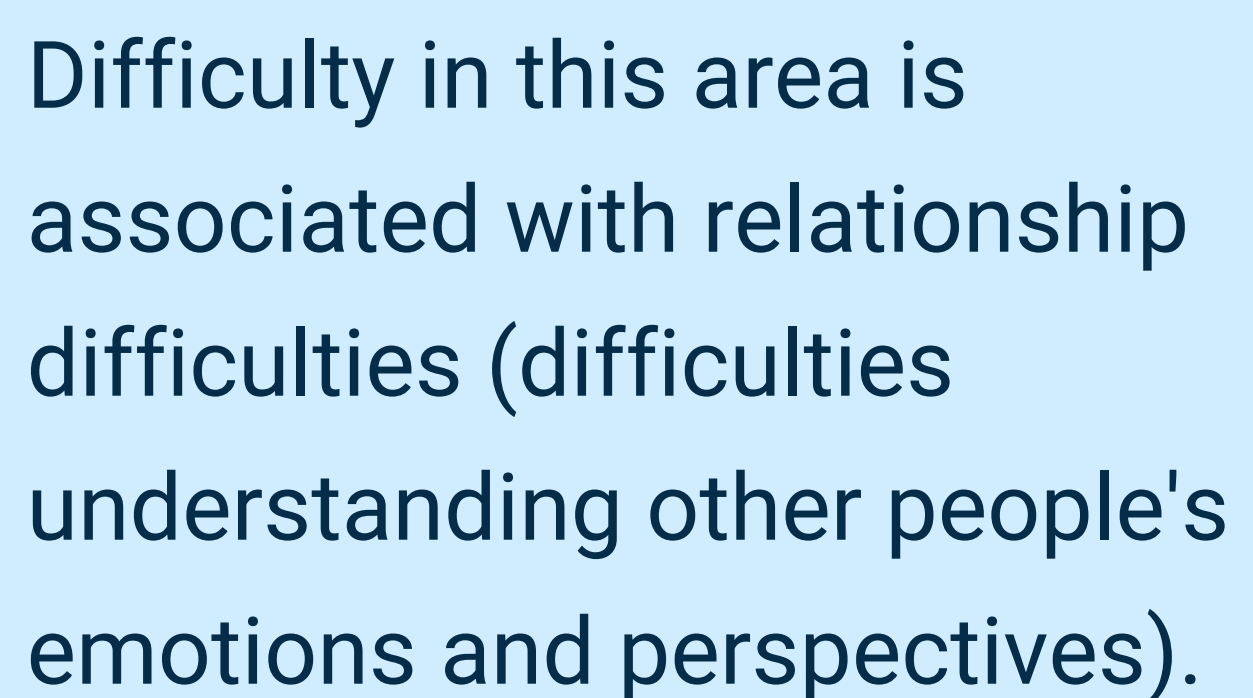
## Vicarious Interpretation of Feeling

People with high alexithymic traits in this area have difficulty identifying and understanding their own emotions, as well as recognizing emotions in others. This can lead them to rely on others to interpret emotions and provide guidance on how to respond in social situations. For example, they may ask others how they would feel in a given situation to try and understand their emotional response.

Additionally, they may struggle to accurately read and understand the emotions of others, which can impact their relationships.



Not always considered a core component of alexithymia, although it is often linked with the core dimensions of alexithymia.



Difficulty in this area is associated with relationship difficulties (difficulties understanding other people's emotions and perspectives).

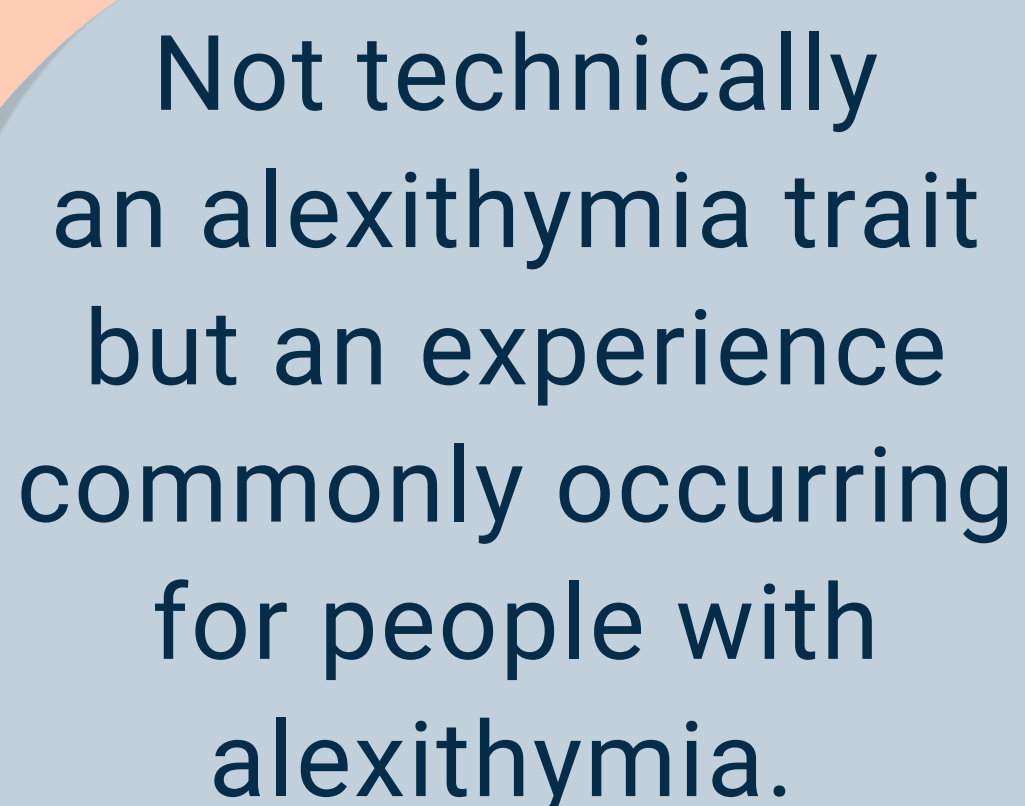


# Alexithymia Features

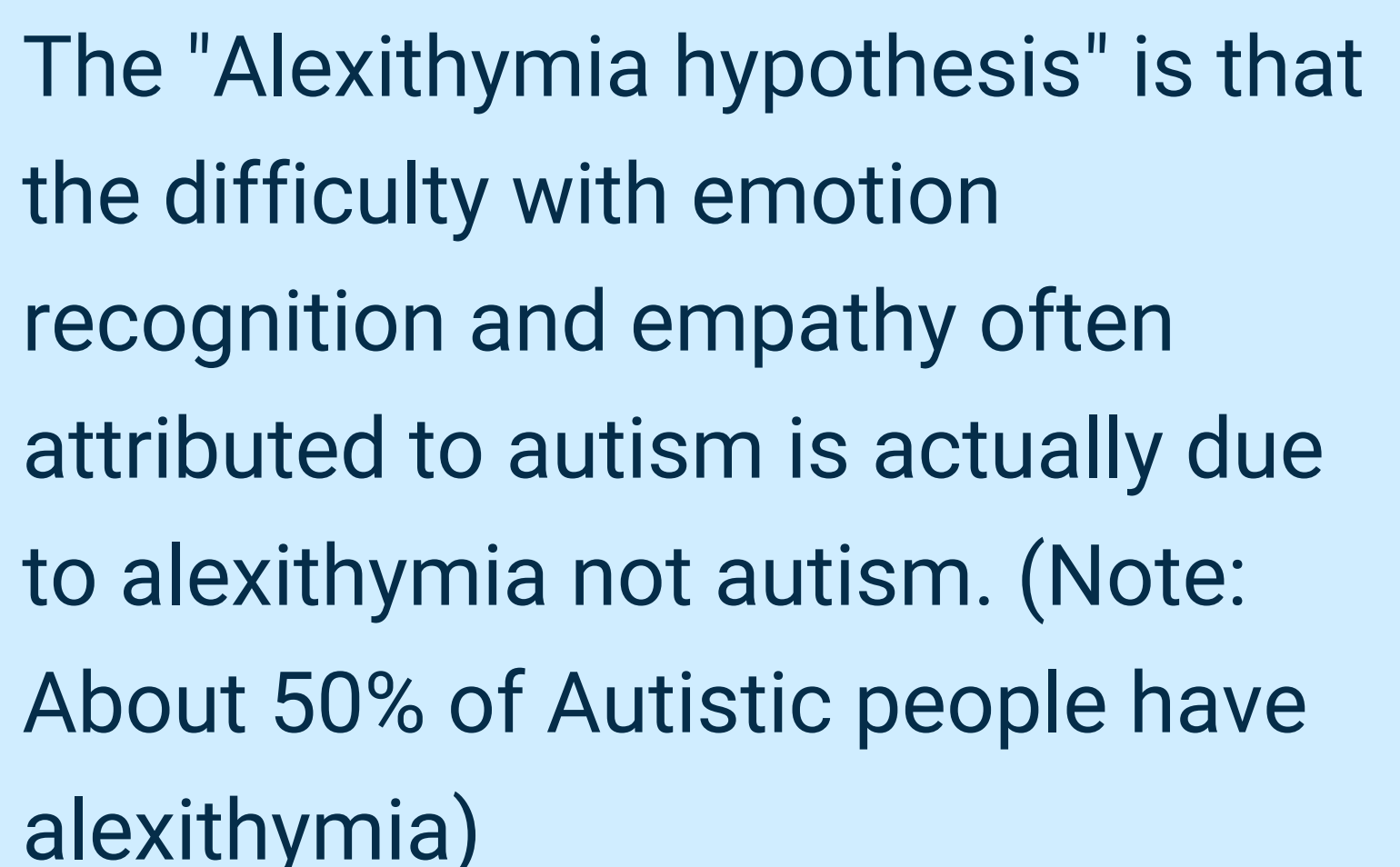
## Interpersonal Relationship Difficulties

Alexithymia has been linked to difficulties with empathy (difficulty perceiving other people's perspectives and understanding their feelings and intentions) ([Goerlich, 2018](#)), making and deepening relationships more difficult.

One study found that alexithymia rather than autism led to difficulties in empathy. Autistic people who did not also have alexithymia did not have the same struggles with emotion recognition and empathy as Autistic people with alexithymia. This has led some researchers to believe it is alexithymia and not autism that results in difficulty with empathy ([Bird and Viding, 2014](#)).



Not technically an alexithymia trait but an experience commonly occurring for people with alexithymia.



The "Alexithymia hypothesis" is that the difficulty with emotion recognition and empathy often attributed to autism is actually due to alexithymia not autism. (Note: About 50% of Autistic people have alexithymia)



# Alexithymia Features

## Sexual Difficulties and Disinterest

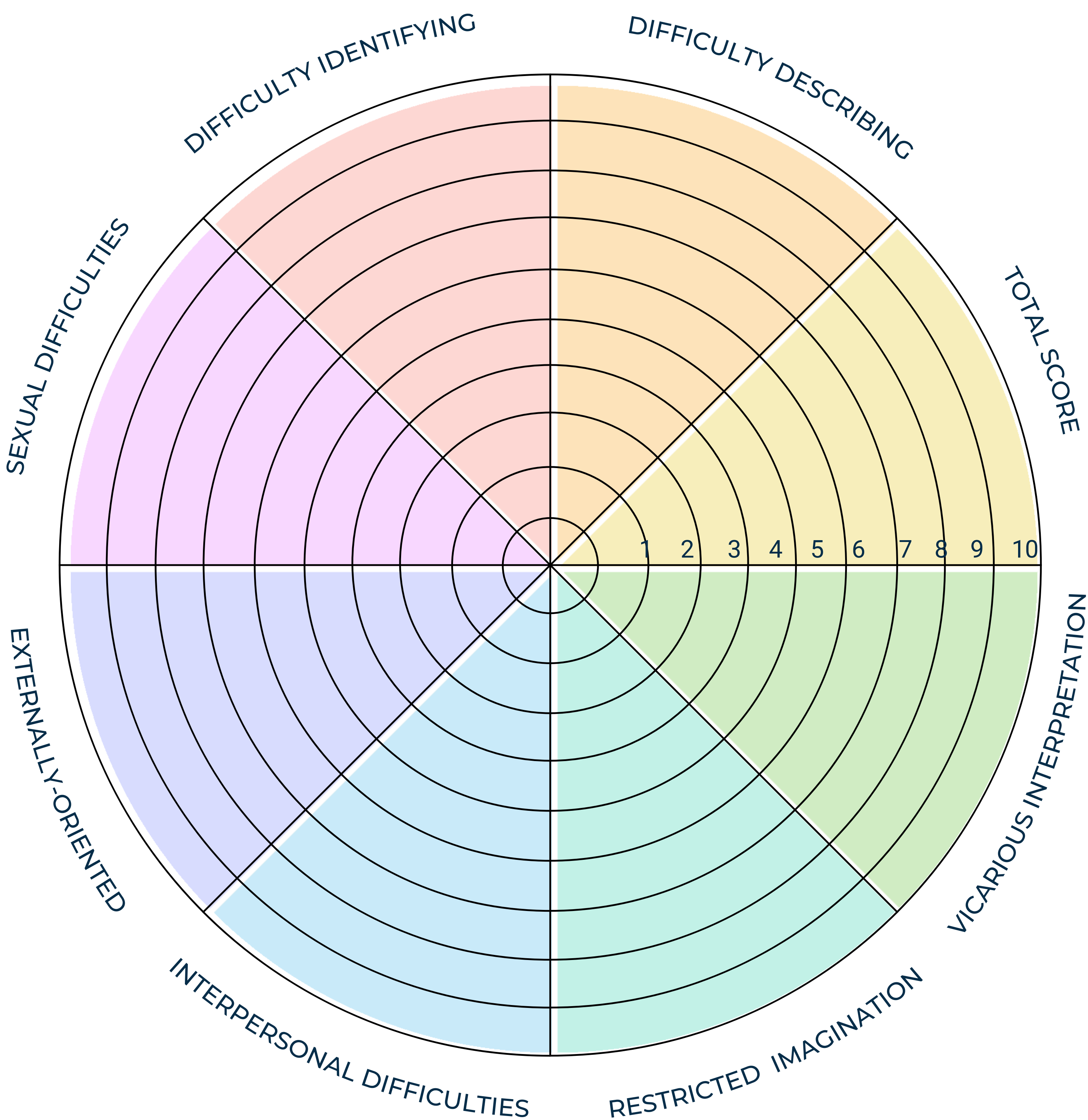
Alexithymia is often associated with asexuality or reduced interest in sex. It's worth noting that asexuality is a valid sexual orientation and not a problem in itself. However, research suggests that alexithymia may contribute to sexual difficulties for some individuals such as reduced sexual satisfaction, sexual anxiety, shyness, and emotional detachment from sexual partners. There are a few potential reasons for this. For one, alexithymia is often associated with experiencing more negative emotions, which can impact attitudes toward sexuality. Additionally, alexithymia may contribute to an avoidant or detached attachment style, which can also translate into a less connected sexual experience ([Scimeca et al., 2013](#)).

Note: this is not technically an alexithymia trait but an experience that commonly occurs for people with alexithymia.

People with alexithymia are also more likely to identify as asexual. This may be one reason there is a higher rate of asexual people within the Autistic population.

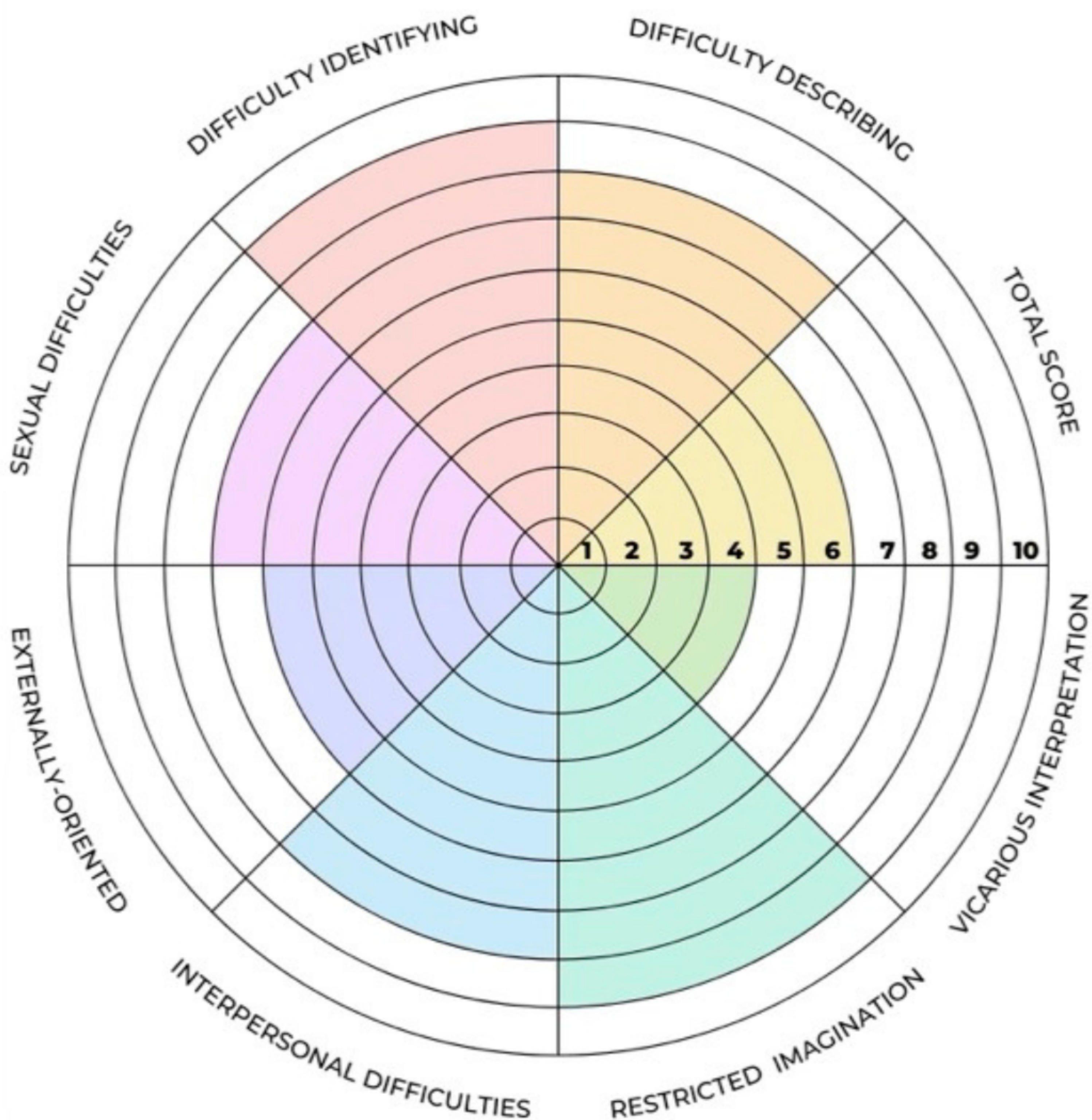
# The Alexithymia Wheel

Just like Autistic and ADHD traits exist on "wheel of traits," there is also a wheel of alexithymic traits. A person can have high alexithymic traits in some areas and low alexithymic traits in others.





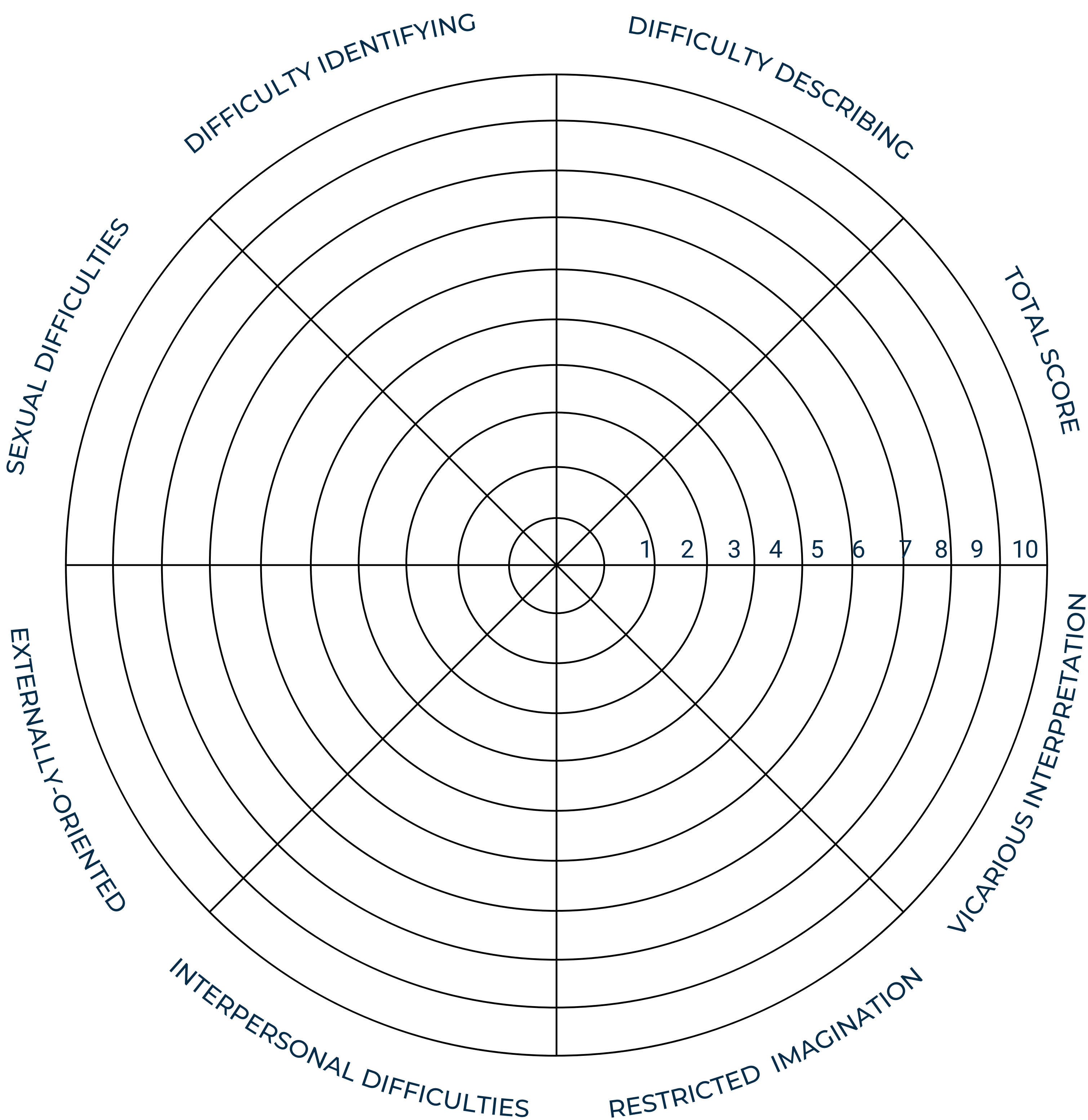
# The Alexithymia Wheel





# The Alexithymia Wheel

You can print this out and color it in to reflect your levels of alexithymic traits (recommended: take the online Alexithymia test first — see next page).

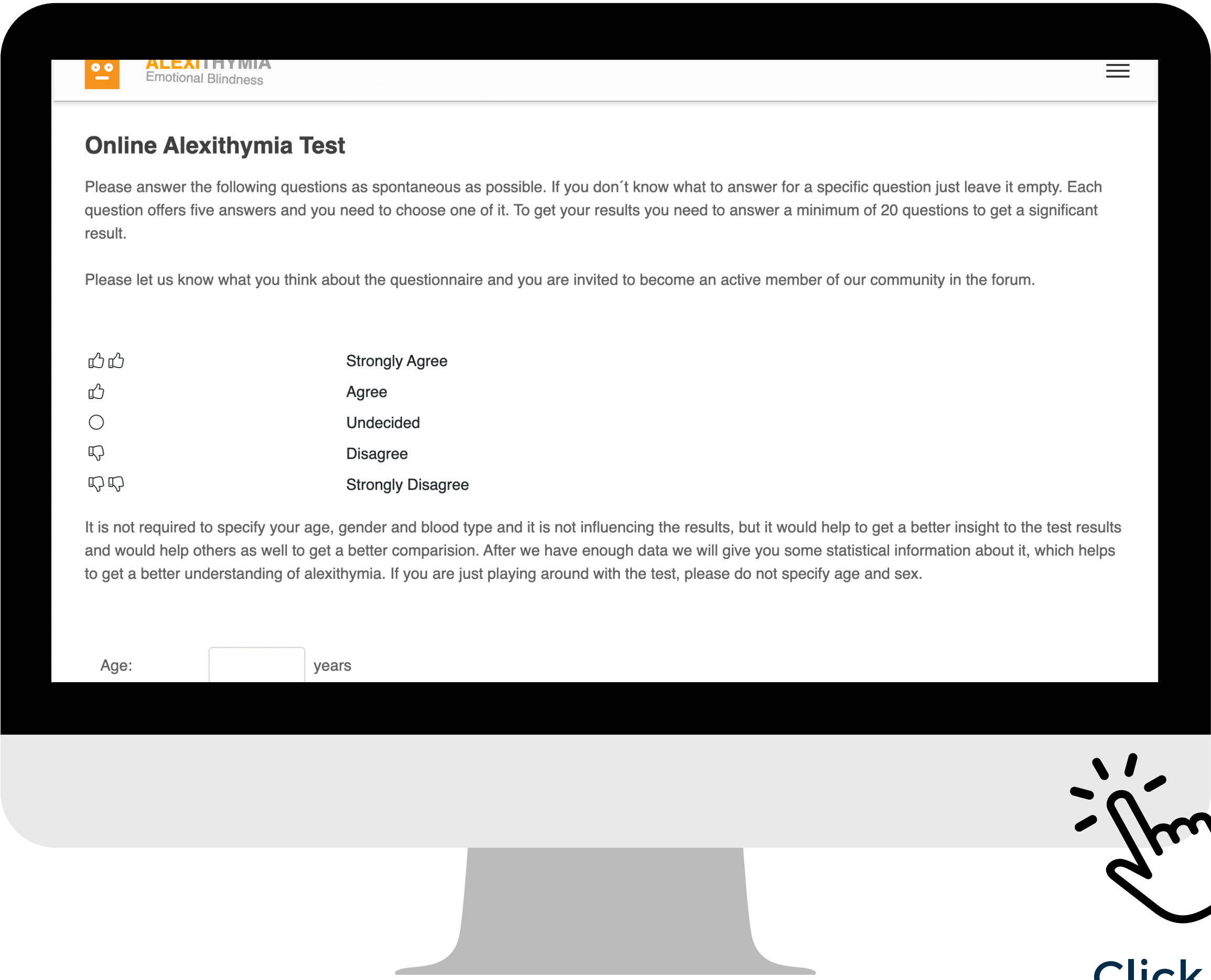


# Alexithymic Traits Explained

## Section One Action Step

Go take the Online Alexithymia Quiz and map out your results.

## Online Alexithymia Test



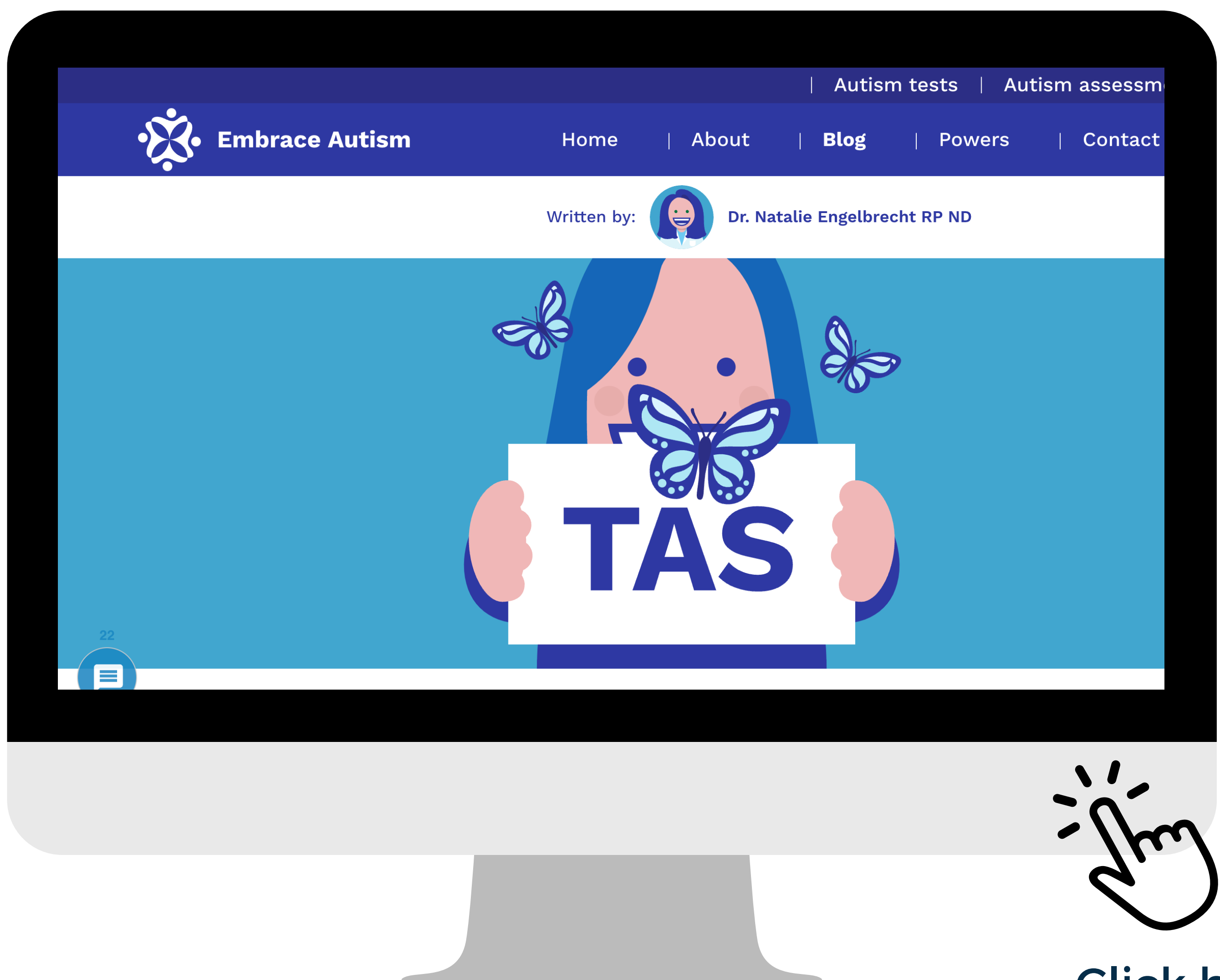
<https://www.alexithymia.us/test-alexithymia>

# Alexithymic Traits Explained

## Section One Action Step

Or go take the Toronto Alexithymia scale.

## Toronto Alexithymia Scale



Click here

<https://embrace-autism.com/toronto-alexithymia-scale/>

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# Resource Page

*For More Learning*

## Alexithymia Tests

- [The Online Alexithymia Measure](#) (best for 16 and older)
- [Toronto Alexithymia Scale](#) (best for 16 and older)
- [Children's Alexithymia Measure \(CAM\)](#) (age 5-17, to be completed by a parent or caregiver)

## Articles

- [Alexithymia Traits Explained: An Introduction to the Alexithymia Wheel of Traits](#), **Neurodivergent Insights**—an overview of Alexithymia traits in a consolidated blog post.



# 2

SECTION

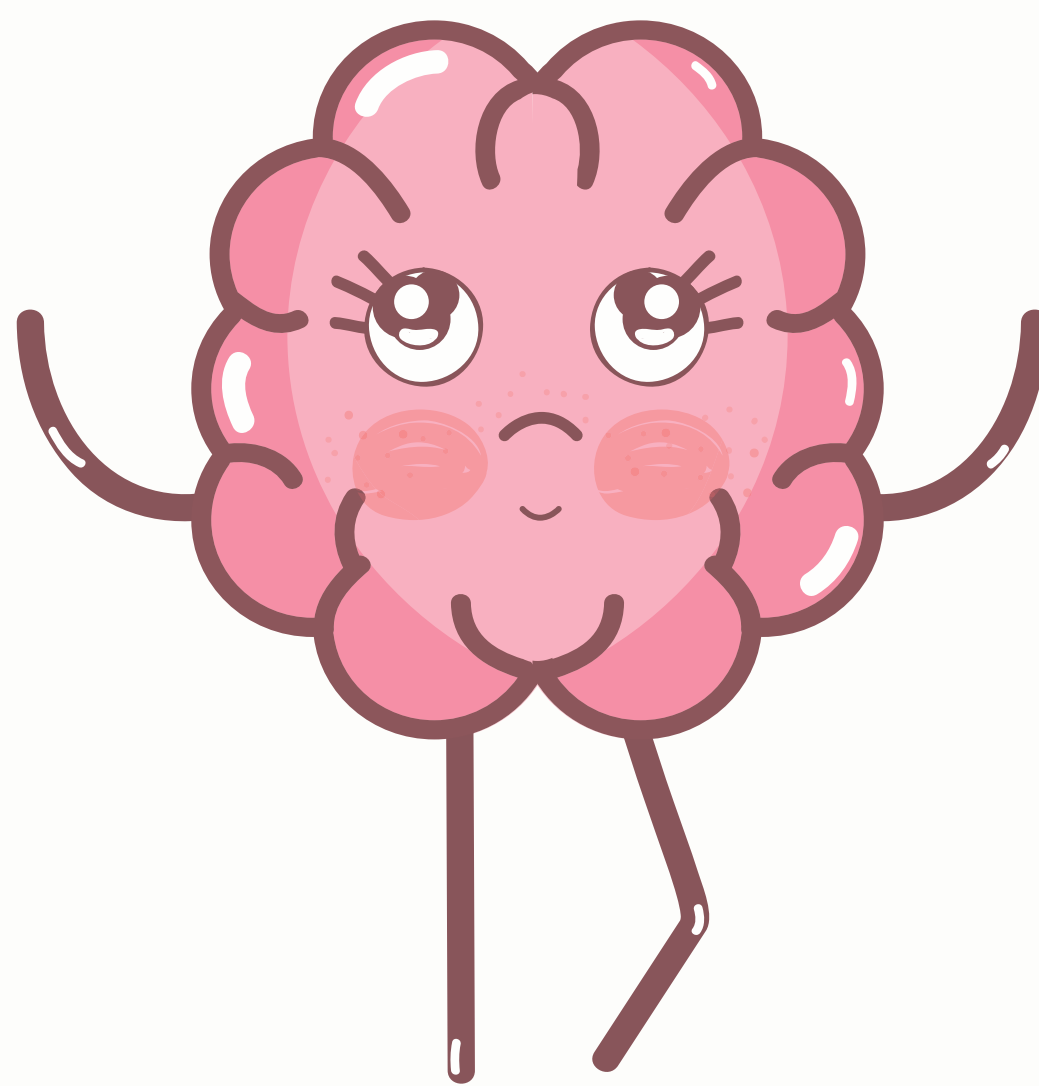
## ADHD, AUTISM AND ALEXITHYMIA

# Alexithymia and Neurodivergence

While an estimated 1 in 10 people has alexithymia, this rate is higher among Autistic and ADHD people.

Most studies that have looked at alexithymia among Autistic and ADHD are smaller studies with small sample sizes. For this reason, there is some variance in the rates of alexithymia, and it can be difficult to state an overall objective prevalence rate.

The following is a summary of several studies that have looked at alexithymia among ADHDers and Autistic people.



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# Alexithymia and Autism

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Approximately half of Autistic people have alexithymia (statistics range from 40% to 65%)(Bird & Cook, 2013).

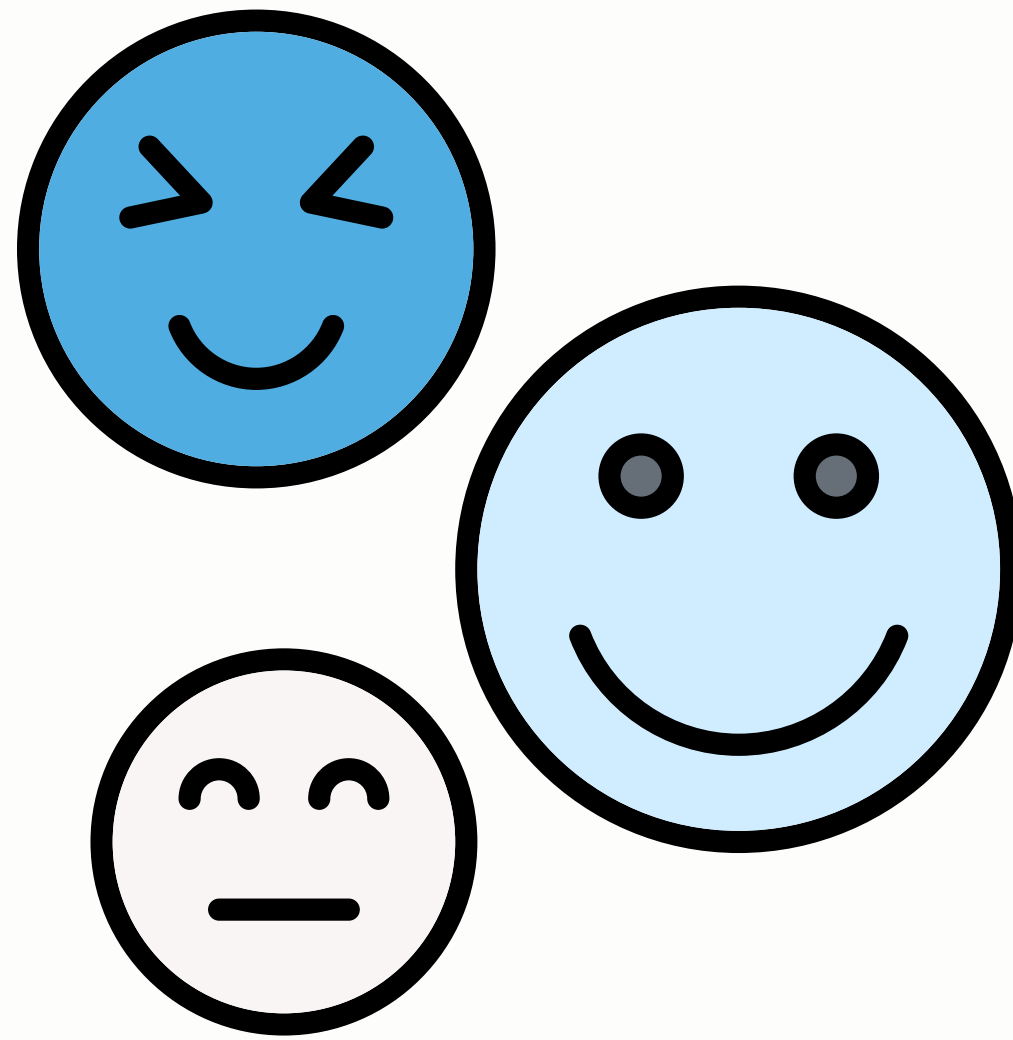
Bird and Cook, who have studied alexithymia and autism extensively, have found some interesting results. They have found that alexithymia, rather than autism, best explains the emotion and empathy difficulties often seen in the context of autism.

They found that Autistic people with alexithymia struggled with emotional expression, recognizing emotion in others, and empathy, while Autistic people without alexithymia did not. *In other words, emotion-related difficulties were related to alexithymia and not to autism itself.*

This may help explain why there is such a wide variance among Autistic people when it comes to social-communication differences. Alexithymia, more so than autism, may be the distinguishing factor. The following pages provide a summary of research studies that took a deeper look into the alexithymia-autism connection.

# Alexithymia and Autism

## Emotion Recognition



One study showed participants different facial expressions and asked them to accurately label the emotion being depicted.

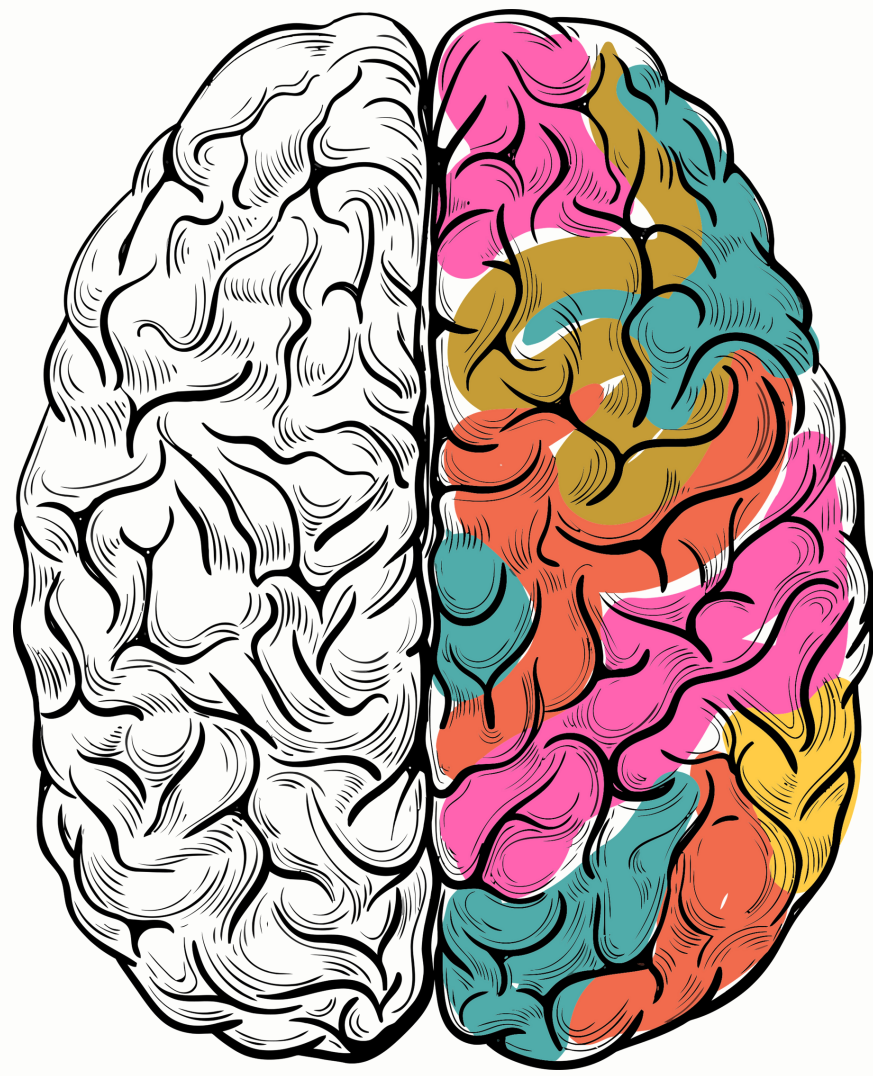
Participants with severe alexithymia were unable to consistently label the emotions depicted. Once alexithymia was accounted for, there were no deficits among Autistic people (meaning Autistic people without alexithymia did not struggle in this area).

Citation: Cook R, Brewer R, Shah P, Bird G. Alexithymia, not autism, predicts poor recognition of emotional facial expressions.



# Alexithymia and Autism

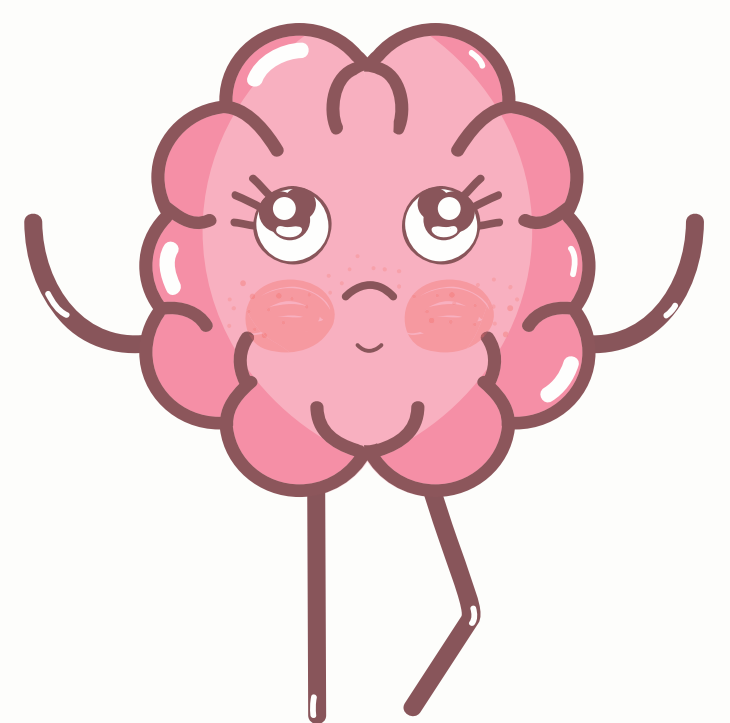
## Empathy



A second study used fMRIs to measure the degree of neural activity evoked by a loved one's pain.

The authors observed that the degree of empathic brain activity correlated with alexithymia but not autism. Once alexithymia was accounted for, there were no group differences (between Autistic and non Autistic participants) in empathy.

Citation: [Bird G, Silani G, Brindley R, White S, Frith U, Singer T. Empathic brain responses in insula are modulated by levels of alexithymia but not autism.](#)



# Alexithymia and Autism

## Vocal Recognition



A third study looked at the relationship between autism, alexithymia, and difficulties recognizing vocal affect (affect = emotional tone).

Participants were asked to identify the emotion conveyed in verbal (three-digit numbers being read aloud) and nonverbal (for example, laughing, crying) vocalizations.

They found a significant link between alexithymia and emotional recognition. The authors concluded that differences in emotion recognition were due to alexithymia rather than autism itself.

Citation: [Heaton P, Reichenbacher L, Sauter D, Allen R, Scott S, Hill E. Measuring the effects of alexithymia on perception of emotional vocalizations in autistic spectrum disorder and typical development.](#)

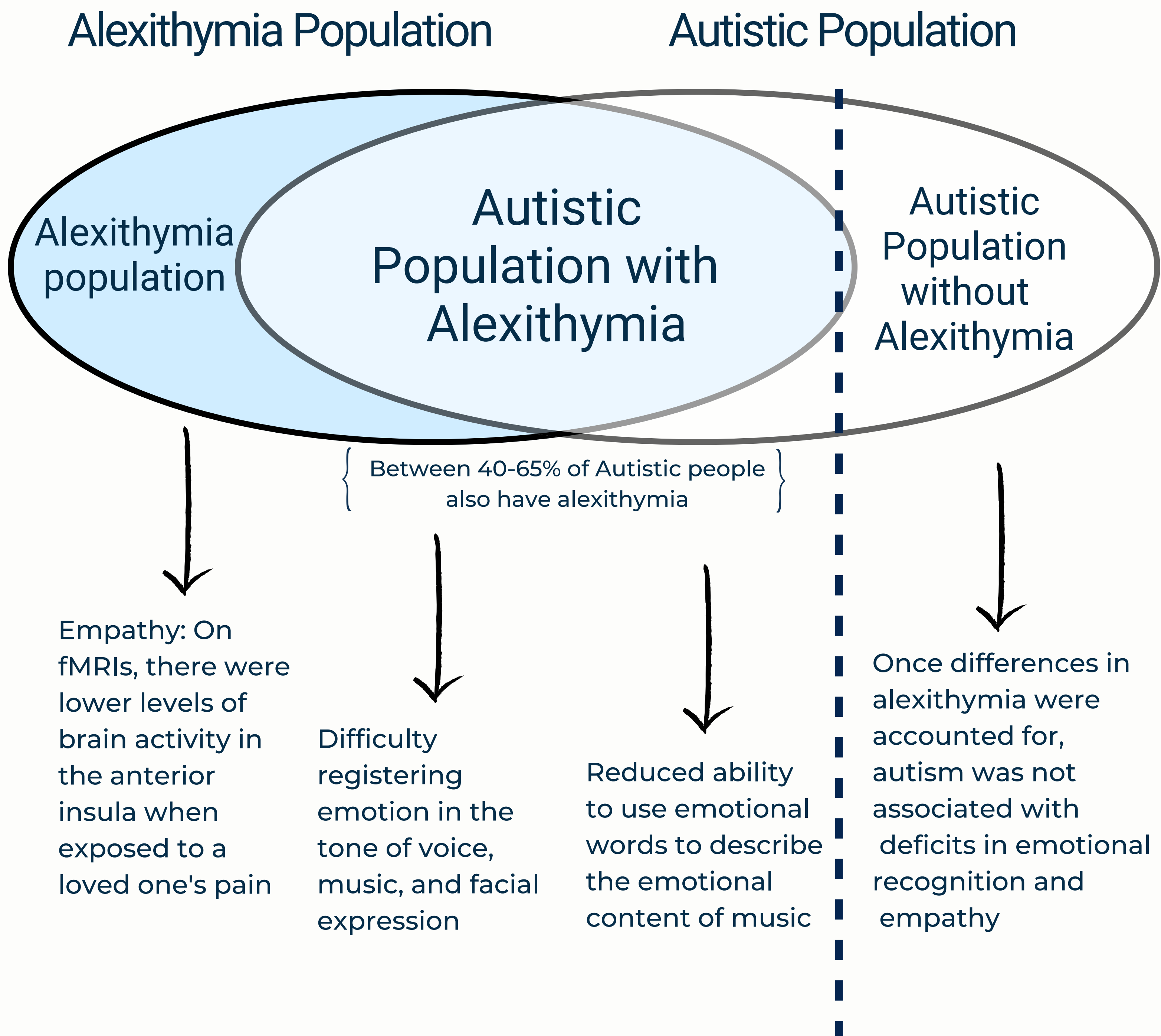
# Alexithymia and Autism



emotional difficulties  
within the autistic  
population are actually  
attributable to alexithymia  
—a condition that  
frequently co-occurs with  
autism—rather than a  
feature of autism *per se*.

(BIRD AND COOK, 2013).

# Alexithymia and Autism



## Big Takeaway

The "emotional symptoms of autism" are better explained by alexithymia and not Autism alone. (Bird and Cook, 2013). Many of the stereotypical depictions of Autism are based on Autistic people with severe alexithymia.



# Alexithymia and Autism



If future research shows the alexithymia hypothesis to be correct, the diagnostic criteria for autism may require revision. If it is found that individuals with autism, but without alexithymia, exhibit no emotional impairments, problems of emotion processing (for example, a lack of empathy and impaired recognition of emotion in others) should no longer be considered diagnostic markers of autism.

(BIRD AND COOK, 2013)



# Alexithymia vs. Autism

## Alexithymia

Difficulty identifying emotions

Difficulty differentiating between feelings & bodily sensations

Difficulty describing emotions

Detached-avoidant attachment style

Externally oriented thinking

Reduced affective empathy

Difficulty registering emotions

## Autism

Self-soothes through repetitive behaviors, routines, and stimming

Difficulty with NT social-communication patterns

High-context, visual thinker (literal use of words)

Special interests

Difficulties in emotional recognition and empathy not observed in research studies

### Alexithymia + Autism

More likely to identify as AroAce

Higher prevalence of relationship and sexual struggles

Increased rates of depression & anxiety

More difficulty regulating emotions

Increased rates of eating disorders

High rates of substance abuse

Interoception struggles

{ Between 40-65% of Autistic people also have alexithymia }



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# Alexithymia and ADHD

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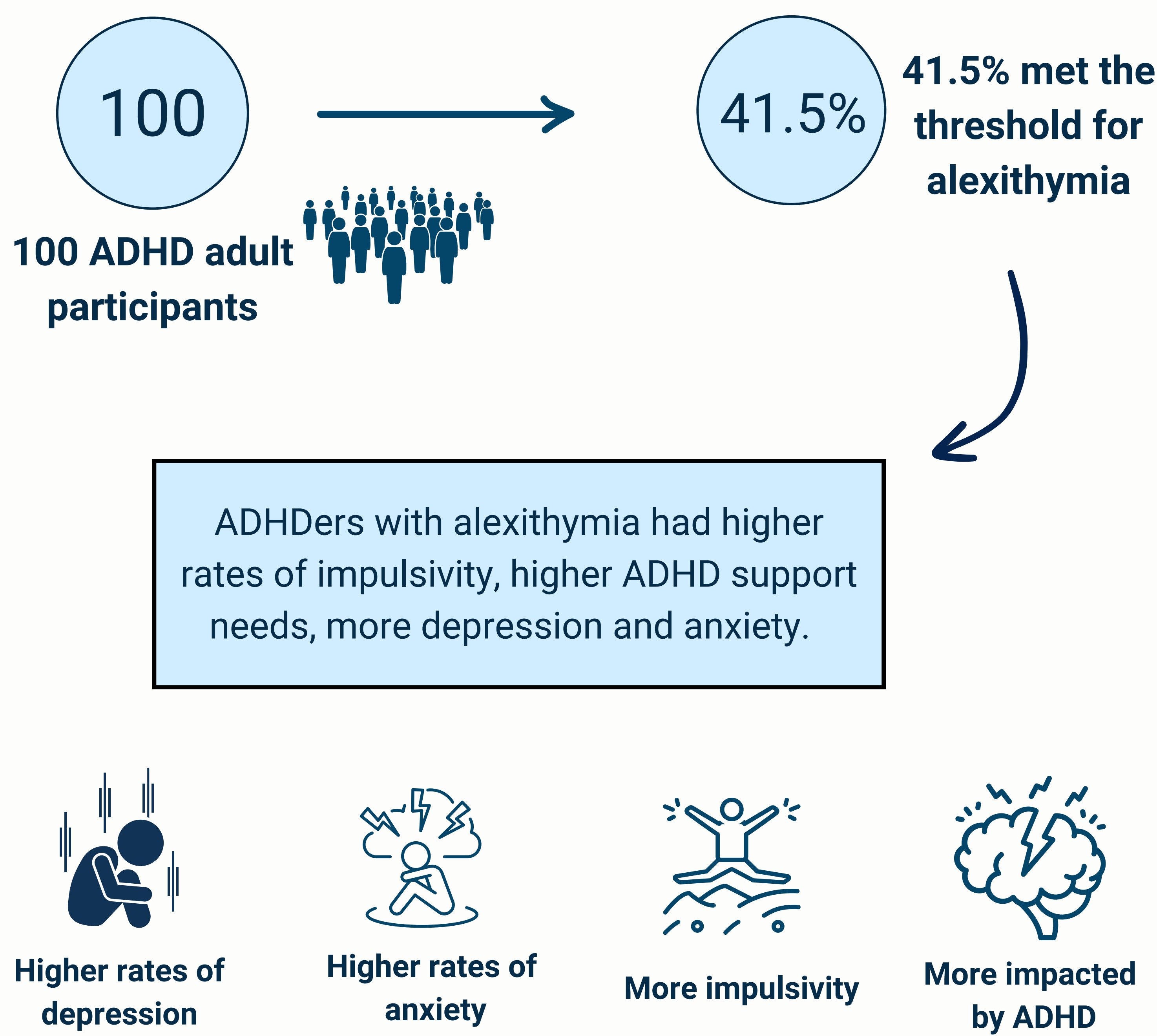
Alexithymia is more commonly found in people with ADHD than in the general population. Although there is no agreement on the exact prevalence rates, studies suggest that it could be anywhere between 20% to 40%.

Alexithymia can cause increased difficulty with ADHD traits, emotional processing, and social anxiety. The next pages provide an overview of studies that explore the relationship between ADHD and alexithymia.



# Alexithymia and ADHD

A study including 100 ADHDers found 41.5% had alexithymia. They found a link between alexithymia and ADHD impulsiveness, "severity of ADHD symptoms," depression, & anxiety (Kiraz et al., 2021).\*



\*From a neurodivergent affirming lens, I don't like the phrase "severity of ADHD symptoms," but it captures something important here. It means that ADHDers with alexithymia were more negatively impacted by their ADHD traits and required more significant support than ADHDers without alexithymia.

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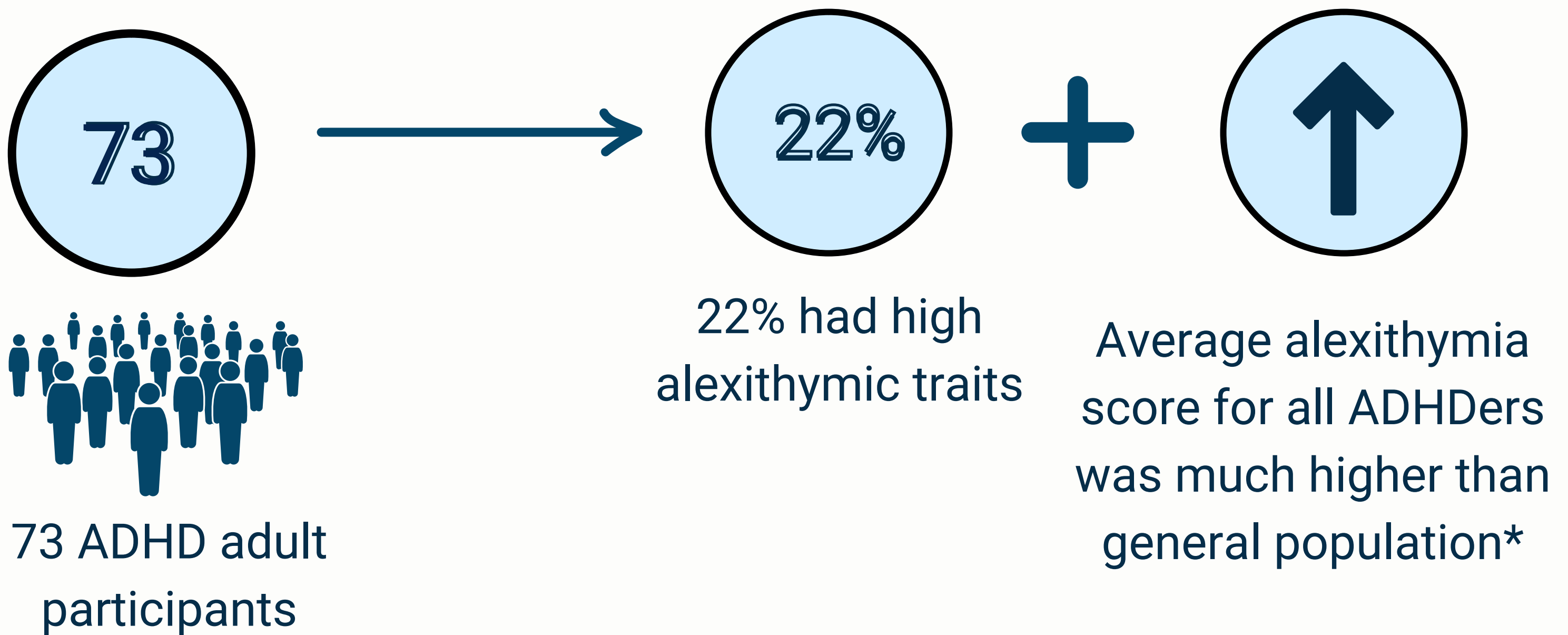
# Alexithymia and ADHD

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A second study ([Edel et al., 2010](#)) examined the relationship between ADHD, alexithymia, social anxiety, and emotional processing. They found that 22% of ADHDers had alexithymia. They also found that even among those who didn't meet clinical levels of alexithymia, the average alexithymia score was much higher than in the general population.

They found a connection between ADHDers with alexithymia and social anxiety and emotional processing difficulties, meaning ADHDers with alexithymia had elevated rates of social anxiety and more difficulty processing emotions. Difficulty processing emotions was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions.

# Alexithymia and ADHD



ADHDers with alexithymia had higher rates of social anxiety, and more difficulties processing and regulating emotions.

\*Note: This means that even ADHDers who didn't reach threshold for high alexithymia still have higher alexithymia traits than the general population

Source: Alexithymia, emotion processing and social anxiety in adults with ADHD ([Edel et al., 2010](#))



# Alexithymia vs. ADHD

## Alexithymia

## ADHD

Difficulty identifying emotions

Difficulty differentiating between feelings & bodily sensations

Difficulty describing emotions

Detached-avoidant attachment style

Externally oriented thinking

Reduced affective empathy

Difficulty registering emotions

Difficulty regulating attention and focus

Hyperactivity and impulsivity

Interest-based nervous system

Executive functioning disabilities

Craves novelty and new experiences

### Alexithymia + ADHD

Higher rate of social anxiety

Higher rate of emotional eating

Higher prevalence of relationship and sexual struggles

Increased rates of depression & anxiety

More difficulty regulating emotions

Increased rates of eating disorders

High rates of substance abuse

Interoception struggles

{ Between 20-40% of ADHDers also have alexithymia }





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## Summary

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So to summarize.....

- ✦ Autistic and ADHD people are more likely to experience alexithymia than non-Autistic and non-ADHD people.
- ✦ Many stereotypical assumptions about autism are better explained by alexithymia, which is one reason for the large variance in how autism presents itself.
- ✦ ADHDers with alexithymia tend to have more impulsive traits and have higher support needs around their ADHD traits.
- ✦ Autistic and ADHD people with alexithymia are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and social anxiety.

Supporting alexithymia (increasing emotional awareness) is integral to supporting many Autistic and ADHD people!

# Resource Page

*For More Learning*

## Articles

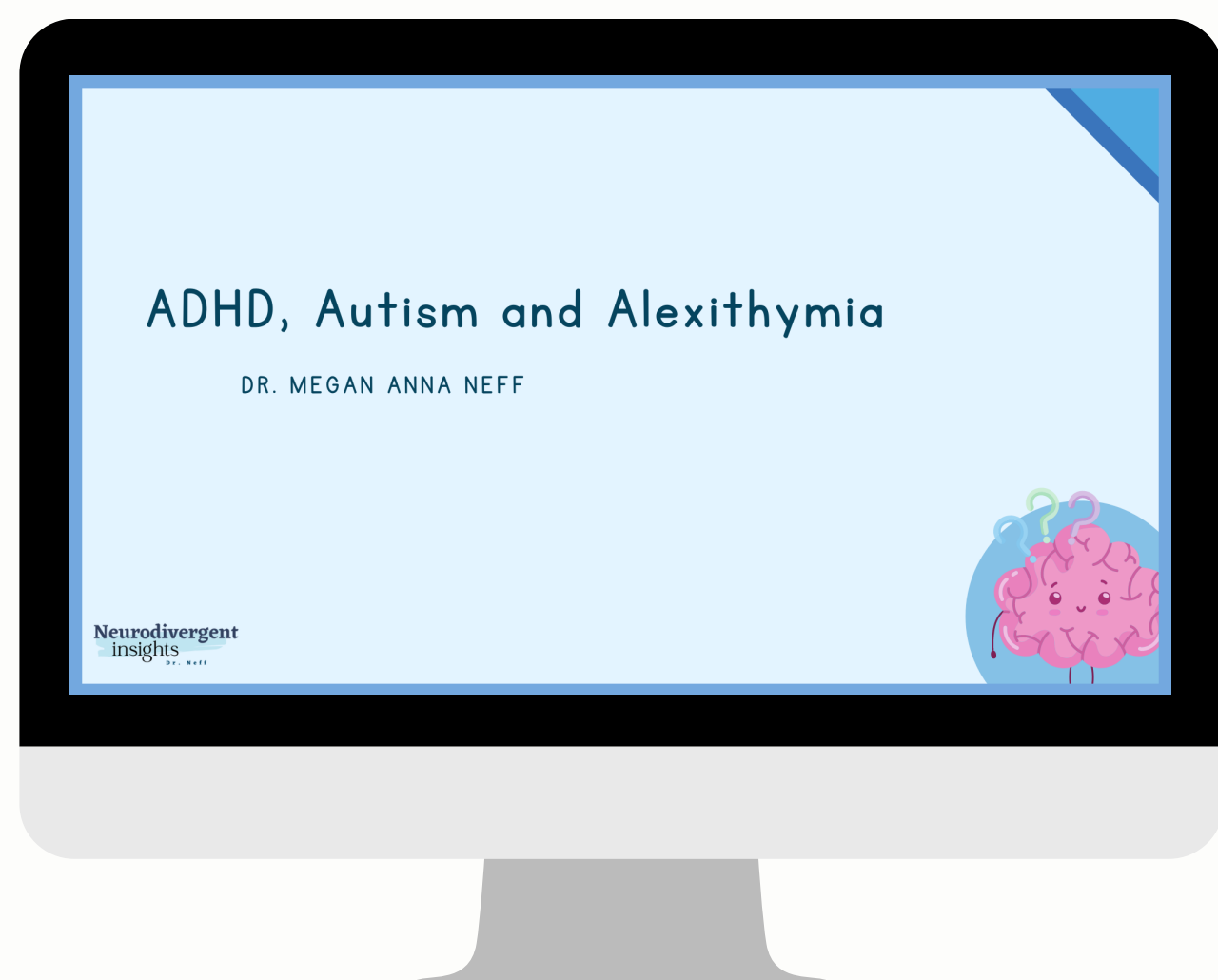
- [Alexithymia and ADHD: the Most Common Overlappings](#), Neurodivergent Insights
- [Autism and Alexithymia: Similarities, Differences, and Overlap](#), Neurodivergent Insights

## Podcasts

- [Interoception and alexithymia](#) (Neurodivergent Women Podcast)

## Webinar and Training

[Explore the Autism-ADHD and Alexithymia Connection](#), [Therasmart](#) (Dr. Neff). 3-hour training



# 3

SECTION

## IMPACT OF ALEXITHYMIA

# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Emotional Impact of Alexithymia*

Alexithymia can have significant impacts on various areas of our lives. In this section, we will review four key areas that are often affected:

1. **Emotional regulation** and the ability to identify and understand emotions.
2. **Interpersonal relationships** and attachments, including the formation and maintenance of close relationships.
3. **Somatic experiences**, which can become more intense or amplified due to difficulty processing emotions.
4. **Mental health**, with increased risks of developing conditions such as anxiety, depression, and somatic symptom disorder.





# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Emotional Chaos*

People without alexithymia can perceive their internal cues, identifying sensations and feelings individually (like single gummy bears). With alexithymia, the internal cues are less differentiated and distinct. As such, they become muddled in an undifferentiated, ambiguous mass (much like gummy bears that have melted together).

Because the sensation is ambiguous, that can create a sense of uncertainty. Uncertainty activates the amygdala (the brain's fear center) and triggers anxiety. This creates an inner landscape that often feels emotionally chaotic and confusing. Muddled emotions are more likely to be experienced as chaotic and interpreted through a fear based-lens. Once this happens, neutral and even positive emotions (like excitement) can register as fear-based emotions (like anxiety).

Melted  
gummy  
bears

Well differentiated  
gummy bears



\*The gummy bear metaphor originates from Matt Lowry's work on autism and interoception in a post he published on a facebook (Autistic Connections: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/AutisticConnections>, you can read more of his work here: <https://www.mattlowrylpp.com/blog>

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# Impact of Alexithymia

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## *Emotional Spikes*

Difficulty perceiving our emotional experiences can lead to emotional spikes.

Someone with strong interoceptive awareness can track their stress, anxiety, or anger as it slowly increases. People with alexithymia often vacillate between feeling nothing and feeling too much! Emotions often don't register until they are intense, which can result in feeling nothing or too much! At this point it becomes much more difficult to regulate the emotion which can lead to big emotional swings.



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# Impact of Alexithymia

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## *Emotional Spikes*

Trani et al., 2018 found elevated rates of alexithymia among people with hypertension. They also found that people with hypertension had wide fluctuations of emotional awareness (meaning they would fluctuate from no awareness of feeling to extreme emotions.)

This leaves the person vulnerable to go from 0 to 100 in their emotional experience (no emotions and then a sense of being overwhelmed by urgent, chaotic, and dysregulated emotions).

These wide fluctuations are emotionally and physically stressful for the person which increases emotional vulnerabilities (and physical vulnerabilities)!

# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Emotional Spikes*

“

In people low in alexithymia, emotional expression rises and falls more gradually, so that their inner awareness of their emotions and their ability to express those emotions are in sync. If they get angry, they are aware of their anger and express it accordingly. People high in alexithymia may be more likely to explode all of a sudden.

**SUSAN KRAUSS**  
**WHITBOURNE PH.D.**





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# Impact of Alexithymia

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## *Misinterpreting Emotional Cues*

With alexithymia, the person is still experiencing emotions in their body, but they struggle to know how to interpret these signals accurately. When we have more difficulty discerning and teasing out energetic and emotional responses in the body, we are more likely to respond in fear and uncertainty — leaving us more vulnerable to misinterpreting these emotions. And they are often skewed toward the negative; for example, the fast heartbeat of excitement may register as fear and panic.

This means ordinary things like delight, excitement, surprise, and arousal may activate fear and anxiety (which activates the amygdala and fight-or-flight response), which then perpetuates the fear cycle.

# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Maladaptive Emotional Coping Strategies*

Alexithymia is associated with more negative coping strategies, including emotional eating, self-harm, substance use, and avoidance strategies.



Emotional Eating



Substance Abuse\*



Self-Harm



Escape/Avoidance Strategies

\*[Shank et al., 2019](#)

\*\*Approximately 45% to 67% of people with alcohol use disorder reported high alexithymia scores ([Saladin et al., 2012](#))

\*\*\*Particularly high among women with alexithymia ([Normal et al., 2020](#))

\*\*\*Escape avoidance strategies include non-active ways of dealing with emotional stressors that seek to avoid thinking about the stressors rather than addressing them. These behaviors lead to increased stress and a sense of powerlessness ([Tominaga et al., 2013](#))

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# Impact of Alexithymia

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## *Emotional Advisors*

Emotions can serve as our advisors, providing valuable information about how we are doing, how we are experiencing our environment, and what our needs are from moment to moment. When we are in tune with our emotions, we can use this information to guide us toward activities and behaviors that support our well-being.

However, many of us, especially those with alexithymia, struggle to perceive emotions at low levels. This can make it difficult to access our advisors and the information they provide, which in turn can make it harder to regulate our emotions and take care of our needs.

We're in a much more difficult position when we don't register emotions until the emotions are strong, at which point our limbic system (emotional brain) has taken over. At this point, we have fewer options and resources, making it harder to self-soothe and regulate emotions.

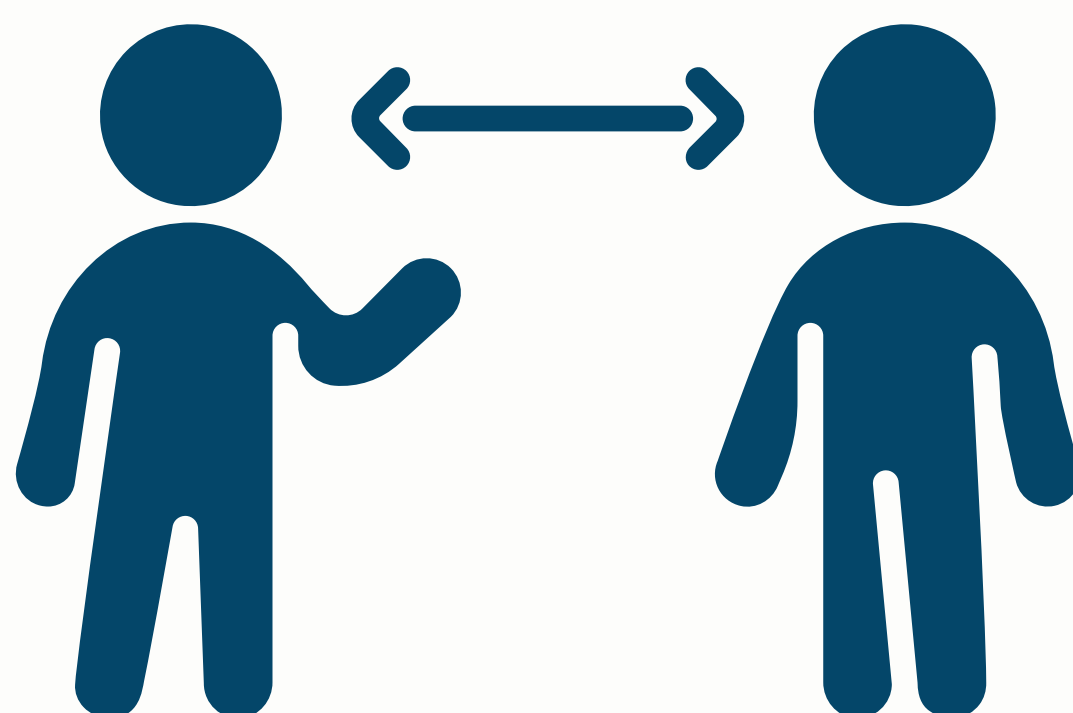
# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Social Impact*

Alexithymia can also impact relationships and our attachments with others.

Alexithymia is often associated with a more avoidant-detached attachment style. This means we are more likely to self-soothe through being alone. During conflict, we tend to pull away to regulate ourselves. We are also more prone to experience closeness and intimacy and intrusive.

Complicating matters, it is not uncommon for avoidantly attached people to partner with anxious-preoccupied partners! Anxiously attached people self-soothe by drawing close to the other (which can feel intrusive for the avoidant person).





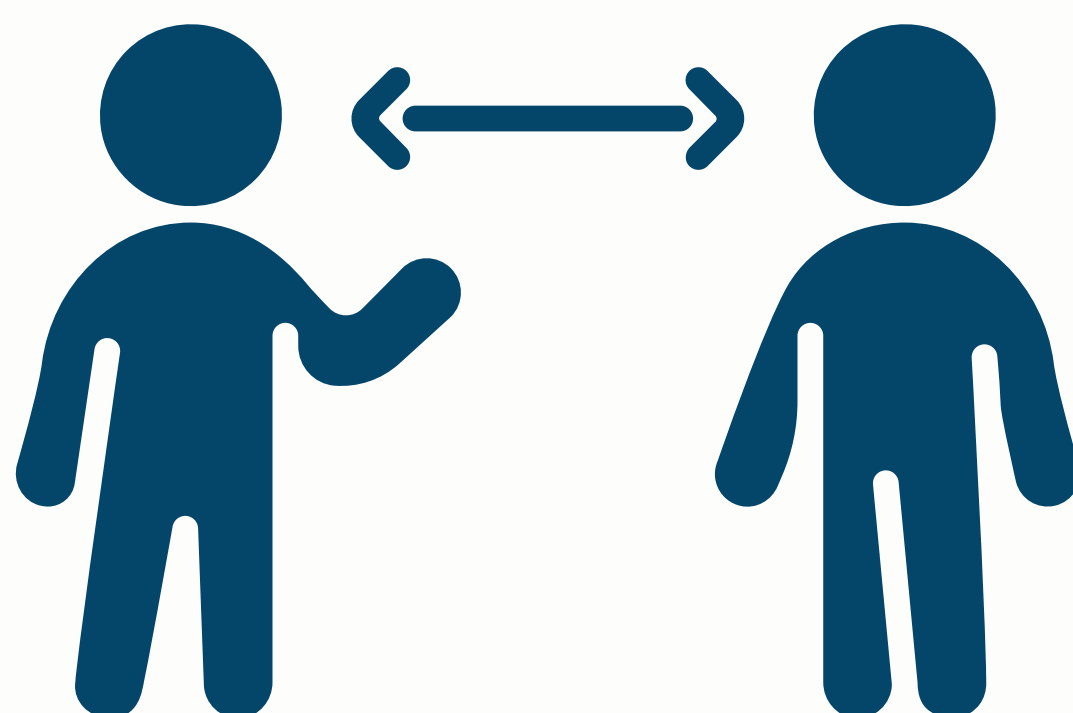
# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Social Impact*

The avoidant-anxious attachment dynamic often results in relationship struggles, as one partner will always want more emotional closeness and connection than the other. During arguments and fights one person will retreat while the other moves close, this can cause further tension in the relationship.

This dynamic is so common it has been given a name-- the pursuer-distancer dynamic, which you can read more about [here](#).

When this happens, the anxiously attached person will always want more access to the avoidant person's internal world than they can provide. This can lead to discontentment and confusion for both partners.



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# Impact of Alexithymia

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## *Social Impact*

Outside of attachment style and partnerships, there are several other ways that alexithymia can impact relationships. Alexithymia makes it more difficult to:

- 1) respond to the emotions of others
- 2) articulate and communicate our emotions and needs

These struggles can make it more difficult to form relationships, navigate differences, and articulate our needs and desires in relationships.

Alexithymia often correlates with a more detached attachment style. People with alexithymia often get feedback such as *"it is hard to get to know you"* or *"I feel like I don't know you"* from the people we're in relationship with.

Difficulties with understanding other people's emotions can also lead to relationship challenges as we may misunderstand social situations or respond to people in ways they experience as insensitive.

# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Alexithymia and Somatic & Chronic Pain*

Alexithymia is associated with somatic complaints such as headaches, lower back pain, irritable bowel syndrome, and fibromyalgia.



Backpain



Irritable Bowel Syndrome



Headaches



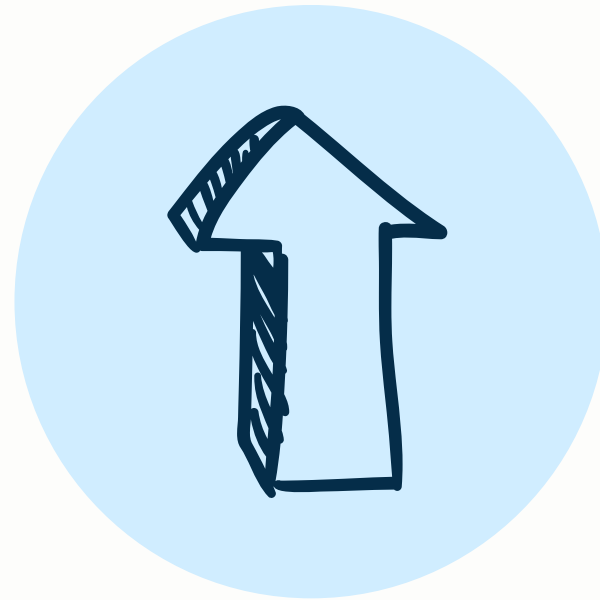
Fibromyalgia

You can read more about the link between somatic disorders, chronic pain, and alexithymia here ([Nakao and Takeuchi 2018](#); [Lanzara et al., 2020](#))

# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Alexithymia and Somatic & Chronic Pain*

There is a higher prevalence of alexithymia in people who experience chronic pain.



High percentage of people with chronic pain experience alexithymia

They also found that chronic-pain patients with alexithymia experienced more complications and suffering associated with their pain. They reported: higher levels of pain, more disability, and more mood symptoms.



Chronic pain patients with alexithymia report higher levels of pain intensity.



Report more interference with physical mobility (more disability)



Increased levels of depression and anxiety

You can read more about the relationship between chronic pain and alexithymia here ([Aaron et al., 2020](#))



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# Impact of Alexithymia

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## *Alexithymia and Somatic & Chronic Pain*

While there is still much research to be done to understand the connection between alexithymia and chronic pain, following are some of the possible factors:

- Alexithymia makes coping with stress and regulating negative emotions more challenging. Stress more easily accumulates in the body, contributing to health conditions and chronic pain.
- People who have difficulty identifying their feelings tend to have more negative feelings. Because the brain is not registering and processing these feelings, it is more heavily felt in the body. This may also contribute to the development of more body-based and pain-based experiences.
- The body may be "turning up the volume" on its distress signals (since we have a more challenging time tuning into quieter interoceptive signals, the body sometimes compensates by creating louder signals that force us to slow down and rest).

You can read more about the link between somatic disorders, chronic pain and alexithymia here ([Nakao and Takeuchi 2018](#), [Lanzara et al., 2020](#))

# Impact of Alexithymia

## *Alexithymia and Mental health*

Alexithymia is also associated with several mental health conditions and appears to predispose us to develop mental health conditions. It is correlated with a higher rate of depression, eating disorders, PTSD, substance abuse, non-suicidal self-injury, and more.



Anxiety



PTSD



Depression



Eating  
disorders



Self-harm



Substance  
abuse

# Resource Page

*For More Learning*

## Academic Articles

- [The Association Between Alexithymia and Eating Behavior in Children and Adolescents](#), Shank Et al., 2019.
- [Alexithymia and Somatosensory Amplification Link Perceived Psychosocial Stress and Somatic Symptoms in Outpatients with Psychosomatic Illness](#), Nakao and Takeuchi, 2018.
- [Alexithymia and Somatization in Chronic Pain Patients: A Sequential Mediation Model](#), Lanzara et al, 2020
- [Unable to Describe My Feelings and Emotions Without an Addiction: The Interdependency Between Alexithymia and Addictions](#), Orsolini, 2020
- [The relationship between self-harm and alexithymia: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#), Norman et al., 2020
- [Relationship between alexithymia and coping strategies in patients with somatoform disorder](#), Tominaga et al., 2013
- [The Most Important Personality Trait You've Never Heard Of](#), Susan Krauss Whitbourne, August 2018.

# 4

SECTION

## HOW TO WORK WITH ALEXITHYMIA

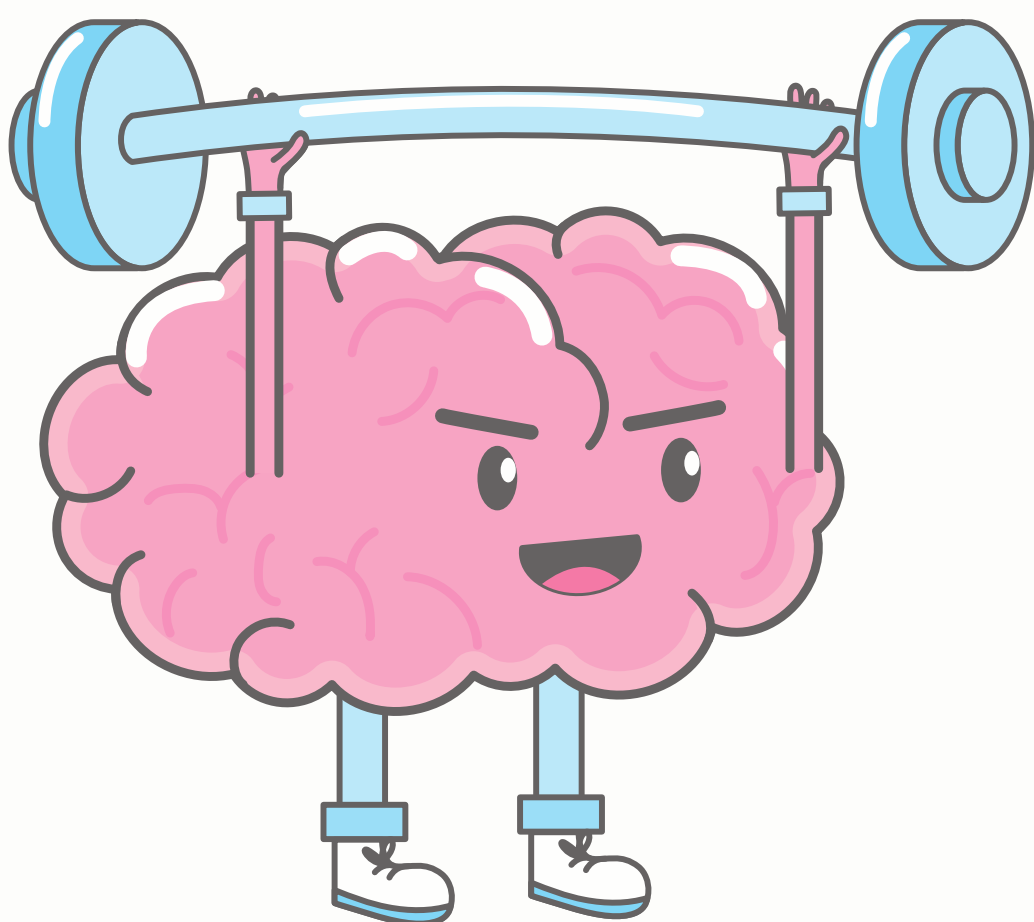


# Working With Alexithymia

## *Practices to Increase Emotional Awareness*

In this section, we'll explore various practices that can help improve body awareness and emotional recognition. The strategies are grouped into six categories, and options are available within each category. However, it's important to note that you don't need to try all of them at once. I recommend starting with the strategies that resonate with you and focusing on one at a time.

It's best to start slowly and gradually incorporate new practices into your routine. As you become more comfortable with each practice, you can add new ones to your routine.



Consider these exercises like a workout. The more you practice these, the stronger your "emotion muscle" will become.

# Activities to Increase Emotion Awareness

## YOGA AND BODY-BASED PRACTICES

Somatic practices, such as yoga, helps increase emotional awareness through increasing interoception and increasing the mind-body connection.

## INCREASING EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Increasing emotional literacy through alternative and creative formats can help increase emotional awareness and emotional intelligence.

## MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness increases emotional awareness by increasing present awareness of current sensations and experiences.

## BODY SCANS

Mindful body scans increase awareness of physical sensations, increasing interoception awareness (and thus the ability to identify emotions).

## EMOTIONAL LABELING

Increasing the ability identify and label core emotions helps to increase emotional awareness and body awareness.

## GAUGE EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

Gauging the intensity of the sensation and emotion helps by increasing awareness of emotions earlier in the emotion process.

# Yoga and Body-Based Practices

Yoga helps to increase the mind-body connection. Yoga can increase interoception (the mind-body connection), simultaneously reducing alexithymia.

## Why It Works

Yoga requires the person to bring awareness and focus to one body area or one position at a time. Different yoga positions create different sensations (stretching, relaxation, and tension). Bringing focused attention to these different sensations increases body awareness, a building block for emotional identification.

Other body-based techniques like breathwork or progressive muscle relaxation can also help increase body awareness. This exercise also encourages the person to focus and observe subtle shifts in the body, increasing body awareness and recognition of subtle energetic (emotional) shifts in the body.



# Resources

For body-based work it is often helpful to follow a guided recording while you get comfortable with the exercises.

Following are several resources that you can use independently.

## Yoga

From YouTube subscriptions to in person classes there are now several ways of accessing yoga.

For children consider CosmicKids Yoga which can be a fun and playful way of introducing yoga to younger children.

## Guided Meditation

UCLA has several guided meditations to foster mindful awareness:

- Breathing Meditation (5 min)
- Breath, Sound, Body Meditation (12 min)
- Meditation for Working with Difficulties (7 min)
- Body and Sound Meditation (3 min)
- Body Scan for Sleep (12 min)

Dartmouth also has several free guided meditations:

- Deep Breathing & Guided Relaxation Exercises (3 min)
- Guided Imagery/Visualization Exercises (5 min)
- Mindfulness & Meditation Exercises (3 min)

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

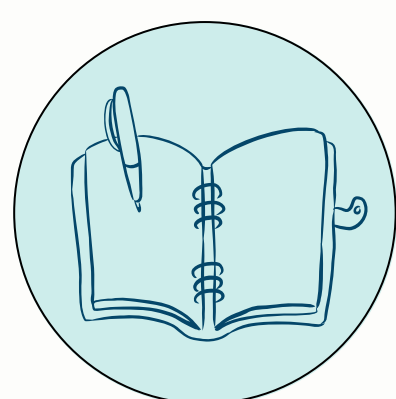
Dartmouth's Progressive Muscle Relaxation recording provided a guided recording.



# Increasing Emotional Literacy

Developing emotional literacy is crucial for effectively understanding and managing our emotions. This includes expanding our vocabulary to describe emotions and accurately identifying and labeling feelings in ourselves and others. However, for many Autistic-ADHD individuals, accessing and identifying emotions can be a challenge. Alternative methods, such as creative expression through writing or music, can provide a means of tapping into our emotional experiences.

While traditional cultural scripts around emotional intelligence often emphasize using emotion words to describe emotions, there are many alternative and rich ways of connecting with our internal world. The following are a few examples of alternative ways to develop emotional literacy and access our emotions.



# Increasing Emotional Literacy

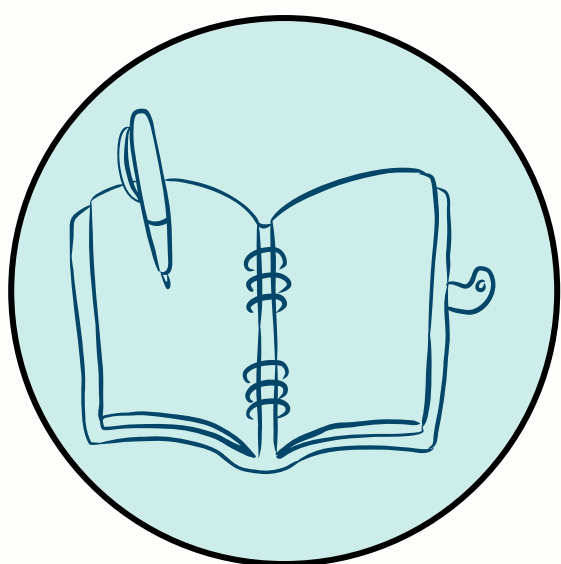
The following are a few alternative ways of getting in touch with your emotions and exploring your internal landscape:



Reading novels can be a powerful way of increasing emotional literacy. As the character's complex emotions are narrated and described in detail, this can help expand our emotional vocabulary and literacy.



Find a song that captures your mood. Listen to it and notice the sensations and experiences that come up for you.



Many people with alexithymia do better identifying their emotions through writing. Try journaling to gain more insight into your emotional experiences. *[Note: this is particularly helpful for those higher in externally oriented thinking.]*

# Increasing Emotional Literacy

The following are a few alternative ways of getting in touch with your emotions and exploring your internal landscape:



Photos can be a powerful way of accessing/describing emotions. If you have a whisper of an emotion, do a google image search of that word. For example, "sadness" or "joy." Choose an image that captures your current state.



Bonus, if you are in therapy and struggle with answering the "how are you" question, consider bringing in a song, journal entry, or photo to jump-start the conversation with your therapist.

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# Mindfulness

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Mindfulness is a big word that can sound intimidating. However, it doesn't have to be complex, and you don't have to sit quietly in meditation for 15 minutes to be mindful!

Mindfulness can happen in micro-moments, in a matter of 5 seconds, as you check in with yourself and gently observe and identify and narrate your experience.

*Mindfulness is more of an attitude than an activity — it is a way of being with yourself.* Mindfulness is characterized by bringing present awareness to your experience in a non-evaluative, non-judgmental way.

To learn more about mindfulness techniques, consider working with a mindfulness-based coach or therapist or using an app like Headspace that teaches mindfulness through videos and guided mindfulness exercises.



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# Body Scans

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Body scans are a powerful way to increase body and emotional awareness. There are several different kinds of body scans you can practice.

While the techniques can shift slightly, the attitude remains the same. When doing a body scan, it is important to do it mindfully, without judgment, and with openness.

You want to aim for descriptive words over evaluative ones when doing body scans.

**Examples of Descriptive Words:** squishy, tense, hot, buzzy, relaxed, sharp, heavy.

**Examples of Evaluative words:** bad, good, hurt

*A word of caution: Body scans can be an intense practice when recovering from PTSD or complex trauma. It can bring up intense sensations and associations related to your trauma and trigger a flashback. Therefore, it is best to consult your therapist before engaging in these practices. Further, before doing this exercise, you want to have a solid grasp of grounding strategies in case you need to re-orient yourself in the middle of this practice.*

# Sensations Body Scan

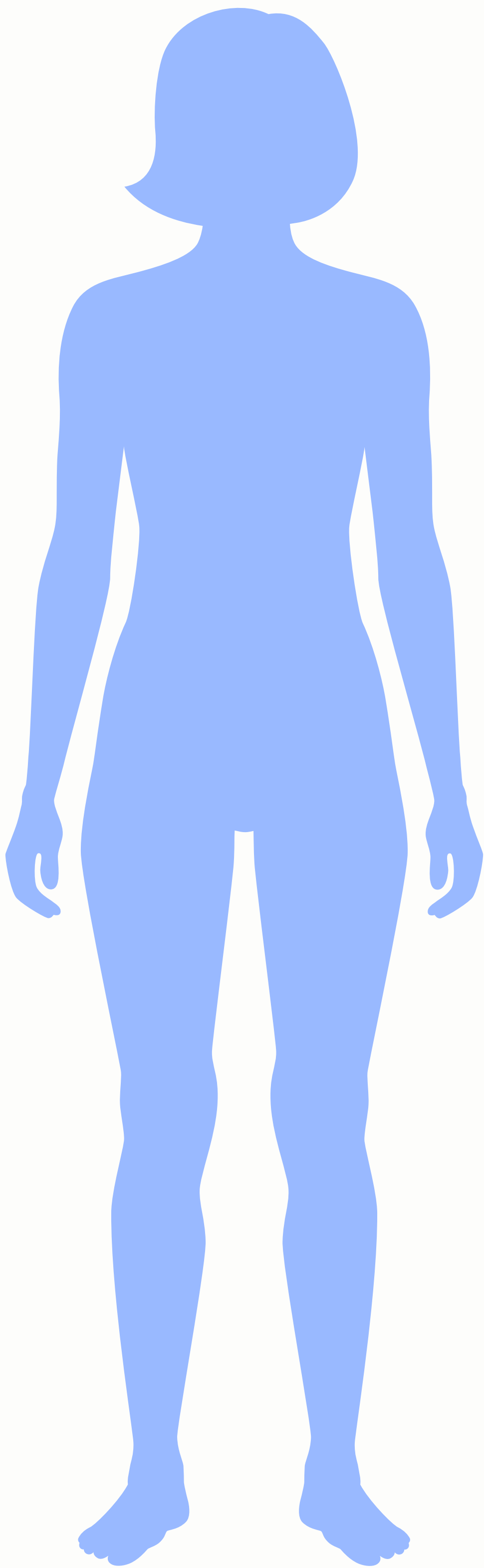
1. Take a few deep breaths and close your eyes
2. Become aware of your five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch/feel)
3. Beginning with your toes, slowly scan up to your head, noticing what sensations you experience in your body



4. Stretch, move, massage, shake, or breathe into the areas holding tension. Spend time noticing the difference in sensation after you create a sensation or release tension (noticing the subtle differences in sensation increases body awareness)

# Feelings Body Scan

As you experience an emotion (it's okay if it's faint!), try to locate where you feel that in your body. Use the chart and the questions below to understand the connection between emotions and physical sensations.



Identify the parts of the body experiencing a response:

Describe any sensations you observe in your body:

What label would you give this feeling?

# Emotional Identification

Spending time practicing emotional identification is one way of increasing body and emotion awareness. The following pages provide exercises that help you with emotional identification.

Exercises that help you:

- 1) expand your language for emotions
- 2) help you identify your emotion signals
- 3) help you understand the connection between body sensations and emotion

The following exercises are aimed at helping you to increase your body and emotion awareness.

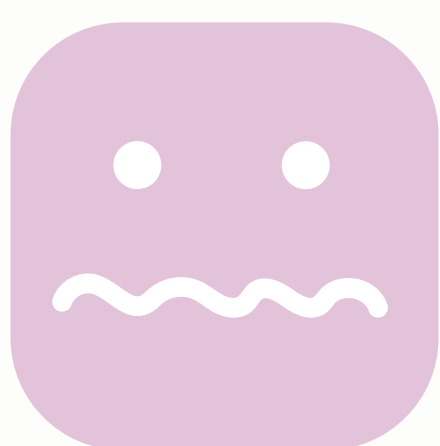
*Note, You likely will not resonate with all of these; just choose and practice the activities that most resonate.*



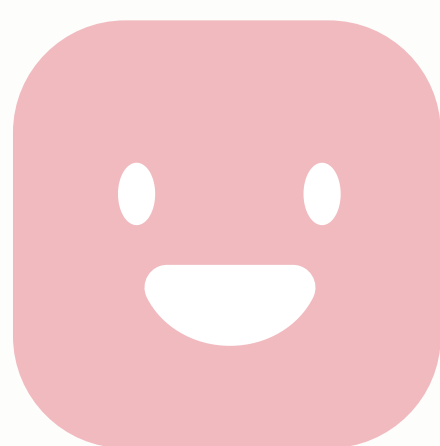
SAD



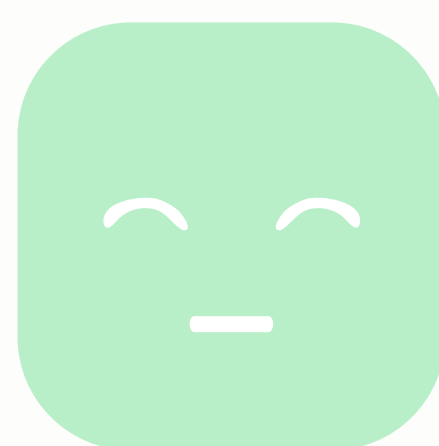
ANGRY



SCARED



HAPPY



CALM



STRONG



# Identifying Emotions

I have alexithymia; I am also an empath. I have difficulty identifying and describing my emotions while vicariously feeling other people's emotions with intensity. It's confusing!

Through years of training and practice, I have substantially grown in my ability to discern and distinguish emotions. We can get better at identifying emotions with practice.

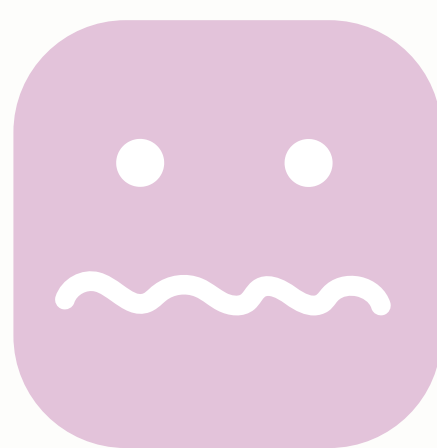
By recruiting our analytical and pattern-finding minds to the task, we can make significant strides in developing emotional awareness and understanding. It may take time and patience, but with consistent effort and a willingness to learn, we can make meaningful progress in our emotional journey.



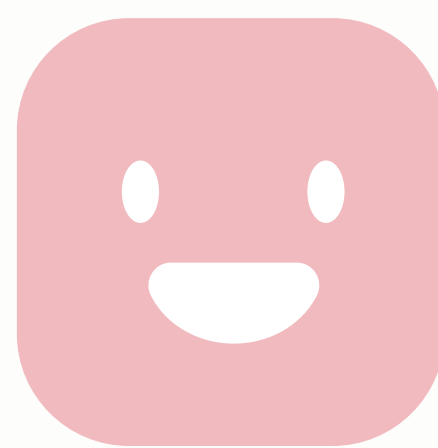
SAD



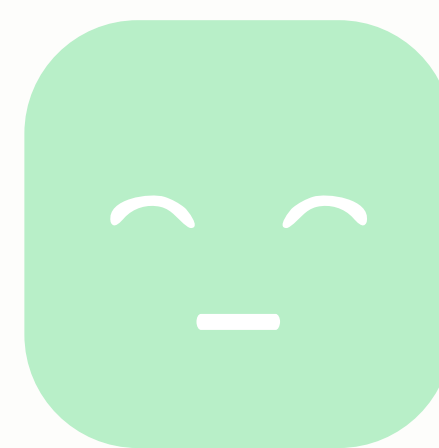
ANGRY



SCARED



HAPPY



CALM



STRONG

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# Emotional Identification

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## *Why It Works*

For those of us with alexithymia, emotion identification exercises can be a challenging and frustrating experience. We may feel incompetent or even consider these exercises childish.

For these reasons, I like to start with the why. Why do these exercises matter, and how do they help?

Alexithymia is closely linked to difficulty regulating emotions, particularly negative ones. This means that we often struggle more with painful and intense emotions. One of the main reasons for this struggle is our difficulty with identifying emotions. If we cannot recognize the emotion we are feeling, we cannot take steps to regulate it.

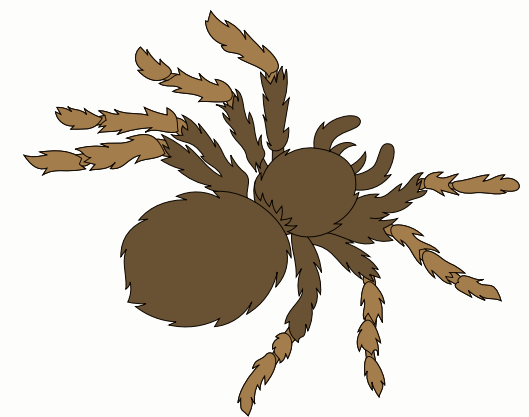
Recognizing and labeling our emotional state is often the first step in regulating and self-soothing.

Furthermore, research has shown that labeling our emotional state can help reduce negative emotions ([Aaron et al., 2019](#)). So, even though it may be challenging, practicing emotion identification exercises can significantly impact our emotional well-being.

# Emotional Identification

## *Why It Works*

Psychologists from the University of California conducted an experiment with 88 participants who had a fear of spiders. They were asked to approach and touch a live tarantula in an open container.



The participants were split into four groups.

- ◆ The first group was instructed to describe and label their emotions, such as saying, "I am feeling anxious."
- ◆ A second group was told to reframe their thoughts in a more positive light, such as "this spider can't hurt me" (a CBT technique).
- ◆ The third group was asked to say something irrelevant to the experience (a distraction technique).
- ◆ The fourth group did not say anything — they were simply exposed to the spider (a simple exposure technique).

The study found that simply acknowledging and labeling emotions had a positive impact. Note, there was no attempt to change their experience. They were simply stating their experience, and this group had the most significant results (reduced anxiety and were able to make the most progress in approaching the spider).

Simply naming our emotions helps us to regulate them!

# Emotional Identification

## *Why It Works*

As the spider study illustrates, the simple act of naming our emotions helps reduce anxiety and fear. Labeling our emotions activates the prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of our brain), which in turn helps to calm the amygdala and the limbic system, which are key components of the brain's emotion center.

This may be one of the reasons people with alexithymia experience more anxiety (because we have more difficulty identifying and labeling our emotions!). This creates uncertainty in the brain which causes the amygdala to go on high alert! This heightened state can contribute to increased feelings of anxiety.

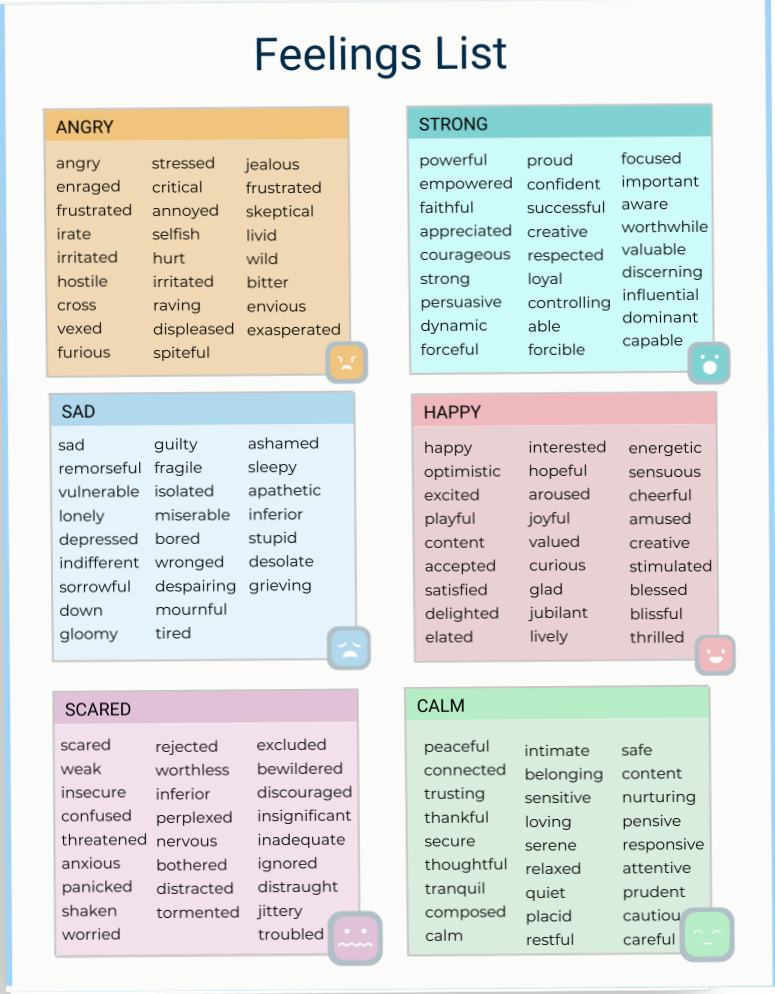
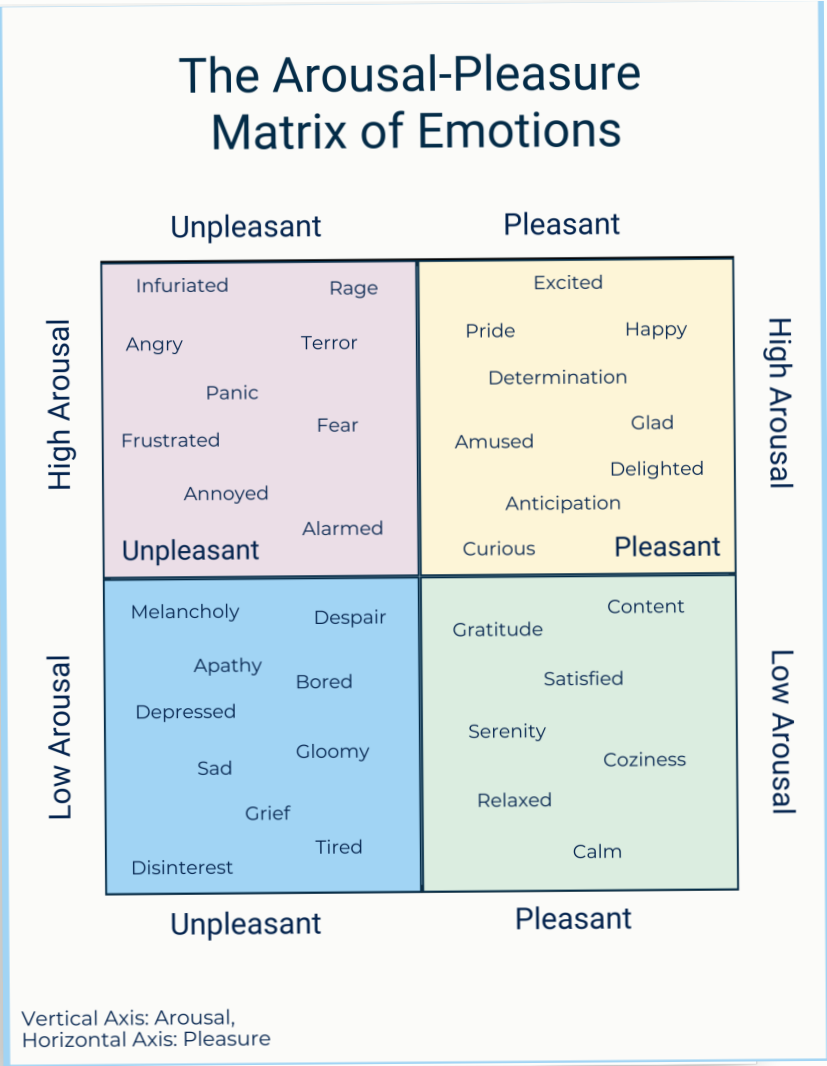
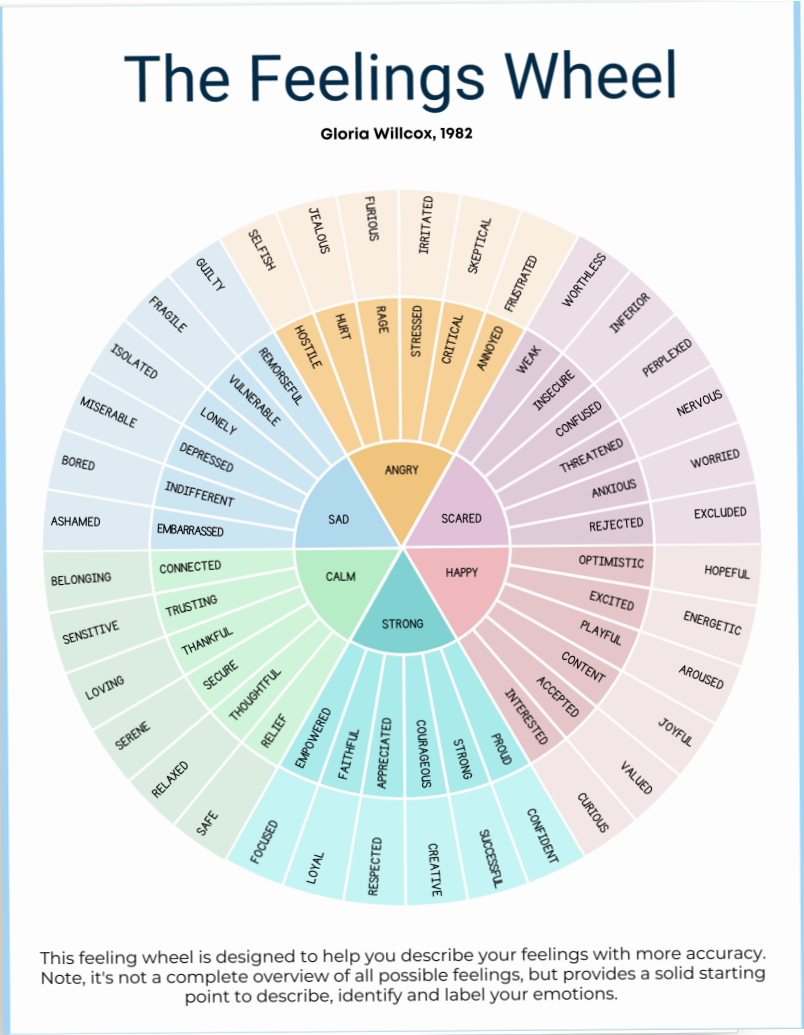


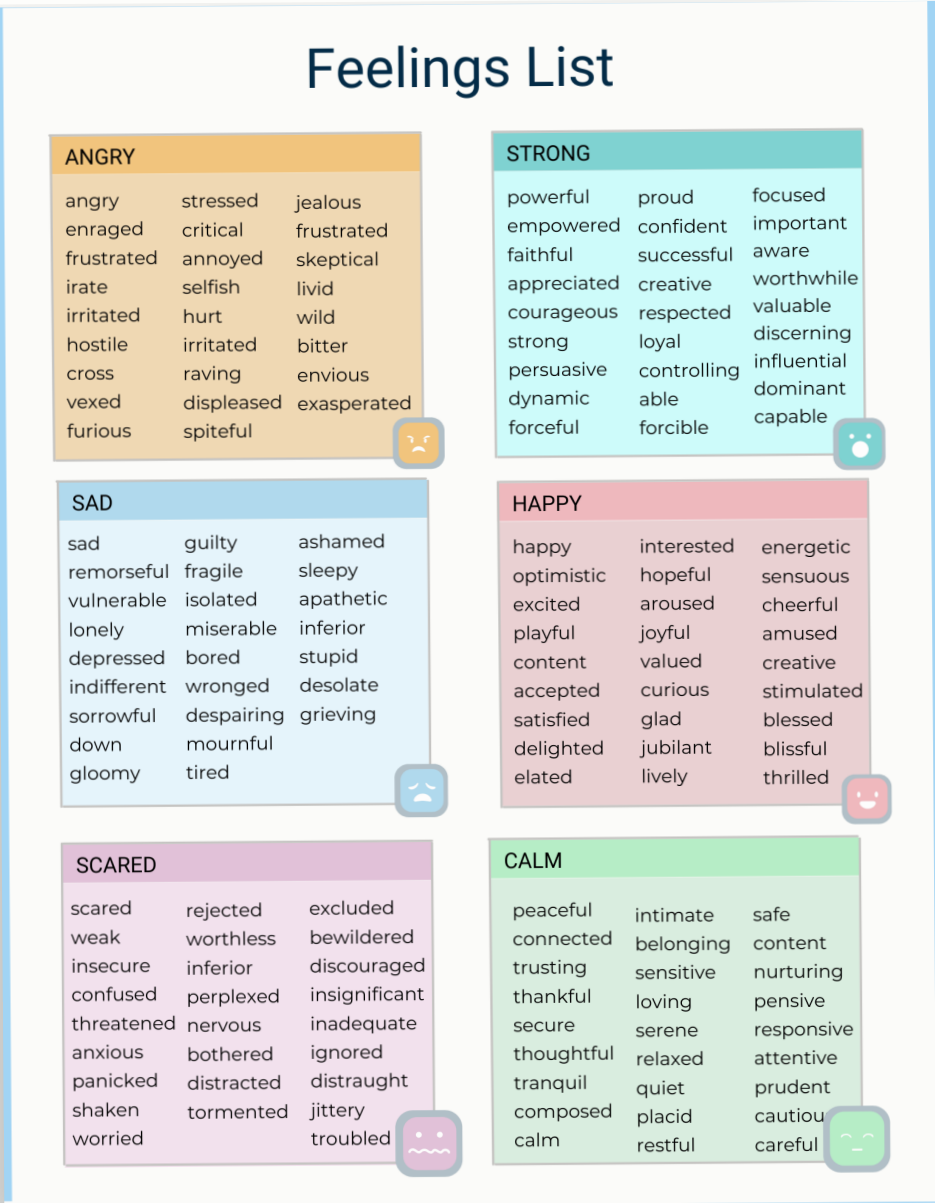
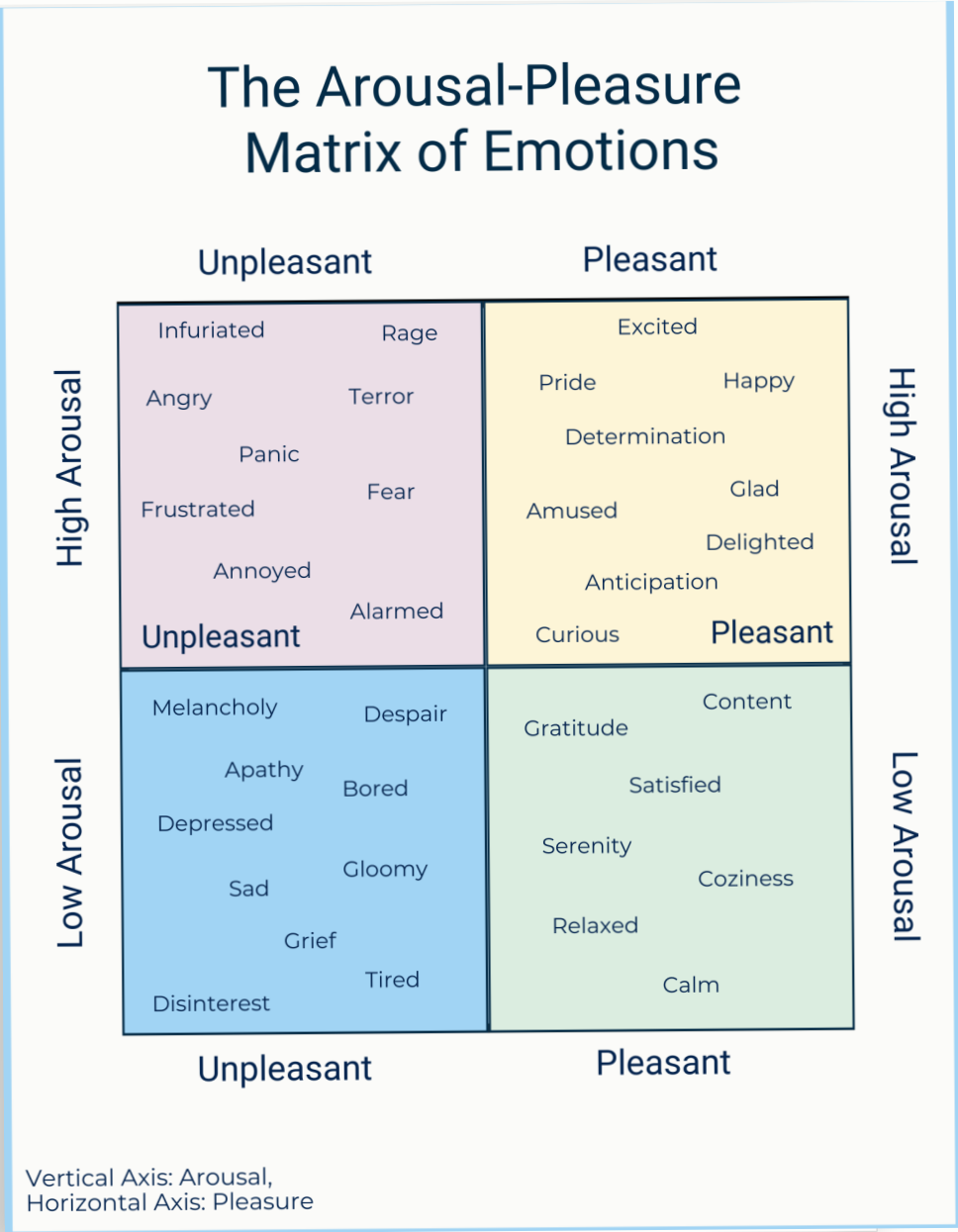


# Use Visual Aids and Supports

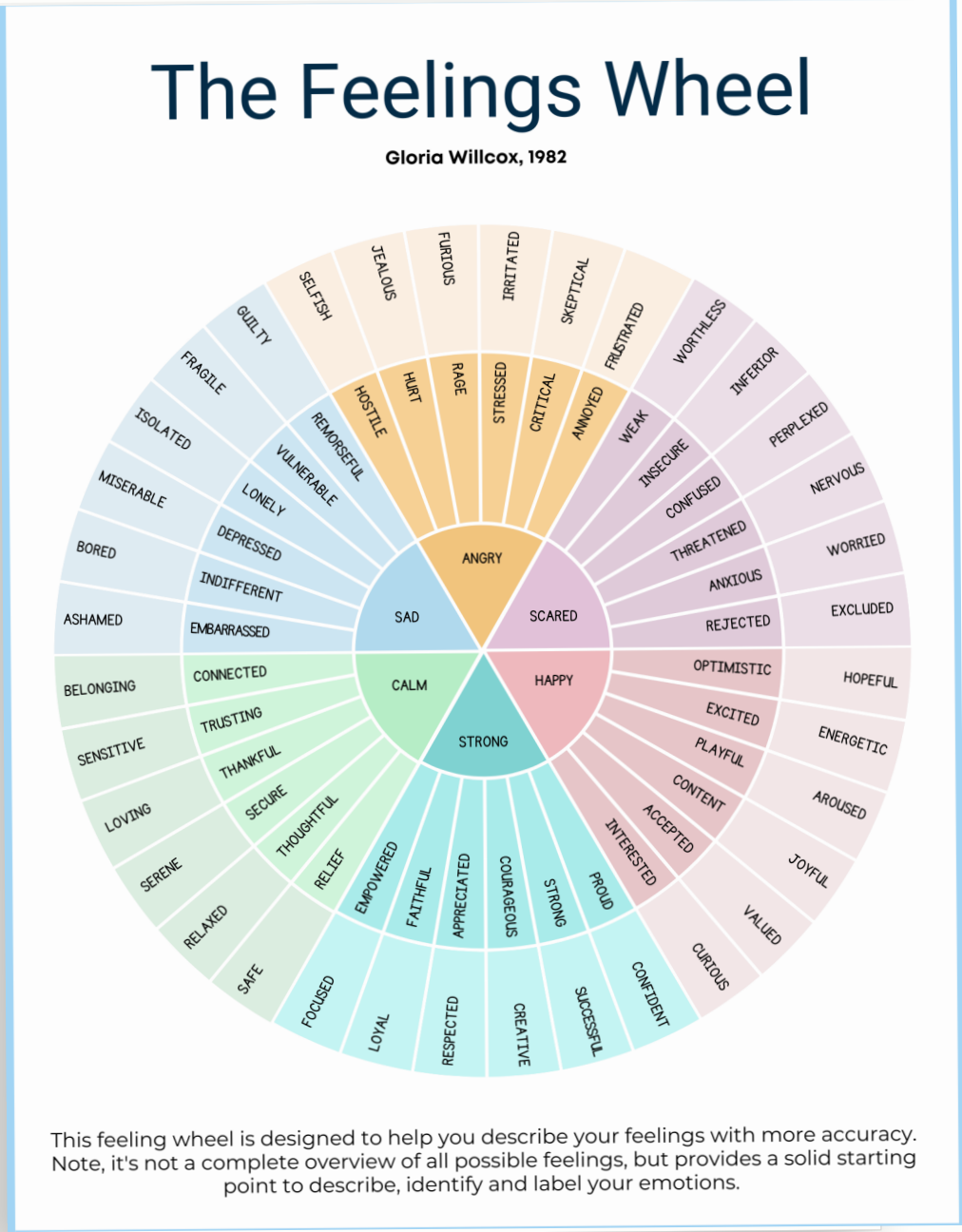
As discussed in the previous pages, affect labeling has been shown to be effective in managing anxiety and emotions. However, for people with alexithymia, identifying and labeling emotions is a challenge! This is where visual aids can be helpful.

Visual aids like feeling wheels, matrices, and charts provide a structured and organized way to help identify and label emotions, which in turn can improve emotional regulation. Examples of these visual aids are provided on the following pages.





# Exercises for Emotional Labeling and Identification





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# The Emotion Matrix

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The Emotion Matrix (or the technical term, the Arousal-Valence Matrix) is my favorite visual aid for individuals with alexithymia. It's a broad tool that incorporates body awareness, not just emotions. This makes it particularly helpful for increasing interoception awareness and developing a more holistic understanding of emotional experience, especially for beginners.

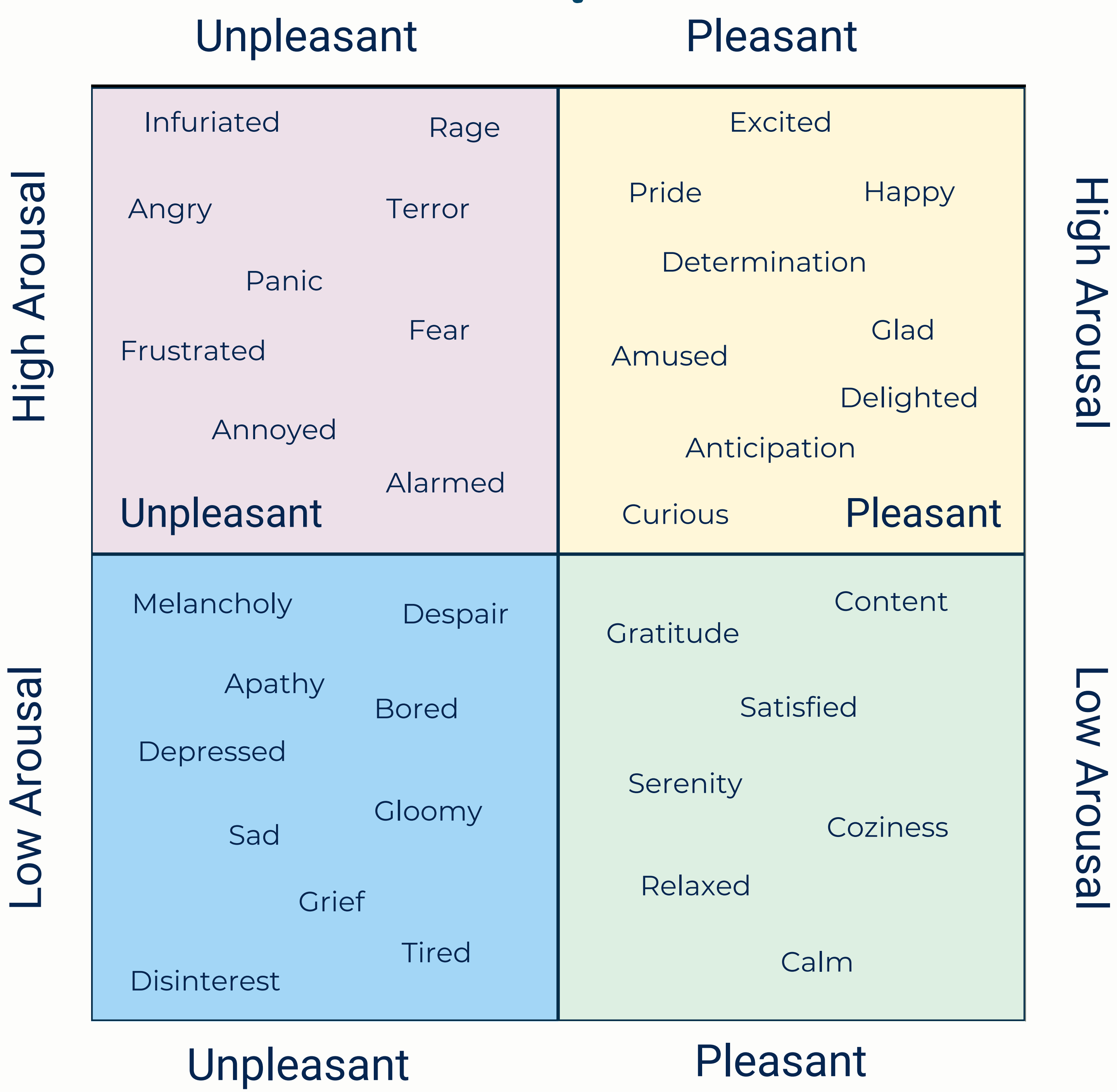
The Arousal-Valence Matrix plots emotions on a graph with arousal and valence axes. Arousal refers to the intensity of the emotion, or the level of energy associated with it. Energizing emotions like happiness, excitement, fear, and anger would be plotted high on the arousal axis. In contrast, low-energy emotions like calmness or sadness would be lower on the arousal axis.

Valence, on the other hand, refers to whether the emotion is positive or negative. Positive emotions like joy or love would be on the right side of the valence axis, while negative emotions like fear or sadness would be on the left side.

Overall, the Arousal-Valence Matrix is a useful tool for individuals with alexithymia. By incorporating interoception awareness and considering both the intensity and positivity/negativity of emotions, it offers a more comprehensive approach to emotion identification.

# The Arousal-Pleasure Matrix of Emotions

The matrix is divided into four quadrants based on the combination of arousal and valence. By identifying the specific quadrant in which an emotion falls, you can gain a clearer understanding of your broad emotional experience.



Vertical Axis: Arousal,  
Horizontal Axis: Pleasure



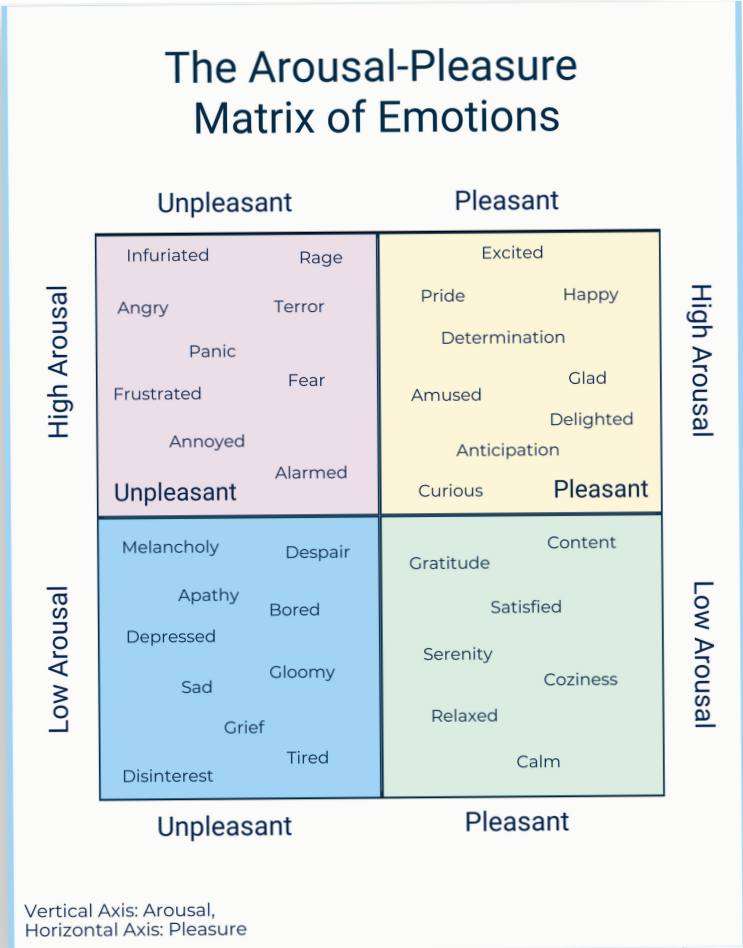
# How to Use the Emotion Matrix

To use the Arousal-Valence Matrix for emotion identification:

- 1. Identify your common emotional experiences and focus on the energy in your body (low or high energy).
- 2. Determine if the overall feel is pleasant or unpleasant, and then locate which quadrant you're in. If you can only identify the quadrant and not the specific emotion, that's okay. Place an "X" in the quadrant.
- 3. With consistent check-ins, you can build awareness of the general pattern of your moods over time.
- 4. Once you become more comfortable with the matrix, start working on identifying specific emotions within each quadrant.

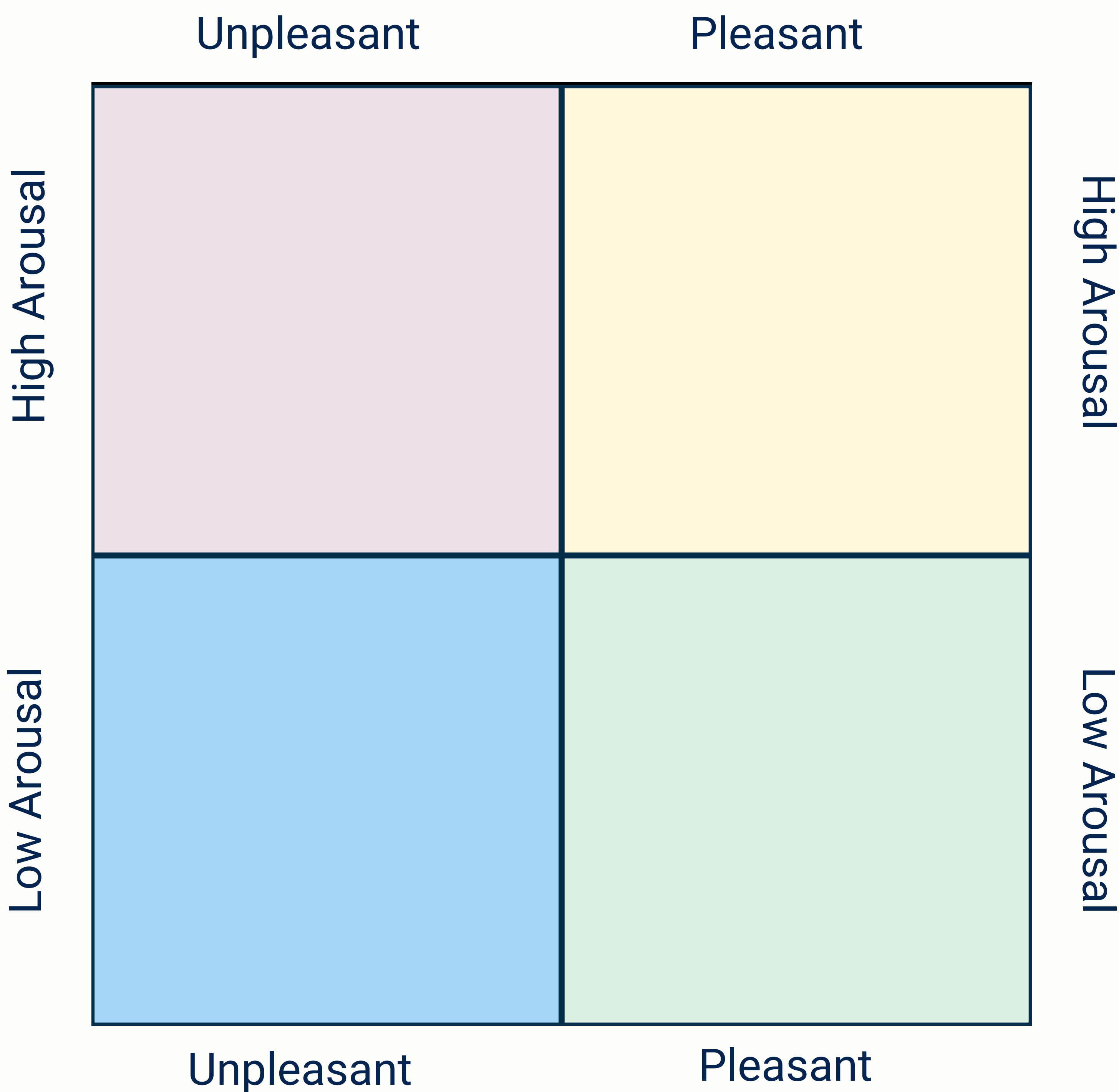
By following these steps, you can better understand your emotional experiences while simultaneously improving your interoception awareness.

The following page provides a fillable chart where you can map out your common emotional experiences using this arousal-pleasantness framework.



# The Arousal-Pleasure Matrix of Emotions

Fill out your own. Pay attention to which quadrant feels the easiest to fill out (this may give you an idea of where you spend the most time).



Vertical Axis: Arousal,  
Horizontal Axis: Pleasure



## Pulling at a Thread

The following visual exercises may be challenging for those with alexithymia, and it's understandable to feel frustrated at times. Remember to be patient and kind with yourself - learning to identify and understand emotions is a skill that takes time, effort, and persistence.

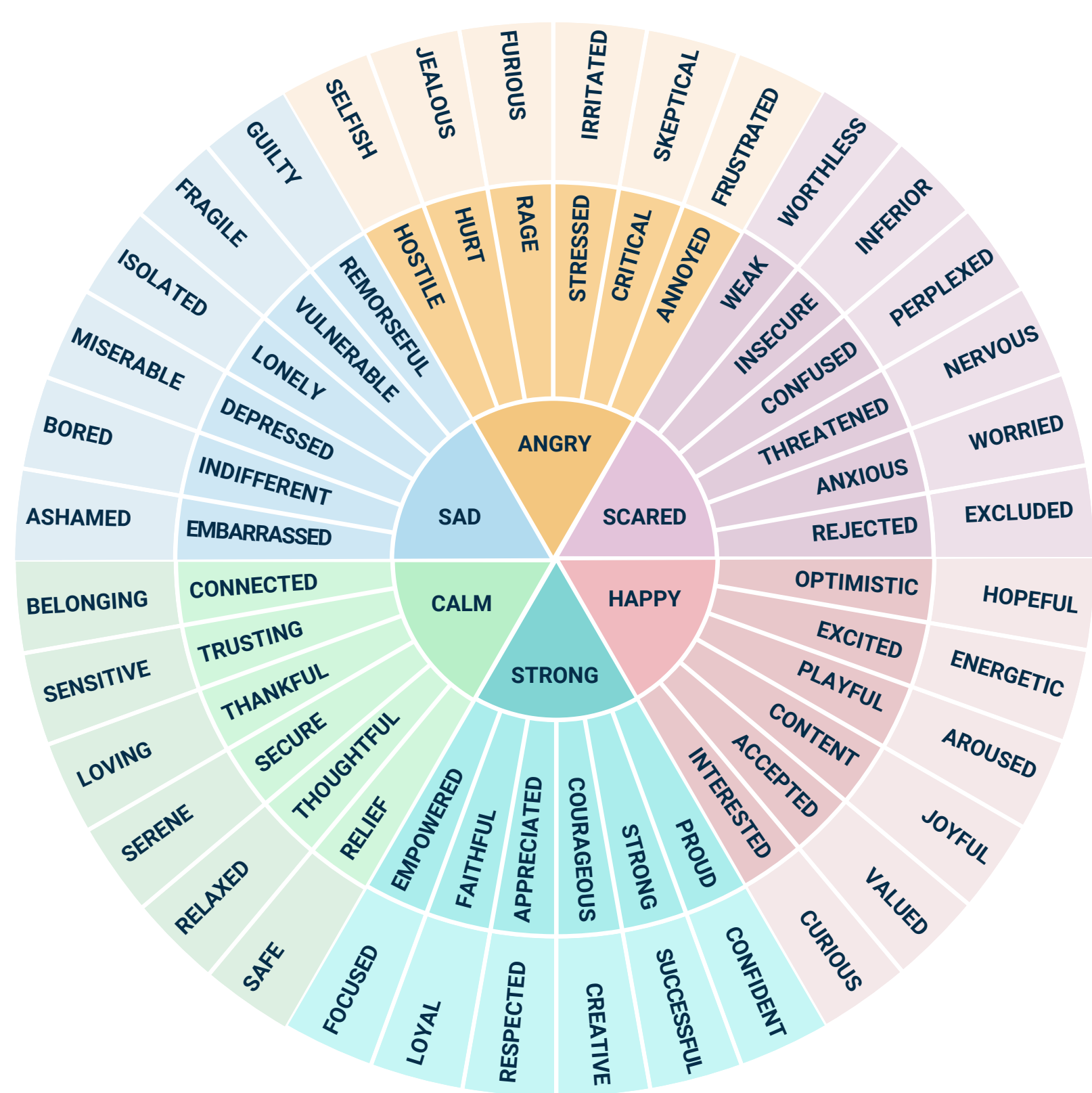
Emotional awareness is like a muscle; the more you practice it, the stronger the "emotional awareness muscle" becomes.

To make these exercises more effective, try to "pull a thread" of emotion. Start by noticing any faint whispers of emotion and try to grab onto them. Similar to how a sweater unravels as you pull on a thread, see if you can pull back more of the emotional experience. It may take time and practice to get better at identifying and understanding emotions, but the more you practice, the more comfortable and confident you'll become.

# The Feelings Wheel

The Feelings Wheel was created by Gloria Willcox and organizes 72 feelings into 6 key areas: sad, angry, scared, happy, strong, and calm. It can be useful in helping you identify the feelings you are experiencing.

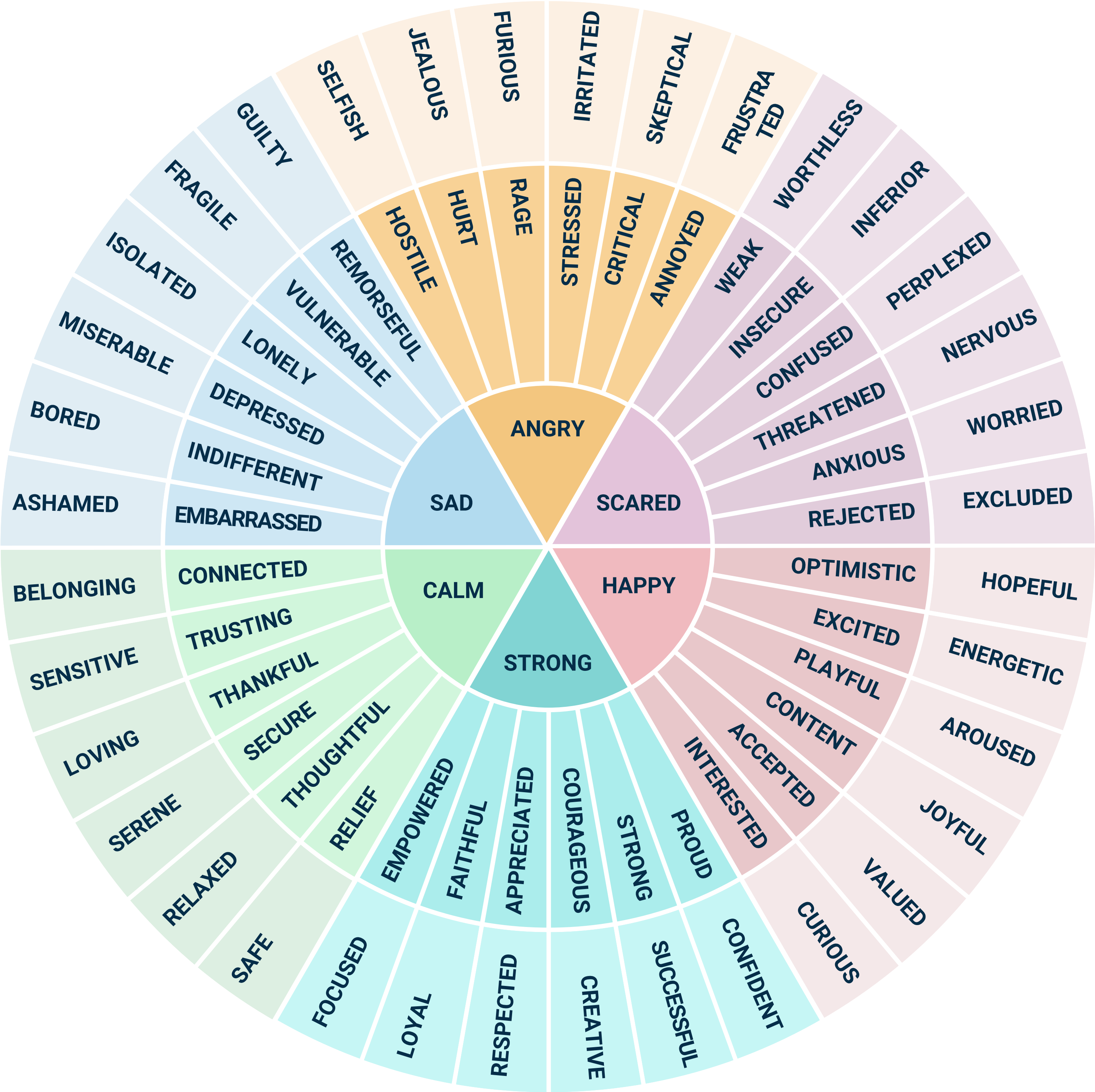
The core emotions are in the middle of the wheel. After choosing the core emotion, you can identify the more specific emotions in the outer edges of the circle. These more specific emotions help you better understand what you are experiencing.





# The Feelings Wheel

Gloria Willcox, 1982



This feeling wheel is designed to help you describe your feelings with more accuracy. Note, it's not a complete overview of all possible feelings, but provides a solid starting point to describe, identify and label your emotions.

# How To Use The Feelings Wheel

## with Alexithymia

### Chase the Whisper

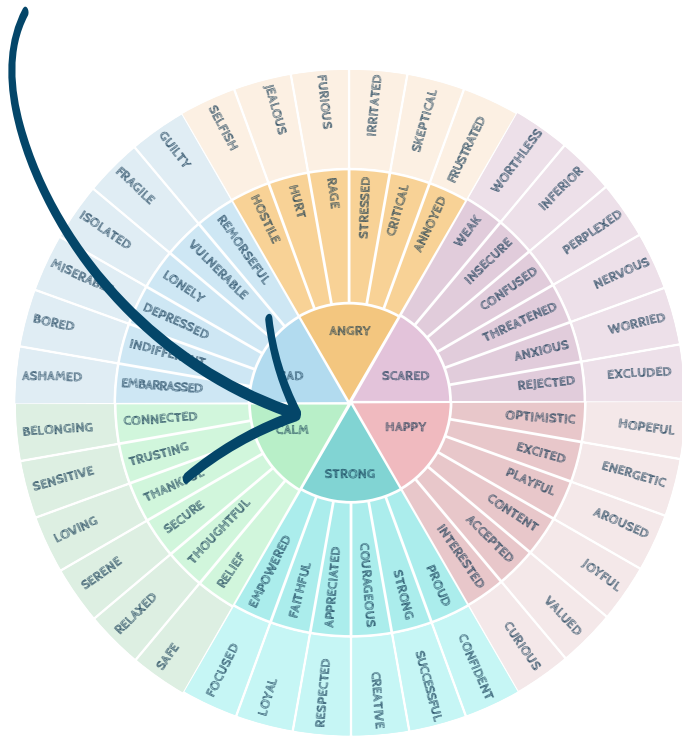
When you feel a whisper of a feeling, grab the feeling wheel and try and locate the feeling. It's okay if it's initially a guess or an educated guess.\*

Sit with the feeling without pushing it away. Focus on where you feel energy shifts in your body and notice any sensations in your body.

### Start in the Center

The closer you are to the center, the easier the emotion is to identify (they become more sophisticated the further you go out). Start by focusing on the core emotions in the center. Over time as you become more comfortable identifying the core emotions, you can move on to more nuanced layers.

\*Consider taking a screenshot or photo of the feeling wheel to keep it easily accessible on your phone for when you experience a sudden hint of an emotion.

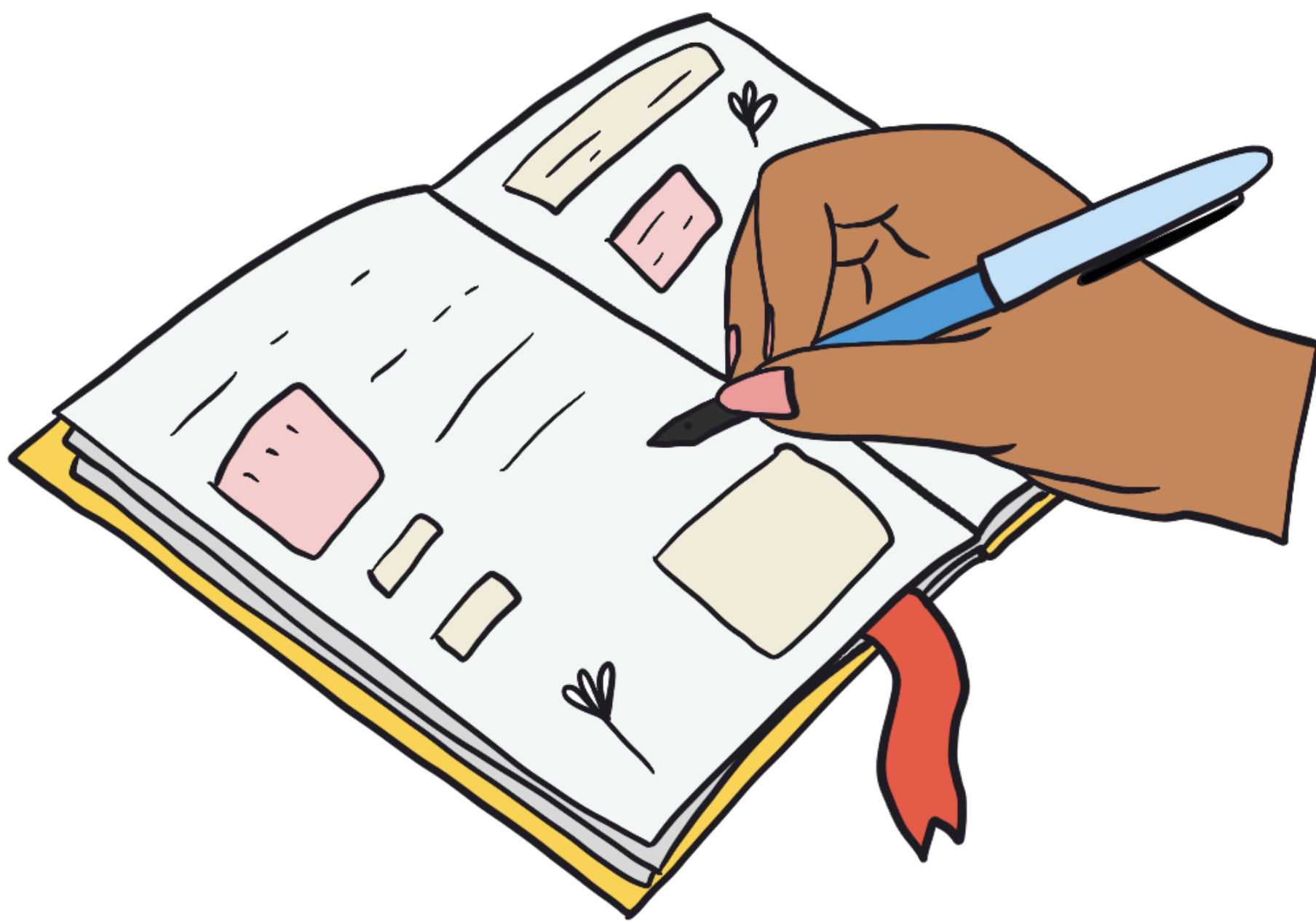


# How To Use The Feelings Wheel

## with Alexithymia

### Write or Journal

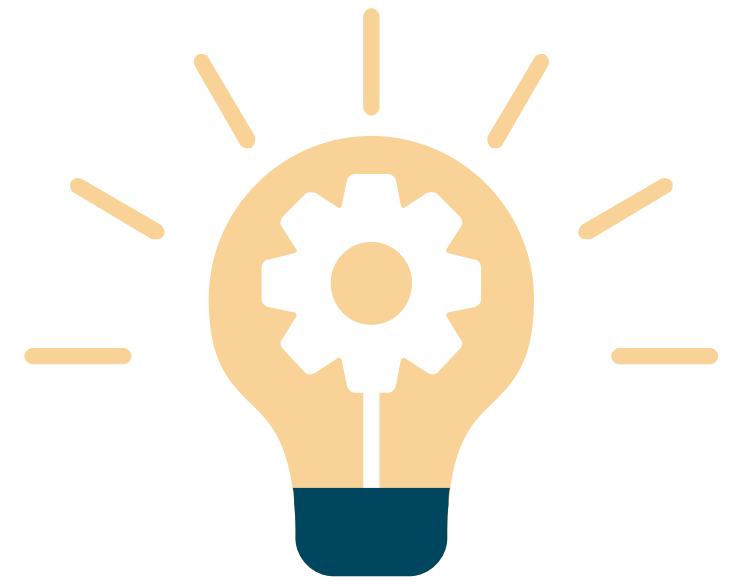
If you find it challenging to identify your feelings, journaling when you're feeling down can be helpful. By writing down your thoughts and experiences, you may be able to better understand and identify which emotion you're experiencing. With practice, you will become more familiar with the sensations and patterns associated with different emotions, and you may no longer need to rely on journaling to identify them.





# How To Use The Feelings Wheel

## with Alexithymia



### Use Pattern-Finding

While people without alexithymia intuitively know their feelings, for people with alexithymia, it can be helpful to start with concrete markers to help identify emotions.

You can use physical and behavioral markers to help guide you: For example: "I notice my jaw is clenched; I typically do this when I am stressed" (physical marker). Or "I just raised my voice; I typically do that when I am irritated; I think I may be experiencing irritation and anger right now" (behavioral marker).

Perhaps when you are sad, you eat, withdraw or isolate. Perhaps when scared, you start fidgeting and pacing. Your external behavior may be the first cue of what emotion you are experiencing. If it is difficult to intuitively know your emotions start by observing your behavior and recruit your pattern-finding brain to help you be a detective in determining the primary emotion at the moment.



# The Feeling List

The feeling list is an alternative exercise to the feeling wheel. It draws on a similar concept (that practicing identifying and naming emotions helps increase emotion awareness). However, the feeling list offers a more linear process for those who may feel disoriented or confused by the feeling wheel.

Similar to the feeling wheel, start by identifying the overarching emotion. Once you are comfortable identifying the core emotion, look through the more descriptive emotions on the list and try to identify a more nuanced emotional state. Over time, use other, more descriptive emotions from the table to increase your ability to identify nuanced and complex emotions.

Feelings List								
ANGRY			STRONG					
angry	stressed	jealous	powerful	proud	focused			
enraged	critical	frustrated	empowered	confident	important			
frustrated	annoyed	skeptical	faithful	successful	aware			
irate	selfish	livid	appreciated	creative	worthwhile			
irritated	hurt	wild	courageous	respected	valuable			
hostile	irritated	bitter	strong	loyal	discerning			
cross	raving	envious	persuasive	controlling	influential			
vexed	displeased	exasperated	dynamic	able	dominant			
furious	spiteful		forceful	forcible	capable			
SAD			HAPPY					
sad	guilty	ashamed	happy	interested	energetic			
remorseful	fragile	sleepy	optimistic	hopeful	sensuous			
vulnerable	isolated	apathetic	excited	aroused	cheerful			
lonely	miserable	inferior	playful	joyful	amused			
depressed	bored	stupid	content	valued	creative			
indifferent	wronged	desolate	accepted	curious	stimulated			
sorrowful	despairing	grieving	satisfied	glad	blessed			
down	mournful		delighted	jubilant	blissful			
gloomy	tired		elated	lively	thrilled			
SCARED			CALM					
scared	rejected	excluded	peaceful	intimate	safe			
weak	worthless	bewildered	connected	belonging	content			
insecure	inferior	discouraged	trusting	sensitive	nurturing			
confused	perplexed	insignificant	thankful	loving	pensive			
threatened	nervous	inadequate	secure	serene	responsive			
anxious	bothered	ignored	thoughtful	relaxed	attentive			
panicked	distracted	distraught	tranquil	quiet	prudent			
shaken	tormented	jittery	calm	placid	cautious			
worried	troubled			restful	careful			

# Feelings List

## ANGRY

angry	stressed	jealous
enraged	critical	frustrated
frustrated	annoyed	skeptical
irate	selfish	livid
irritated	hurt	wild
hostile	irritated	bitter
cross	raving	envious
vexed	displeased	exasperated
furious	spiteful	



## STRONG

powerful	proud	focused
empowered	confident	important
faithful	successful	aware
appreciated	creative	worthwhile
courageous	respected	valuable
strong	loyal	discerning
persuasive	controlling	influential
dynamic	able	dominant
forceful	forcible	capable



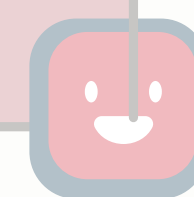
## SAD

sad	guilty	ashamed
remorseful	fragile	sleepy
vulnerable	isolated	apathetic
lonely	miserable	inferior
depressed	bored	stupid
indifferent	wronged	desolate
sorrowful	despairing	grieving
down	mournful	
gloomy	tired	



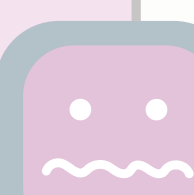
## HAPPY

happy	interested	energetic
optimistic	hopeful	sensuous
excited	aroused	cheerful
playful	joyful	amused
content	valued	creative
accepted	curious	stimulated
satisfied	glad	blessed
delighted	jubilant	blissful
elated	lively	thrilled



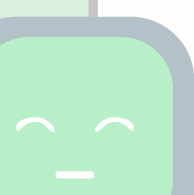
## SCARED

scared	rejected	excluded
weak	worthless	bewildered
insecure	inferior	discouraged
confused	perplexed	insignificant
threatened	nervous	inadequate
anxious	bothered	ignored
panicked	distracted	distraught
shaken	tormented	jittery
worried		troubled



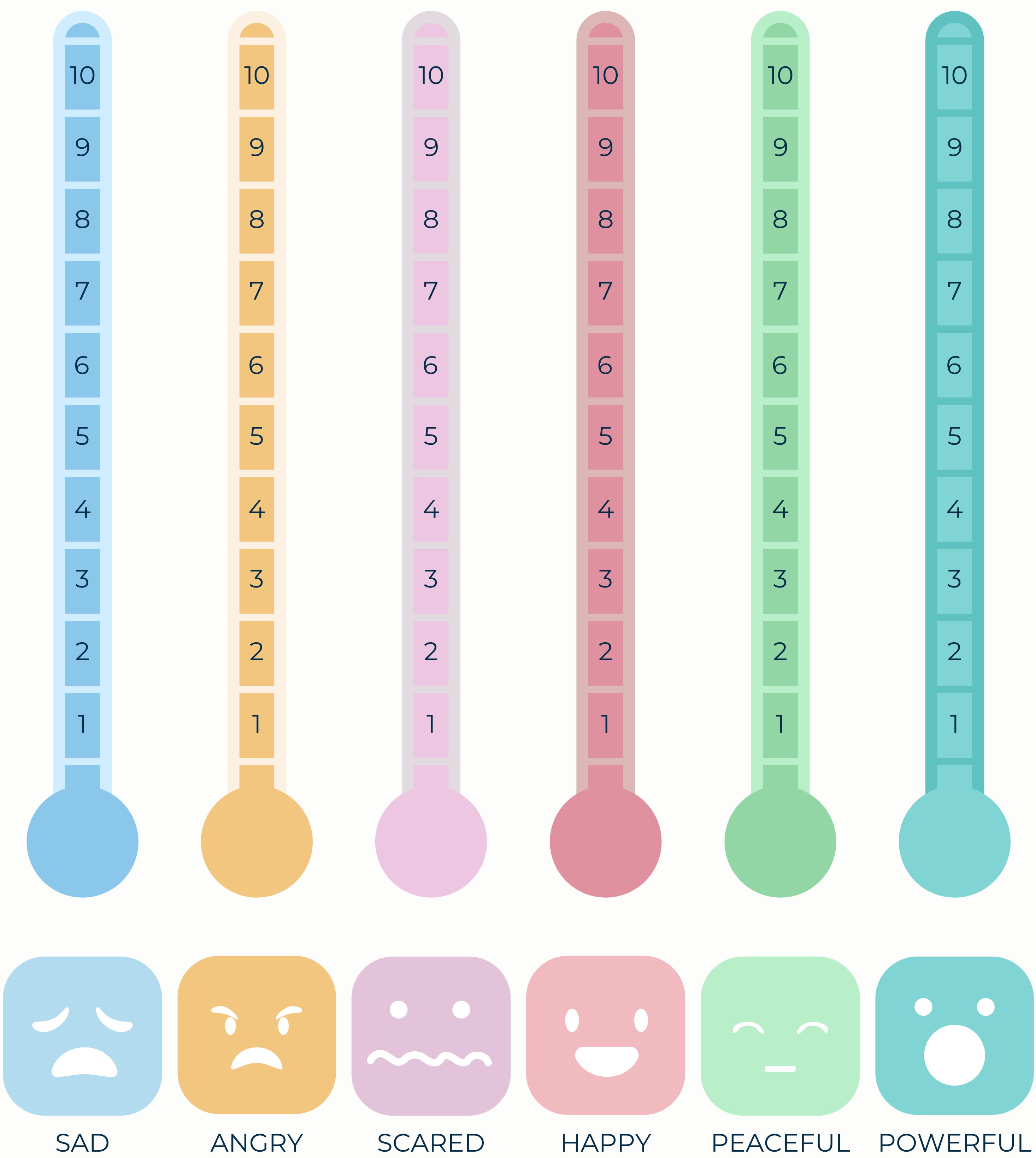
## CALM

peaceful	intimate	safe
connected	belonging	content
trusting	sensitive	nurturing
thankful	loving	pensive
secure	serene	responsive
thoughtful	relaxed	attentive
tranquil	quiet	prudent
composed	placid	cautious
calm	restful	careful



# Gauge Your Feelings

Identifying the intensity of the emotion pairs well with emotional identification. You can use the thermometers below to gauge your feelings in each of the 6 key areas.



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# Gauge Your Feelings

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## *Why Is This Helpful?*

When we have alexithymia, we often do not notice our feeling until they are at a seven or higher. By the time our mind registers emotions, we are in an urgent state. Once we are at a 7, 8, or 9, it is much more challenging to reign the emotions in and to have agency in the moment.

When we get better at catching quiet emotions (emotions in the 2-6 range), we can intervene when the emotions are easier to walk back. When we can register emotions at lower levels, it also helps us to advocate for what we need.

For example, if we can tell that we are starting to get stressed, we may put on noise-canceling headphones, ask for space or engage in relaxation exercises. By identifying the stress early in the process, we can intervene and support ourselves earlier in the emotion-stress cycle.



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# Gauge Your Feelings

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## *Practice*

- 1) Pick one or two emotions that often cause you difficulty (stress, anxiety, anger, for example).
- 2) Set three alarms (or choose an activity you do multiple times a day, like every time you eat a meal or use the bathroom).
- 3) Mindfully check in with yourself when your alarm goes off (or when doing your pre-selected daily activity like eating). On a scale of 1-10, how intense is that emotion?
- 4) This is likely to feel awkward and challenging at first. The more you practice, the better you will get at this.

**\*\*Remember, many people with alexithymia begin to understand their emotional intensity by tracking concrete markers. For example (I know that when my shoulders are tense, I'm stressed, so this is what a seven feels like).**

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# Resource Page

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*For More Learning*

## Articles and Blog Posts ~

- [Using the Arousal-Valence Model to Better Your Emotional Intelligence](#), **Neurodivergence Insights**. For a more in-depth overview of the arousal-valence model of emotion.
- [The Feelings Wheel: Learn How to Identify Your Emotions](#), **Neurodivergence Insights**. For a more in-depth overview of how to use the feeling wheel.
- [Emotional Identification: 5 Proven Activities for Better Emotional Literacy](#), **Neurodivergence Insights**. For an overview of exercises to help with emotion identification.

## Courses ~

- If you want a deeper dive into how to work with alexithymia as a clinician, consider taking the [training I did through TheraSmart](#) (note that it is aimed at clinicians, but others may still find it interesting).

# Conclusion

Great job on making it through this workbook on alexithymia!

Throughout this workbook, we covered a variety of topics related to alexithymia, including an introduction to the concept, the intersection between alexithymia and neurodivergence, the impact that alexithymia can have on our lives, and exercises to help increase our emotional awareness.

It's a lot of information to take in, so take your time and feel free to revisit any sections that were particularly helpful or relevant to you. Remember, this is a journey, and it's okay to take it one step at a time.

Above all, remember that you are important and your emotions matter. By practicing increasing our emotional awareness, we can learn to better understand and care for ourselves.

Take care, Dr. Neff

This is book one of a series on Emotions and Neurodivergence. Head on over to the [Neurodivergent Insights Store](#) to learn more, or consider joining the [Neurodivergent Insights membership](#) area, where you will be sure never to miss a workbook.

