Alexithymia

Peter Sifneos introduced the term Alexithymia to the world of Psychiatry in 1973. It is derived from the Greek and literally means 'having no words for emotions' (a = lack, lexis = word, thymos = emotions).

Although research is identifying links between Alexithymia and the autistic population, it has only truly done so in recent years. However, this is a factor which, anecdotally, is described by huge numbers of autistic people and has been for years.

There are strategies by which you can encourage an autistic person to identify their own emotional state by connecting physical feelings with emotional feelings, but this can take time to develop.

With people who are Alexithymic, there is a disconnect between the physical sensations that come with emotions and labelling that emotion.

Alexithymia can work on a scale, there are many identified subtypes – sometimes it's the inability to process at all, sometimes recognition can be triggered at a later time, sometimes it can be situational depending ironically on one's emotional state and the sensory environment too.

An inability to identify your emotional state can cause an immensity of issues characterised, for example, by not understanding anxiety, meaning that potentially you are more likely to find yourself in dangerous situations, or not understanding when you are feeling sad and therefore less able to recognise sadness in others, or understand 'sad situations' and act accordingly (this is part of a more complex issue which negates poor Theory of Mind).

Currently, it is not uncommon to subject autistic children to 'feeling charts' and to encourage them to tell us, as adults if they are happy or sad. Adults also often subject to autistic children to 'emotional training' around identifying very subjective facial expressions denoting emotional states which can lead to feelings of inadequacy amongst autistic children and increasing the reasons for autistic masking (See Link).

When applying a lens of alexithymia to emotional learning amongst developing autistic children it can help reframe our expectations of autistic people when it comes to emotional reciprocity, behaviour and social expectations and many of the myths associated with autism.

When someone is Alexithymic it's important to help them raise an awareness of their own emotional triggers, or to look at situations in advance to help recognise potential sources of emotional triggers.

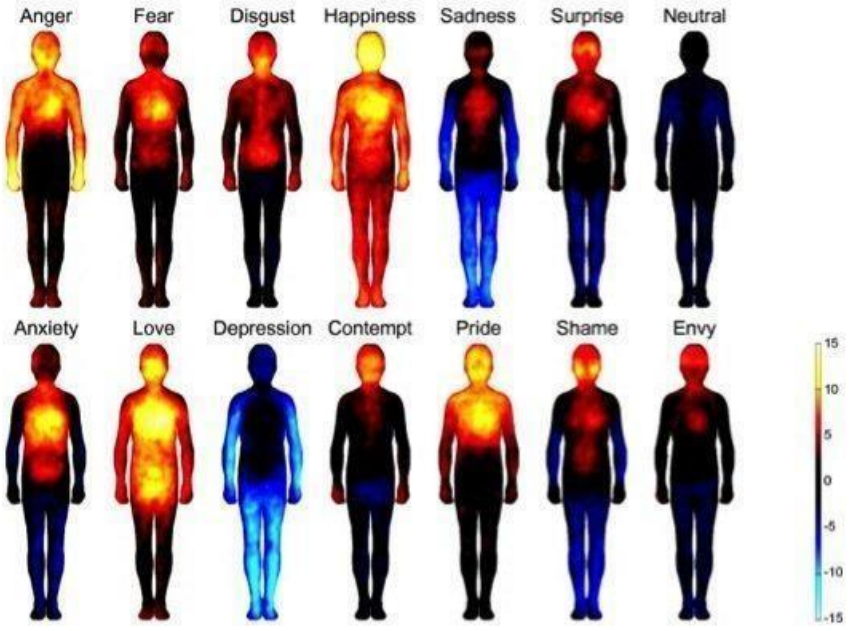
From the supporter's point of view it is important to understand fully that emotional triggers are hugely subjective from person to person and very much situational.

One way to support someone in identifying their emotions is not only to build their emotional vocabulary, but to help them identify which emotions go with which physical feeling.

For example by identifying that if a certain event were to happen, then the individual's stomach would hurt.

Emotional mapping is a good way to do this, as research shows that physical manifestations of emotions tend to occur in specific areas of the body and in specific intensities, dependant on the emotion:

Bodily topography of basic (Upper) and nonbasic (Lower) emotions associated with words.



Lauri Nummenmaa et al. PNAS 2014;111:646-651

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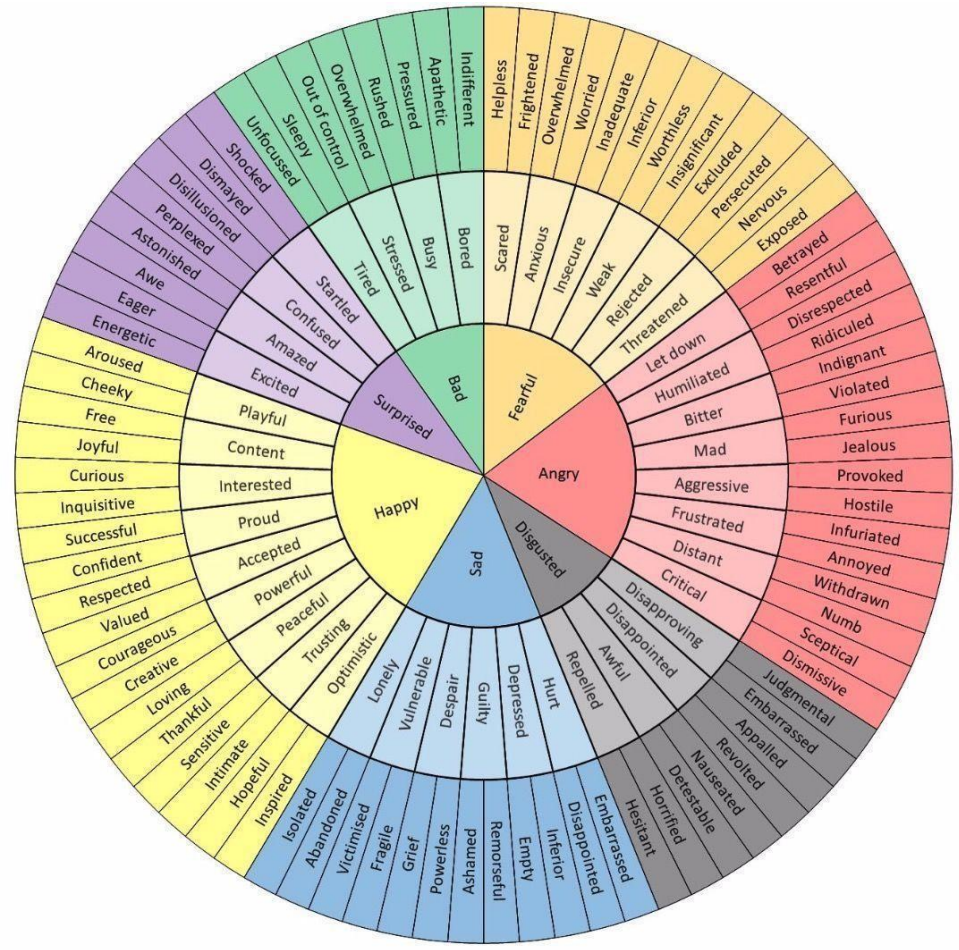
Combining this with an emotion wheel can help to build that vocabulary and connect the emotion with the sensation:



All this combined can help the individual identify a physical sensation and give that physical sensation a name which they can communicate.

There is an app called Mood Meter: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.reliablecoders.moodmeter
This is a simple way of tracking moods and helping your understand and shift your emotional state.

There is another app called 'My emotional Compass' this is a little more complex and probably should only be used once the Mood Meter app is being used comfortably.

Some quick reading:

https://visualvox.wordpress.com/2017/03/26/alexithymia-isnt-only-a-problem-of-not-understanding-our-emotions/?fbclid=IwAR36BmGFU9Zl6SQhx9vF2EjpptnPFLchuT512VmgC-jvtacST_IuRebD8hE

https://jeanettepurkis.wordpress.com/2017/06/20/please-dont-ask-me-how-do-you-feel-emotion-blindness-and-autism/

https://musingsofanaspie.com/2013/01/31/emotional-dysfunction-alexithymia-and-asd

Book recommendations:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Practical-Resilience-Preteens-Teenagers-Spectrum/dp/1785922750/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=the+parents+practical+guide+to+resilience&qid=1582117053&sr=8-2

https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=trauma+stigma+and+autism&crid=2U066W23UZVD6&sprefix=trauma%2C+stigma+and%2Caps%2C151&ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_17