

Having trouble sharing or understanding emotions? MU researcher believes affection could help

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Every person has some level of alexithymia, as it is the personality trait which keeps people from sharing or even understanding their own emotions. Now, one University of Missouri researcher's latest study indicates that affectionate communication, such as hugging, could help those who have high levels of alexithymia lead more fulfilling lives.

Colin Hesse, an assistant professor of communication in the MU College of Arts and Science, said previous studies estimate 8 to 10 percent of people suffer from high alexithymia. Those who have high alexithymia have trouble relating to others, as they tend to become anxious around others or avoid forming relationships. Alexithymia is often found with other conditions on the autism spectrum, as well as post-traumatic stress disorders. Studies have shown that alexithymia has been related to eating and panic disorders, as well as [substance abuse](#).

"We know how important it is for people to empathize and be open with the people around us, because that makes someone more competent as a communicator," Hesse said. "We still need to study the best approaches, but we believe that affectionate communication ranging from hugs, touching, or even the posture taken during communication – can make a positive impact, even if it only relieves anxiety."

In the paper "Affection Mediates the Impact of Alexithymia on Relationships," published in the journal *Personality and Individual*

Differences, Hesse and Kory Floyd of Arizona State University surveyed 921 people and measured shared affection, attachment levels, and the number of close relationships. The researchers found that even though alexithymia was negatively related to forming relationships, the impact was lessened by giving and receiving higher amounts of affectionate communication.

While alexithymia is still relatively new to the scientific world, some scholars believe it may eventually be added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. As a communications expert, Hesse is studying the ways alexithymia sufferers can ease the physical and mental costs of the affliction and succeed at relationships.

Hesse's previous work has shown that affectionate communication releases hormones that relieve stress, and his future studies will be applicable to all forms of communication.

"Because there is so much gray area with alexithymia, the potential for what we learn could have benefits for people with conditions such as [emotional](#) distance and [autism](#) spectrum disorders," Hesse said. "I want to help alexithymia sufferers understand the undercurrent of the messages sent from other people."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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