

Emotional disconnection disorder threatens marriages, researcher says

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(Medical Xpress)—Communication can be challenging for any married couple, but a personality trait called alexithymia that keeps people from sharing or even understanding their own emotions can further impede marital bliss. University of Missouri interpersonal communication researchers found when one spouse suffers from alexithymia, the partners can experience loneliness and a lack of intimate communication that lead to poor marital quality.

Nick Frye-Cox, a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, says people with alexithymia can describe their [physiological responses](#) to events, such as sweaty palms or faster heartbeats, but are unable to identify their emotions as sad, happy or angry. In addition, those with alexithymia have difficulty discerning the causes of their feelings or explaining variations in their emotions, he said.

"People with alexithymia have trouble relating to others and tend to become uncomfortable during conversations," Frye-Cox said. "The typical alexithymic person is incredibly stoic. They like to avoid emotional topics and focus more on concrete, objective statements."

People with alexithymia avoid forming relationships; however, they get married because they still feel the basic human need to belong, which is just as fundamental as the need to eat or sleep, Frye-Cox said.

"Once they are married, alexithymic people are likely to feel lonely and

have difficulty communicating intimately, which appears to be related to lower marital quality," Frye-Cox said. "People with alexithymia are always weighing the costs and benefits, so they can easily enter and exit relationships. They don't think others can meet their needs, nor do they try to meet the needs of others."

Frye-Cox collected data from both spouses in 155 [heterosexual couples](#). He says the proportion of alexithymic people in his sample, 7.5 percent of men and 6.5 percent of women, is representative of the general population, according to previous research. The trait is often found with other conditions on the autism spectrum, as well as with post-traumatic stress disorders. Studies also have shown that alexithymia has been related to eating and panic disorders, substance abuse and depression.

The study, "Alexithymia and [marital quality](#): The mediating roles of loneliness and intimate communication," will be published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*. In his previous research, co-author Colin Hesse, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication, found that affectionate communication, such as hugging or touching, could help those who have high levels of [alexithymia](#) lead more fulfilling lives.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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