
Alexithymia is associated with an augmenter profile, but not only: Evidence for anticipation to arousing music

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Abstract

Alexithymia is defined as difficulties in identifying and describing feelings and is characterized by an external way of thinking. Alexithymia is well represented in somatization, characterized by amplification and misinterpretation of somatic sensations. It has been suggested that high alexithymia scorers (HA) amplify their sensations because of their "augmenter" profile, which is defined as the tendency to amplify psychophysiological and subjective responses to arousing stimulations. The lack of studies focusing on the augmenter profile of HA at a physiological level has motivated us to test this theory using physiological (skin conductance level, pulse volume, and interbeat interval) and subjective measures (arousal, somatic sensations, positive and negative mood). We also aimed to assess if alexithymia is associated with reduced habituation abilities. Therefore, we manipulated the order of presentation of the stimuli, and hypothesized that the increase (decrease) of autonomic responses would be stronger (weaker) in HA compared to low scorers, in the 'increasing' ('decreasing') condition of arousing stimuli presentation order. Twenty-seven female listened to musical excerpts of different arousing levels, but were not informed of this manipulation. The results showed no effect of habituation but showed that HA had an augmenter profile for subjective reports to the most arousing excerpt (higher negative mood, somatic sensations and lower positive mood) and stronger skin conductance responses when the most arousing excerpt is presented first. These results partially support the augmenting hypothesis and suggest higher negative anticipation among HA for the first excerpt, which may be apparent only when this excerpt is highly arousing.

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