

Alexithymia in Patients with Somatization Difficulties and Tinnitus-Related Distress: A Systematic Review.

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Abstract:

Background: Chronic tinnitus, characterized by the perception of sound without an external source, can significantly impact individuals' well-being. Often medically unexplained, chronic tinnitus may manifest as a “somatoform” or “functional” difficulty. Emerging evidence suggests that alexithymia, characterized by difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions, serves as a transdiagnostically relevant risk factor for both symptom clusters.

Methods: Utilizing a two-part rapid review approach, searching within EBSCO, Embase by Ovid, PubMed, and Web of Science, we summarize psychological studies investigating alexithymia in relation to (1) somatoform conditions and (2) chronic tinnitus. For somatoform conditions, inclusion criteria encompassed adult human subjects with various forms of somatization, longitudinal study designs, publications between 2001 and 2021, and full-text availability in English or German. Eight studies meeting these criteria revealed significant associations between alexithymia and somatoform conditions, with psychotherapy demonstrating efficacy in improving alexithymia and associated outcomes. Risk of bias assessment utilized the 'Risk Of Bias In Non-randomized Studies—of Interventions' tool (ROBINS-I) and the 'Revised Cochrane risk-of-bias tool for randomized trials' (RoB 2). Summarizing studies on alexithymia and chronic tinnitus, three studies met inclusion criteria, with risk of bias evaluated using the 'JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross Sectional Studies'.

Results: Studies indicated a high prevalence of alexithymia (65.7%) among patients with chronic tinnitus. Tinnitus-related distress showed significant associations with alexithymia in two studies, although one found no differences in alexithymia between bothersome and non-bothersome tinnitus cases. Conversely, one study reported elevated alexithymia levels in patients with low tinnitus-related distress.

Conclusion: Alexithymia may serve as a transdiagnostic psychological indicator of somatization phenomena, potentially including certain presentations of chronic tinnitus. Psychotherapy appears promising in addressing alexithymia and associated somatoform symptoms.

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