

### **Alexithymia in a relapsing addict**

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#### **Abstract:**

Drug addiction is one of the most important problems that affect many people and societies, and upset their balance. This study dealt with the topic of alexithymia in a relapsing addict in order to highlight the emotional role played in the regression of the addict. For this reason, a clinical study on a relapse addict has been carried out who was following treatment at Chlef Mediator center for addiction treatment, with the use of the following tools: the half directed interview, observation, TAS20 Alexithymia standard. It was found that the relapsing addict has a high alexithymia level in all dimensions: after describing emotions' difficulty, after identifying emotions' difficulty and after the externally- oriented thinking.

#### **Keywords:**

Addiction ; Relapse; Alexithymia.

#### **Introduction:**

The changes societies are undergoing from the renaissance and the progress of civilization and technology through which the world has become a small village have led to the development of human consciousness in all spheres of life. So that life has become characterized by complexity, conflict and multiple roles. This has led to the emergence of many social and psychological phenomena and problems, one of the most important of which is the problem of drug addiction, considered as a very complex problems that societies face at present time, and continues to pose a threat to human beings of different classes and groups.

The problem of addiction is one of the most serious psychological and social problems that face the entire world both Arab and Western countries because it is considered as a pathological phenomenon, which poses a threat to human development, as well as a risk to health, economic and social

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development. Statistics published by the United Nations indicate that there are more than 20 million addicts in the world, its report on the world drug addiction indicates that the number of addicts has increased, and reached about 185 million (Harmali, 2007, p. 10), which represents 3% of the world's population, and that half one million of these addicts are from the Arab world.

The spread of drugs in Algeria has taken a serious turn, the National Office for Drug Control and Drug Addiction in 2017 reported 22, 444 cases of assignment and treatment of addiction, of which 630 cases were under 15 years old ( 2,81%), 8054 cases of addicts aged 16 to 25 ( 35,51%). These percentages recorded a rise during the first semester of 2018. ([https://onlcdt.mjustice.dz/onlcdt\\_ar/?p=donnees](https://onlcdt.mjustice.dz/onlcdt_ar/?p=donnees)).

According to statistics prepared by professor Khayati, President of the National Authority for Health promotion and Practical Research Development, 27% of high school pupils use drugs, the rate increases to 31% among university students and 15% among middle school pupils. That in the absence of a clear law criminalizing the trade in such toxins and poisons, he indicated that educational institutions have been transformed from an educational space into a place to steal and to trade in various kinds of poisons, in which after a while, teenagers will become additional numbers in the organized crime equation (to Mohammed 27/ 06/ 2016).

The high rate of addiction among adolescents and young adults poses a high risk, as these groups are the foundation of the future, and the development pillar of any society. Many studies indicate that the earlier is the age of addiction, the more vulnerable an individual is to the risk of long term dependence ( charbi, 2013, p. 6), the factors and the causes that lead to this early addiction and include social, economic, cultural and other factors.

Many studies point to the importance of psychological factors, especially the emotional aspect of addiction rise, so that Farges and his colleagues have found that 43,5% of addicts (especially alcohol) have a high level of disability to express their emotions and feelings. Rybakawaski and his colleagues found that 78% of Polonian alcoholics suffer from alexithymia, where in Italy, Troisi and his colleagues found that 80% of those addicted to drinks and cannabis also suffer from alexithymia. Farges et al. (2004) . While Bonnet and his colleagues in their study on 268 junkie pupils (tobacco, alcohol, cannabis) reached out that 44, 9% of them have emotional vulnerability and emotions' expression problems (Bonnet, 2010).

In her study in the Center for Prevention and Treatment of Drug Addiction in Blida, Charbi found that addicts had a misperception about their addiction, and suffered from a deterioration of their psychosocial life ( stress, anxiety, emotion), and their attitudes towards future varied from pessimism, optimism and desire for change (Charbi, 2013).

Surveys of psychotic diseases have found that alexithymia is a predictor of relapse in alcoholics, as well as the response of some individuals treated with pharmacological medications such as psychological trauma or patients' relapse with Peptic Ulcer. (Loas, 2016, pp.6-7).

Relapse is a problem associated with drug addiction treatment, because the rate of post treatment relapse is 50% - 90%, studies on addiction also indicate that the rate of relapse is high among recovered patients. Kharbouch (2012) indicates that relapse can occur at any time after treatment, and can also occur at 66% within the first three months. (Kassis, 2017, p. 1), Al sayid (2011) shows the percentage of relapse ranges from 30% - 70% depending on the type of narcotic substance. Boni (2011) showed that 40% - 90% relapse over the following year of treatment while Askar (2005) published that relapse rates of alcohol, opioids, and cocaine users exceed 90% for one time, 85% for two times, 80% for three times, and 75% for more than three times per year. ( Al-Rimawi, 2015, p. 4). From this sense, the following question has been raised:

- What is the level of alexithymia in a relapsing addict?

## **1 .Study Concepts:**

### **1.1. Alexithymia:**

Defined by Robert fish (1989) as: It is a condition that benefits the ability to discriminate, and express feelings, emotional and affective states, and it reduces in the alexithymia ( Secretive) the ability to imagine, to dream, and the ability to think in an operational way and non symbolic , which leads to a reduced connection with the real factors affecting the psychological system, and fails to distinguish between his emotional conditions and his physical feelings. Because of his secrecy, he expresses his psychological distress through his physical symptoms (Dawach, 2011, p. 6).

Research approaches differ in considering secrecy as a personality component, or as a secondary condition caused by physical and psychological trauma. Freyberger is one of the first to distinguish between primary and secondary secrecy, and considers secondary secrecy to be a transient condition caused by distressing agents. The first is a feature that makes a person more willing to suffer from psychological and physical disorders, Sifnoes asserts that the initial secrecy is due to heredity and neuropsychological development. While the secondary secrecy is a defensive mechanism in which rejection and emotions suppression are used, as well as cultural and environmental factors. (Quraichi & Zaatout, 2008 ).

It is defined procedurally as indicators stated by the relapsing addict through observation, the half- pointed interview, and TAS 20

standard of alexithymia on 3 dimensions: describing emotions ‘ difficulty, recognizing emotions’ difficulty, and externally- oriented thinking.

### **1.2. Addiction:**

It is the systematic consumption of a toxic substance for which the addict suffers from an indelible desire (psychological dependence), and causes an adaptive condition accompanied by the emergence of severe physical disorders when the drug is not consumed (Selamy, 2001, p. 42). For an addicted individual, drugs are the means by which they can change their physical balance, namely sleepy and unconscious chemicals accompanied by pain killers; it also includes steroids, hypnotics, needles and hallucinogens, cocaine, morphine, heroin and alcohol (Bensalem, 2005, p. 12).

Goodman’s definition (1990), “Addiction is a process in which behavior is achieved and whose function is to create desire and mitigate internal discomfort through repeated failure to control and continue with awareness of its risks and negative consequences”. Then he described six criteria for determining the habituality, and instead focused on the question of behavior repetition, despite an awareness of the negative consequences of an individual. Therefore, compulsive repetition is an intrinsic factor of habituality (Bazire, 2017, p.9).

### **1.3. Relapse:**

Izzeddine (1992) defines it as a return to addiction after treatment is over ( El Salim, 2005, p. 10), relapse also marks the return stage of alcohol and drug use after an individual has decided that he is addicted and needs to refrain from using drugs. In addition, he marks a decision to treat himself, to be calm and balanced with the help of a counseling program (Al Sayed, 2017, p. 20). Chung and Lopez (2010) point out that relapse is practically defined as any use of alcohol or drugs within 30 days after the treatment plan has been implemented.

Moss and Cook (2012) define it as: “return to drug use after a period of interruption or abstinence” (Ghidani, 2019, p. 22). Marlalitt (1996) points out that it is re- addictive, the practice or the abuse of any kind of drugs, and of any quantity, because it is a failure to maintain the change of past behavior, and to stop the addictive substance (Algharib, 2011, p. 81).

## **2. Study importance and aims:**

The importance of this study is shown in dealing with a very sensitive group of society, the addicts who face an addiction’s problem, which affects their psychological and social adjustment. In addition, the imminence of this study is also observed in the highlighting of the psychological and emotional

aspect and the role it plays in the emergence and the persistence of addiction among addicts. It also has the advantage of linking the psychological aspect to the social one of the addict in general.

The current study aims at trying to identify the level of alexithymia in drug- dependent addicts because alexithymia is the cause of such addiction, considered as a preparation factor or as increasing the risk and the severity of such an addiction.

### **3. Methodological procedures of the study:**

#### **3.1. The approach followed:**

For the preparation of a research, systematic steps are followed to address one or more issues, in order to arrive at somewhat objective results. Given the nature of the subject considered, the clinical approach was used, one of the branches of psychology that examines and analyses the individuals behavior that differs a lot, for a view to help them overcome their problems, and better adapt to them. It is based on the identification of the factors leading to psychiatric illness, and then the development of a treatment plan. Therefore, the psychologist collects case data through the interview, the clinical observation, the case study as well as the application of some psychological tests (Gaddafi, 2000, p. 15).

#### **3.2. Tools used:**

The following tools have been used:

##### **3.2.1. Observation:**

It is a tool to assess personality; it has multiple rules and methods. However, observation in psychology requires special skills and precision, because of the phenomena's complexity. In addition, it is concerned with focusing on the behavior of the patient during the interview from depression, sweating, nail- biting, appearance neglect, paranoia when talking, signs of despair and frustration, gear and investigation, as well as aggressive behavior (Ghanem, 2006, p. 137). In this study, free observation will be used by focusing on the following aspects: body, speech, mood, emotions.

##### **3.2.2. Clinical interview:**

Khelfat Barakat defines the half pointed clinical interview as relying on the interview manual (guide), and draws up its plan in advance and in some details. A uniform instruction is set up and followed by everyone who does the interview for one purpose (Yassin, 1986, p. 405).

In this study the half pointed clinical interview was used through the interview manual which includes the following axes:

Axis 01: the addict's personal information

Axis 02: history of the addict

Axis 03: status of the case

Axis 04: the emotional side of the addict.

### 3.2.3. Alexithymia standard (TAS20):

It is a standard for the evaluation of alexithymia developed by Pajbi, Taylor, Rayan and others (1994), which contained 26 items, and currently contains 20 items spread over three important axes, the first concerning the inability to describe emotions, the second concerning the inability to recognize emotions and to distinguish between them and physical sensations, and the last axis concerns externally- oriented thinking or what is known as Practical thinking, and they are as follows:

**DDF** means difficulty describing feelings and emotions, this axis consists of 5 items related to numbers: 2- 4- 7- 12- 17.

**DIF** means difficulty identifying feelings and emotions, this axis consists of 7 items related to the numbers: 1- 3- 6- 9- 11- 13- 14.

**EOT** means externally – oriented thinking, this axis consists of 8 items related to the numbers: 5- 8- 10- 16- 18- 19- 20

The standard is corrected according to the following key:

Table 01: " represents TAS 20 correction standard key "

	Low	Average	High	Very High
First dimension	5-11	10-15	15-20	20-25
Second dimension	7-14	14-21	21-28	28-35
Third dimension	8-16	16-24	24-32	32-40
<b>Tas-20</b>	20-40	40-60	60-80	80-100

## 4. Study results presentation and analysis:

**Presentation and analysis of the case:** Case Z, aged 21 and a half years old is an addict with an average education (Fourth year middle school), lives in a family of foster parents, he has been adopted child. The connection with the case has been rather difficult, and his answers were very accurate and brief. He lived a normal childhood until he discovered he was adopted, this made his relationship with his parents worse. The case had a rather difficult adolescence because his environment does not understand him, and this situation kept him isolated, his friend zone only consists of one friend. He is very aggressive towards others and a quarrelsome person, his emotional life is non- existent after being disappointed once.

The case entered the addiction world from its wildest doors at the age of 14 starting with treated cannabis to psychotropic substances and alcohol. The case is dependent on drug substance on the one hand, and on the other hand, his dependence on drug at this age refers to an adolescence and an identity crisis, especially after discovering that he is adopted “who am I, and who are my parents? ”. After the case situation became psychologically and physically worse because of drugs, he was admitted by his father to Chlef mediator center for addiction treatment in 2017, and was forced into medical and psychological treatment. He was diagnosed with anti social behavior that was primarily aggressive towards others, an identity disorder, unconsciousness and indifference to addictive behaviors. However, the case did not follow up treatment on a regular way and rejected it; this caused him to relapse several times by returning to addiction after the center treatment program has been completed.

From half pointed clinical interviews and direct observation, it turns out that the case suffers from no organic diseases except allergies and head pains, and has no judicial criminal records. Moreover, he suffers from identity disorders, which he considers to be the cause of all his problems, caused him to experience relational conflicts with his family environment. He also tends to experience isolation, social withdrawal and a sense of inferiority, he has difficulty describing and understanding his feelings and is unable to recognize and express them verbally. This makes him vulnerable to emotional engagement with others, and unable to control his feelings practically anger and anxiety, “when I get into a fight with someone, I hit.....; I get out faster on the motorbike..... I do not look for anything”. He is also in a state of frustration, depression and distress, sometimes unaware of its causes, this leads him to resort to alcohol with his friends to ease his psychological pain, and resort to cry alone “sometimes, I feel very upset, I cry alone and I say why parents abandoned me, and sometimes I feel good when I stay up and have fun with my friend”.

These results are consistent with the results of TAS 20 Alexithymia standard, the case had a high score in the standard as a whole, represented by 62 degrees which refers to a high level of alexithymia which is demonstrated by its high degrees dimensions: difficulty of describing and identifying his feelings, and externally oriented thinking, and were respectively 13, 23, 26 degrees.

The high scores of the case indicate that it is difficult to describe and recognize his feelings and emotional state, as well as the weak organization and control of his emotions, which he sometimes translated into a sudden explosion of emotions that emerged in the form of indifference, passivity, anger or crying causing him to suffer from a bad family and social harmony. Besides the inability to direct himself to know his inner world, and his

feelings to direct them to the material outside world, by seeking access to reach and achieve financial independence only “I love money and I love to live financially comfortable, I will work and I will buy a car instead of the motorbike, or I will immigrate”.

By presenting the case, we see the role of the family especially the parents in the emergence of alexithymia as confirmed in the study of CHIN and his colleagues (2011), a trajectory analysis showed that parental bond affects personality, and thus alexithymia which in turn affects the mental health of the individual, this was demonstrated in this case by his relationship with his foster parents. Brunelle found that 40% of addicts suffered from violence and abuse during childhood (Charbi, 2013, p. 7). The theory of addictive psychoanalysis is also due to the disruption of relationships between an addict and his parents which includes emotion duality. The person according to Freud resorts to addiction as a means of self-treatment to satisfy unconscious needs of a child (Ibid., p. 50).

The case is characterized by a typical life with few friends where Joyce Mc Dougal (1974) sees that an individual who suffers from alexithymia shows a lack of emotional participation or affection for others (empathy) with few friendships and acquaintances. In addition to that, an essential characteristic of alexithymia which is the limited imagination, or the inability to shape images in the mind by remembering through the sensory experience where it is not only associated to perception, but also to the inability to evoke past emotions of any kind or any intensity. This is what Sifnoes and Nemiah focused on in determining the descriptive aspect of alexithymia, which is the limited emotional life and the inability to recognize and describe emotions to others.

It should be noted that the case is directed to addiction through his friends. And for that, studies in North America indicate that drug and alcohol abuse begins at the age of 14, where the teenager starts to form relationships outside his family, and starts experimenting and making his own decisions away from family (Charbi, 2013, p. 6). The case also had physical symptoms (headache, allergies), Marcus Corcus (2011) sees that an individual who suffers from alexithymia has his or her body separated from his/ her head, and this prevents processes and operations to make contact and to classify the state of grief, anger or joy leaving amounts of energy on the side and thus, leads to abnormal positions in terms of thinking spread over the body. Yet, when they talk about their own affairs, we often find a long description of physical symptoms due to the inability to clearly distinguish between physical sensations and emotional feelings. Therefore, this description is indicative of an attempt to express emotions. Nevertheless, Oliver Luminet (2013) in his studies on the association of alexithymia with basic depression sees that an individual with high alexithymia cannot invest in others, and



responds through his/ her body to any psychological conflict or mental pain. A clinical schedule appears to show a lack of taste in a sense of denying emotions, pain and all feelings.

Literature on the characteristics of alexithymia also refers to the so- called externally- oriented thinking, where these people are described as human machines: a person appears to be serious, affective and adapted to reality. The case had a high level in this dimension, he was only concerned with the present period in a emotionally – free, and mechanical way, where the attachment to the daily life aspects and everything happens on the external basis (practical) without an association on an emotional basis, which is evident from his conversation when it concerns his family or his friend.

If this is explained on the basis of meta- psychology, we find the absence of emotional representations and imaginations that carry symbolic meaning of inner life, the individual lives quietly and silently. As well as the tenacity of practical thinking which is characterized by a great investment in reality and everyday life in order to escape conflict. Gerard Pirlot (2014) considers practical thinking as the basis of conscious thinking that exists in alexithymia, as it is also found in some taxonomic contexts of people with psychometric disorders where we find utilitarian, realistic and oriented thinking toward tangible material topics that do not use neurodegenerative or psychometric mechanics, and move away from all the memories, emotions and feelings.

Robert and Lecours (2009) also assert that alexithymia cannot be evaluated before we evaluate scientific thinking. This phenomenon must first be understood because it is the basis of alexithymia's psychopathology. Nevertheless, the clinical descriptive aspect that Sifnoes and Nemiah focused on must be identified, which is the limited emotional life and the inability to recognize and describe emotions to others (Fassi, 2016, p. 76).

### **Conclusion and recommendations:**

The country has recently experienced a significant increase in the rate of addiction, that indicates the magnitude of the danger both in terms of addicts, and in terms of different addictive substances. Addiction is no longer limited to a specific age and a social group, but affects all ages and all groups of society. In addition, it is no longer limited to cannabis, but rather to other types such as hallucinogenic pills, heroin, and others.

However, the emergence of a large proportion of addiction in younger age groups, such as adolescents and young adults requires attention and research into the factors behind it. So, this study aimed at the role of the psychological aspect through alexithymia in a relapsing addict, the study was conducted at the mediator addiction treatment center in Chlef on a male addict. A high level of alexithymia was found in the case, which was largely due to his

parents' relationship during childhood and adolescence, as well as the influence of companions in the occurrence of addiction.

It would not be accurate to say that an emotional factor is considered to be a causative and an addictive factor, or as a factor that increases the risk of such addiction due to several considerations, such as the lack of study cases. The expression of emotions is governed by several studies, which led to the lack of generalization.

Based on this study, a series of recommendations have been proposed, the most important of which are:

- Activate the media role in clarifying addiction effects on all fields.
- Conduct studies, meetings, scientific seminars to deal more with the problems of young people in general and addicts in particular, and how to deal with a relapsing addict after drugs recovering.
- Conduct awareness- raising sessions about addiction and its risks in educational institutions.
- Activate the psychologist role in caring for addicts, and the need for coordination between addicts' treatment center and the addicts' families.

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