



Alexithymia and interoception

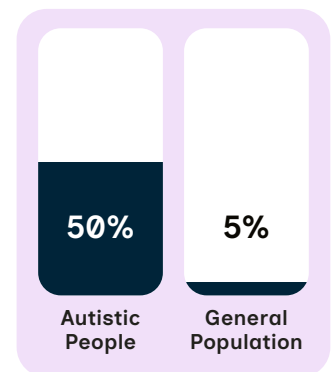
A toolkit for parents and carers
of Autistic young people

About this toolkit:

- This toolkit is for parents and carers of Autistic young people in high school.
- It explores the connections between bodily sensations and emotions.
- There are worksheets to help your child develop language about their emotions.
- There is guidance on the next steps and additional resources.

What is alexithymia?

Alexithymia is a psychological term to describe the experience of regularly having difficulty identifying, understanding and communicating emotions and feelings. Anyone can have alexithymia, but research suggests 50% of Autistic people experience this compared to around 5% of the general population.¹ It is also more common amongst people with various mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



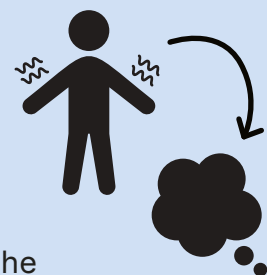
Why communicating feelings can be so difficult

Communicating emotions and feelings is complex, involving both physical sensations and how we interpret them. Although often used interchangeably, emotions and feelings are different stages of this process.

Emotions are brief, automatic, physical sensations in the body that are reactions to experiences and are interpreted by the brain as one of a few basic emotions. Emotions include fear, anger, joy, sadness, surprise, and disgust. Everyone is believed to experience these emotions but our physical experience of emotions and the way we interpret them are unique to each person. Emotions may be expressed through body language and facial expressions in response to these physical reactions.

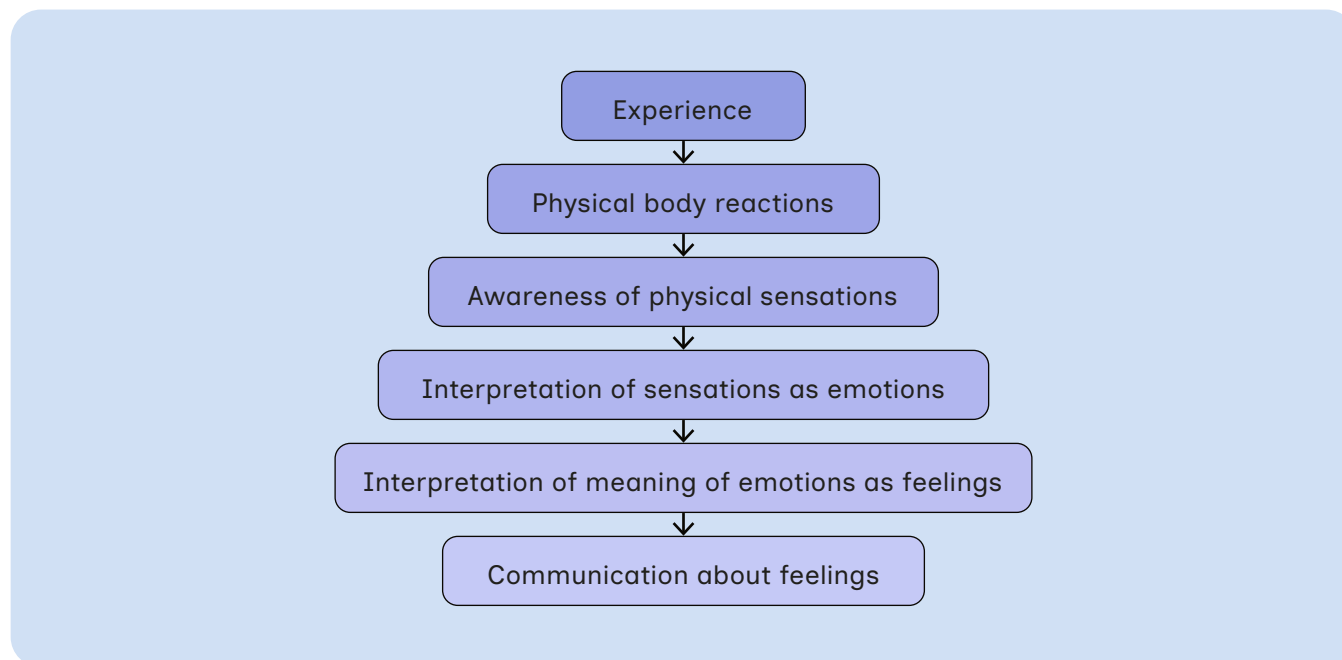


Feelings are our personal interpretation of our emotions and what they mean. This includes what we think might be the reason we are experiencing emotional sensations. Feelings are personal and shaped by our memories, beliefs, and perceptions. They are the stories we tell ourselves and others about the emotions we experience and interpret.



¹: Kinnaird, E., Stewart, C., & Tchanturia, K. (2019). Investigating alexithymia in autism: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *European Psychiatry*, 55, 80–89. doi:10.1016/j.eurpsy.2018.09.004

Below is the process that someone might go through from experiences to emotions and then to communication of feelings includes these steps:

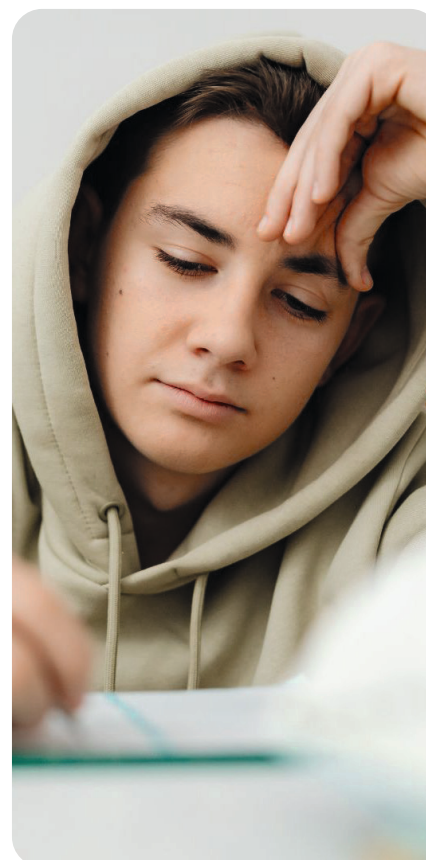


Alexithymia can be experienced when there are differences or difficulties during any of these stages. Many of the differences Autistic people may have with sensory processing, emotional expression and communication can contribute to alexithymia.

The role of interoception in alexithymia

Interoception is the ability to notice and understand sensations inside the body. This includes things like noticing hunger from a growling stomach, muscle tension, and a racing heart. Because emotions start with physical sensations in the body that must be noticed and interpreted by the brain, interoception plays a very important role in understanding emotions and communicating feelings. Autistic people often have differences in their interoceptive awareness, and this is likely a major reason that alexithymia is more commonly experienced by Autistic people.

Interoception is used when we perceive that we are hungry from a growling stomach, that our muscles are tense or that our heart rate has increased. For many Autistic people, interoceptive signals can be quieter, stronger, or harder to interpret. Emotions also involve physical body sensations which is why having reduced interoceptive awareness is a major reason Autistic people more frequently experience alexithymia.

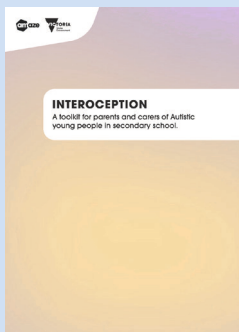


Alexithymia and lower interoceptive awareness are differences, not something wrong with a person. It can provide both advantages and disadvantages in different circumstances. For example, it might help someone to be calm in a crisis when others may struggle to be. On the flip side however, it might lead to someone potentially missing important emotional cues (e.g. gut feelings) to signal a situation is unsafe.

A common experience of Autistic young people who have alexithymia due to interoceptive differences, is to only notice emotions and communicate their feelings once things become quite intense. This can seem to others to be going from 0 to 100 quite quickly, as they may be unable to notice or name the quieter sensations before they become overwhelming.

Interoceptive awareness isn't static. Learning to notice and interpret body signals is a skill that can grow over time, in ways that feel supportive and respectful of each person's unique experience. When we understand what is happening inside our body, we can respond more effectively, whether that means meeting a biological need, an emotional need, or both. Because understanding emotions relies on noticing physical sensations, building interoceptive awareness is a helpful foundation to support Autistic young people with alexithymia. You can only understand what you feel.

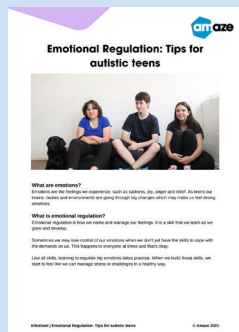
To learn more about interoception and emotional regulation, you can access the resources Amaze have developed on these topics here:



Interoception

A toolkit for parents and carers of Autistic young people in secondary school.

→



Emotional Regulation

Tips for Autistic teens

→

Understanding emotions from body signals

Understanding emotions from body experiences is also a skill that can be built over time.

When supporting Autistic young people, it's especially important to begin with their own internal experience, from the inside out. All people experience and express emotions in unique ways and often relate to others based on their own experiences. When building emotional understanding, it's very important that the focus first be the young person's own experiences. This includes learning to recognise the way emotions feel in their own body in ways that are safe and meaningful to them. This approach respects their unique way of experiencing the world and supports authentic emotional growth.

Emotional understanding is never built alone. We build our emotional understanding during childhood through a process known as mirroring. Mirroring involves reflecting another person's emotions, expressions, or tone of voice back to them. It is common

for Autistic young people to express emotions in ways that might be different from non-Autistic expectations. This can result in an Autistic person receiving less mirroring that is accurate to their experience which can then cause confusion to them about what their true emotions really mean. Parents and carers have an important role when supporting young people with alexithymia. To provide accurate mirroring, it helps to explore an Autistic young person's unique emotional experiences together. This can help you understand their internal experiences, how they express their emotions, and support them to recognise and understand what those emotions mean.

To assist parents and carers a practical toolkit is provided below, so you and your Autistic young person can work together to explore their unique experience of feelings. This toolkit was developed in co-design with families of Autistic young people and with professional oversight from an occupational therapist.



Parent and carer guide to using this toolkit

If your child has difficulty feeling emotional sensations in their body, it is recommended to first use the Amaze Interoception Toolkit before moving to the activities in this resource.



[Download Interoception: A toolkit for parents and carer of Autistic young people in secondary school.](#)



Being an effective co-regulator for your child

We are often influenced by the emotions of others, and this is especially true for many Autistic people who sometimes report feeling others' emotions more strongly than their own. To best support your child with this activity, it's important to be aware of your own emotional state and to choose a time to do this activity when you can be calm and can better co-regulate. Co-regulation means being present with your child and using your own more regulated emotional state to help them tolerate, then move through difficult or high energy emotional experiences. Emotions are automatic responses; we are not in control of them, but we can use strategies to regulate them. All emotions are valid and provide important information about our internal and external experiences.

Many of us have had upbringings where specific emotions may have been shamed or minimised. If this feels familiar, then before working on this activity with your child, think about your own reactions and impulses to specific emotions. Being mindful of this can help you to be a more effective co-regulator and mirror your child's emotions, including their validity. This shows your child that you are there for them, and you are not avoiding or minimising big emotions but also that these big emotions are survivable and important information about their experiences.



Moving beyond distraction as a primary emotional regulation tool

When doing these activities with your child, it is also important to try and reduce distractions in the environment. Distraction is a common strategy used to avoid emotions. While this can be a useful strategy at certain times, when other forms of regulation are not possible, it is not effective as the only strategy to manage emotions. Constantly using distraction to manage emotions means that they will not build the skills needed to better understand and regulate emotions and communicate their related feelings and needs. People who rely on distractions often find that big thoughts and emotions become more noticeable during quiet times, such as winding down during bedtime routine, or during quiet activities at school. If being present with emotions is a new experience for your child, and they have largely relied on distraction to regulate, it might be helpful to approach the following activities in short bursts particularly when exploring uncomfortable situations and the accompanying sensations.

How to mirror and model emotions

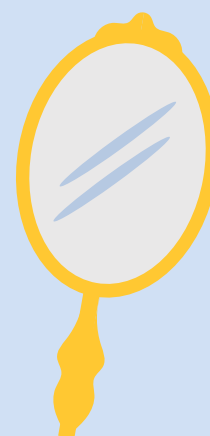
We all learn about our internal emotional experience through our interaction with others, and this is key to helping Autistic young people label sensations in the body as emotions. Some ways to you can encourage the development of emotional understanding and language include:

Modelling means demonstrating the skills yourself that you are helping your child develop. To help a child connect their sensations to emotions, you can share yourself doing this out loud. Such as, *'That was exciting – I can feel my heart racing!'*



Mirroring means reflecting what your child is feeling back to them. An example is *'I see you are red in the face and your voice has changed, are you feeling frustrated?'*

Because we can often interpret emotions incorrectly, and your child's emotional expression may not be what you expect, it's important to mirror in a way that doesn't assume. Including a question in your comment that asks if an emotion feels accurate also acts as a prompt for the child to reflect on their experience, which is ideal as it starts to then consciously connect the felt sense with emotions.



Using the activities with your child

The activities provided help Autistic young people link physical sensations to emotions by considering things they enjoy and things they dislike. For many Autistic young people with alexithymia, it can help to consider emotions in very broad ways, avoiding abstract language. It can help to develop their own vocabulary to describe emotions and feelings.

Some Autistic young people may not want to complete the work sheets. There are alternatives to participating in the activity that aligns to their interests and learning style. They could:



Build a Minecraft or Lego world



Make a mood board



Create a photo album
(digital or physical album)



Create a collage



Scrap book things they like and dislike



Write lists as they think of things



Save videos on YouTube Kids

ACTIVITY 1

Fill out the 5 points of the star with things that **make you feel good**.

It may be:


 People


 Pets or animals


 Activities


 Things

These are things you **want to keep doing**.

These are things that:

- Make you calm and happy
- You want to talk about
- You look forward to

WHAT MAKES ME FEEL GOOD

These are things you **want to do again**.

ACTIVITY 1

Fill out the 5 points of the star with things that **make you feel bad, or dislike**.

It may be:



Situations



Activities



Things

These are things you **want to avoid**.

These are things that:

- Are tough to start and feel hard.
- Make you heavy or tense in your body.
- You may not want to do again.

**WHAT MAKES
ME FEEL BAD
OR I DISLIKE**

These are things that you **don't want to do again**.

ACTIVITY 2 LOCATING AND IDENTIFYING BODY SENSATIONS

Look at your ‘What makes me feel good’ star. Choose something from that list, and if you can, go do it. Think about the sensations in your body.

The worksheet can be completed by:

Colouring in	Drawing symbols	Using stickers	Writing
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Remember – this is a prompt. There is no ‘right way’ to complete the form. It’s a template to work out sensations.

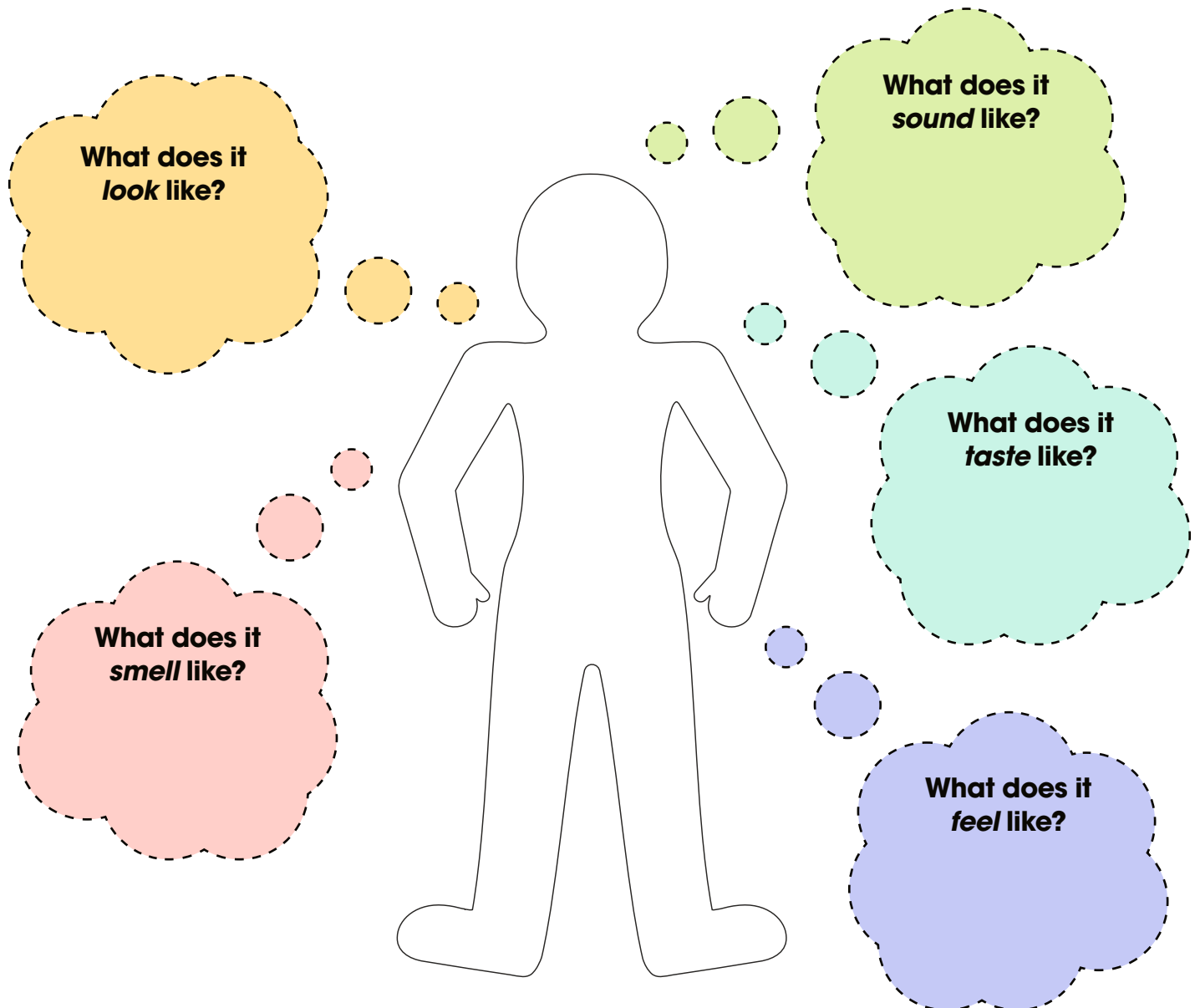


EXAMPLE

ACTIVITY 2

LOCATING AND IDENTIFYING BODY SENSATIONS

I pat my cat every day. Sometimes she will sit on my lap when I am sitting for a long time, or if she is feeling cold.



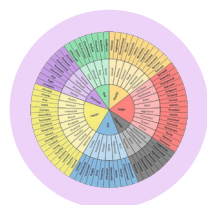
My cat feels heavy and warm on my lap. When I pat her, she will purr. When I **hear** and **feel** her purrs, my thoughts slow down and I feel warm in my chest. Her fur is very soft to touch. I can sit like this with my cats for a long time without moving.

Continue exploring feelings and emotions

If you would like to explore things further, there are a few ways you can support your child at home.



Reading fiction: Encouraging your child to read fiction can be a great way to increase their emotional vocabulary. This could be novels where characters have an expressive inner voice and describe their emotions. If your child isn't a big reader, you may consider audiobooks, comics, or graphic novels.



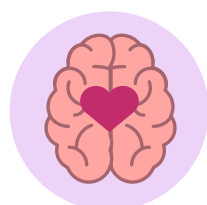
Feelings wheel: A feelings wheel connects the core emotions to feelings. Some Autistic people love the order and colour structure of a feelings wheel. You can view an example [here](#).



Journaling: Some people find benefit from keeping a journal. Your child may begin to write about their day in a descriptive way, but with prompts, they can start to write about their thoughts and feelings. You can try worksheets that prompt your child to write expressively to help build this skill.



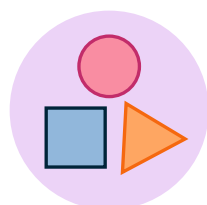
Creative arts: Engaging in creative activities can help young people connect their body and emotions. This can be art, music, dance or theatre. These art forms connect the movement of the body with emotional expression. Singing and playing a wind instrument can be a useful way to regulate the breath, which can calm the nervous system.



Mindfulness: Some young people may prefer a guided mindfulness app. Some apps use progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) which prompts the listener to focus on different body parts. This can be a useful tool for those with quieter interoceptive sensations, but for those with stronger sensations, it may be too much and could trigger anxiety.



Experiments: Some Autistic young people enjoy conducting experiments. Using a heart rate monitor, your child can explore which activities and situations make their heart rate increase, and which make it decrease. For example, taking deep breaths or drinking a glass of water can lower their heart rate. This can help build the child's understanding of interoception, emotions, and feelings.



Understanding novelty: Some strategies may work for a short period of time; this is because our nervous system seeks novelty. Eventually, our nervous system becomes uncomfortable with the strategy, and the benefits are lost. Sometimes, developing a menu of strategies can be useful. This provides a range of options to choose from. By using experiments, Autistic young people can find strategies that work best for them and develop their own self-regulation toolkit.

Support exploration to help identify strategies that suit their nervous system responses. Choosing approaches that reflect your child's preferences and interests can make these activities more engaging and effective.

Further support

Occupational therapists work with Autistic people on interoception, alexithymia, and support strategies. To find an occupational therapist, visit Occupational Therapy Australia's [Find an OT page](#).

Amaze Inc.

678 Victoria Street,
Richmond VIC 3121

Phone: 03 9657 1600

Email: info@amaze.org.au

www.amaze.org.au

 /AmazeAutismAU

 @AmazeAutismAU

 @AmazeAutism

 /AmazeAutism

Acknowledgment

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