A.002 Psychoactive substance use and alexithymia: A systematic review and meta-analysis

Bernadette KUN, Pelin ALPAY, Viktória BODÓ, Ágnes MOLNÁR, Andrea HORVÁTH, Szilvia KARSAI, Róza Sára SOMLAI, Zsofia K. TAKACS, Gyöngyi KÖKÖNYEI

Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Background. Both earlier and novel theories suggest that problems in emotional processing and emotion regulation are key factors in substance use disorders (SUD). Alexithymia has been conceptualized as a specific form of affect dysregulation containing difficulties in describing and identifying emotions, in differentiating between feelings and bodily sensations, poor and limited imagination, and an externally oriented cognitive style. The present study aimed to conduct a systematic review and meta-analysis on the association between alexithymia and any psychoactive substance use.

Method. Studies published between 1988–2022 were identified by a systematic search and 168 eligible studies were included in five meta-analyses.

Results. We found that (1) the correlation between substance use and alexithymia is small but significant ($r = 0.177$); (2) substance users have substantially higher alexithymia than nonusers ($g = 0.545$); (3) alexithymic participants have significantly but slightly higher levels of substance use than non-alexithymics ($g = 0.242$); (4) substance users are significantly but only slightly more likely to be alexithymic than nonusers (OR = 2.392); and (5) alexithymic individuals are not more likely to be substance users than non-alexithymics. Larger effects were observed among samples diagnosed with SUD, and the use of depressants, alcohol, opiates, and illicit stimulants had stronger relation to alexithymia. The difficulties in identifying feelings component of alexithymia showed the strongest association with substance use.

Conclusions. Our findings support clinical practice by suggesting the improvement of emotion regulation in SUD. Further research should investigate whether targeting emotional competencies in the prevention and treatment of SUD has a meaningful contribution.

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Ethical statement. The study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Address for correspondence: Bernadette Kun, PhD, Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary, E-mail: kun.bernadette@ppk.elte.hu.