



Alexithymia and Psychopathology in Adolescents: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Alexithymia is defined by difficulties in identifying, differentiating and expressing emotions and has been associated with a range of presentations of psychological distress in adolescence. The objective of this systematic review was to analyse the available scientific evidence on the link between alexithymia and psychopathology in adolescents, considering the main emotional and behavioural manifestations and associated factors. A systematic literature review was conducted through searches in Scopus and Web of Science, complemented by Google Scholar, with the terms “alexitimia”, “alexithymia”, “adolescentes” and “adolescents”, combined with Boolean operators. Studies published between 2021 and 2025, available in full text and conducted with adolescent populations, were included. The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Sixteen studies were selected, and their findings showed associations mainly with depressive symptoms, self-harm behaviors, difficulties in emotion regulation, and eating-related problems. Associations with somatization, anxiety, aggression, and substance use were also identified, as well as factors such as childhood maltreatment and trauma, negative life events, peer victimization, and family context. The evidence suggests that alexithymia is a relevant component in understanding psychopathology during adolescence and requires further investigation through longitudinal designs.

Keywords: Adolescents; Alexithymia; Emotion regulation; Mental health; Psychopathology.

Introduction

Alexithymia has been linked to various manifestations of psychological distress during adolescence, particularly the presence of negative life events in adolescents with depression and with the coexistence of somatization and self-harming behaviors (Gatta et al., 2022; X. Wang et al., 2021). In this sense, the school environment constitutes a relevant setting for addressing alexithymia, given that a psychoeducational intervention aimed at the recognition and emotional expression showed a reduction in levels of alexithymia and anger expression, while also identifying differences in levels of alexithymia according to the adolescents' gender (Iuso et al., 2022; Szepietowska et al., 2023).

From a contextual perspective, the family environment acquires special relevance in understanding this issue, as alexithymia has been linked to problems related to eating behavior and the psychological consequences of adverse experiences during development; specifically, familial alexithymia has been associated with the severity of eating disorders and, in turn, has participated in the relationship between child maltreatment and internalizing and externalizing problems (Hamel et al., 2024; Marazzi et al.,

2023). Complementarily, childhood trauma and peer victimization were associated with emotional and behavioral difficulties during adolescence, with evidence of relationships between trauma, alexithymia, and psychological symptoms, as well as between victimization, alexithymia, and non-suicidal self-injury (Ruan et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024).

Based on this evidence, subsequent research expanded the analysis to emotion regulation, impulsivity, depressive symptoms, and problematic mobile phone use, identifying associations between these variables and alexithymia in adolescents and young adults with mood disorders (Di Benedetto et al., 2025; Tian et al., 2025). Likewise, alexithymic difficulties were related to consumption behaviors and alterations in interoception, with emotion regulation playing a role in the relationship between alexithymia and substance use, as well as associations between alexithymia, anxiety, depression, and anorexia nervosa (Hatami et al., 2025; Lahaye et al., 2025).

In the same vein, research focused on more severe clinical manifestations identified relationships between difficulties in identifying emotions and suicidal ideation in adolescents with major depressive disorder, while alexithymia, along with insomnia, was involved in the relationship between child

maltreatment and aggression (Shi et al., 2025a; Wang et al., 2025). On the other hand, the relationship between maltreatment and self-harm also showed the involvement of alexithymia, while resilience appeared as a psychological resource related to self-harming behaviors in adolescents (Adak et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2025b).

More recently, the analysis of alexithymia incorporated impulsivity, self-esteem, emotion regulation, and neurobiological mechanisms as dimensions related to self-harming or suicidal behaviors in adolescents (Ma et al., 2026; Yenen et al., 2026). In turn, emotion regulation was linked to coping strategies in adolescents with alexithymia, while difficulties in emotion regulation were associated with maladaptive eating behaviors in adolescents with depression (Ardıç & Küçükdağ, 2026; Selvi & Şimşek, 2026).

Overall, the gathered evidence allows us to recognize that alexithymia is linked to psychopathological manifestations of an emotional, behavioral, and somatic nature during adolescence, although these associations have been examined across different psychopathological manifestations and contexts (Selvi & Şimşek, 2026; Shi et al., 2025a). Consequently, this diversity of approaches highlights the need to integrate the available findings to establish a joint understanding of the main psychopathological manifestations associated with alexithymia and the factors accompanying this relationship during adolescence (Ardıç & Küçükdağ, 2026; Ma et al., 2026).

There is a knowledge gap due to the dispersion of findings regarding the various psychopathological manifestations and factors associated with alexithymia, which hinders an integrated understanding of this relationship during adolescence. In this context, the objective of the present systematic review was to analyze the available scientific evidence on the relationship between alexithymia and psychopathology in adolescents, considering the main emotional and behavioral manifestations, as well as the associated factors identified in the selected studies.

Materials and Methods

A systematic literature review was conducted with a qualitative documentary approach and a non-experimental design, to identify, organize and synthesize scientific evidence on the relationship between alexithymia and psychopathology in adolescents. The unit of analysis was original scientific articles published in full text in indexed scientific journals in the period 2021-2025.

The bibliographic search was mainly done on Scopus and Web of Science, complemented by Google Scholar to extend the retrieval of studies and to confirm the availability of full texts. Boolean operators AND and OR were used to combine the terms "alexitimia," "alexithymia," "adolescents," and "adolescents." The search took into account publications of the period 2021–2025 and prioritized research directly related to alexithymia and variables related to adolescent mental health.

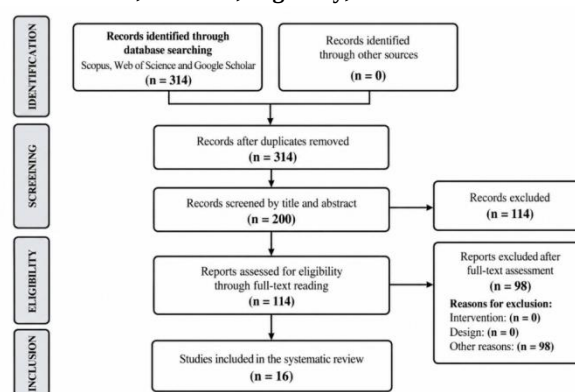
Inclusion and exclusion criteria were previously established. Original research studies conducted with adolescent populations, published in Spanish or English, available in full text, and directly related to alexithymia were included. Studies conducted on adult populations, duplicate records, documents without full-text access, theses, book chapters, conference proceedings, and publications that did not directly address the study variable were excluded.

The selection process was carried out in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, through the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. Initially, 314 records were identified, of which 200 were evaluated through title and abstract, and subsequently, 114 reports were evaluated through full-text reading. After applying the eligibility criteria, 98 reports were excluded and finally 16 articles were selected for the systematic review. Likewise, the indexing and quartile of the journals were verified using the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), considering studies published in journals classified in Q1 and Q2.

The information from the selected studies was organized using a data extraction matrix, in which the author, year, country, objective, methodological design, sample, instrument, main results, limitations, journal, database, and indexing were recorded. Subsequently, the findings were examined through narrative synthesis and thematic analysis, organizing them according to the main psychopathological manifestations and the factors associated with alexithymia identified in the selected evidence.

The systematic review was conducted in accordance with principles of honesty, transparency, responsibility, respect for authorship and scientific integrity. The evidence was selected, analyzed and interpreted with objectivity and rigor, with appropriate citation of the sources and fidelity to the results reported in the original studies. As the study was based solely on documentary sources and did not directly involve human participants, informed consent and intervention procedures were not required. Transparency and traceability were maintained throughout the identification, selection, analysis, and synthesis of the evidence.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the process of identification, selection, eligibility, and inclusion of studies



Source: own elaboration based on the included studies.

Results and Discussion

General characteristics of the included studies

The selection process allowed the inclusion of 16 scientific studies, developed in different geographical contexts and through different methodological designs, published between 2021 and 2025. The evidence was mainly based on studies conducted on adolescent populations with and without psychopathological conditions such as depression, eating disorders and self-harming behaviors, and addressed

alexithymia in relation to emotional, behavioral, familial and psychosocial variables.

The selected evidence involved cross-sectional, correlational, comparative, quasi-experimental, mediation, structural equation modeling, and network analysis designs. This heterogeneity allowed the analysis of alexithymia not only as an attribute associated with various psychopathological expressions, but also as a variable associated with emotional mechanisms, adverse experiences and risk behaviors.

Table 1. Characteristics of the studies included in the systematic review

Code	Author (year)	Country	Sample	Design	Main variables
A1	Wang et al. (2021)	China	293	Cross-sectional	Alexithymia, depression, life events
A2	Iuso et al. (2022)	Italy	191	Quasi-experimental	Alexithymia, anger, psychoeducation
A3	Gatta et al. (2022)	Italy	184	Correlational	Alexithymia, somatization, self-harm
A4	Szepietowska et al. (2023)	Poland	730	Cross-sectional	Alexithymia, sex
A5	Marazzi et al. (2023)	Italy	67	Correlational	Family alexithymia, eating disorders
A6	Hamel et al. (2024)	Canada	1802	Mediation	Alexithymia, maltreatment, internalizing/externalizing problems
A7	Sharma et al. (2024)	India	100	Mediation	Trauma, emotion regulation, alexithymia
A8	Ruan et al. (2024)	China	2243	Mediational	Alexithymia, victimization, self-harm
A9	Di Benedetto et al. (2025)	Italy	115	Comparative	Alexithymia, emotion regulation, impulsivity
A10	Tian et al. (2025)	China	286	Cross-sectional	Alexithymia, depression, mobile phone addiction
A11	Hatami et al. (2025)	Iran	400	Structural equation modeling	Alexithymia, emotion regulation, substance use
A12	Lahaye et al. (2025)	France	20	Cross-sectional	Alexithymia, interoception, anxiety, depression
A13	Shi et al. (2025a)	China	329	Network analysis	Alexithymia, empathy, suicidal ideation
A14	Wang et al. (2025)	China	251	Mediation	Alexithymia, maltreatment, insomnia, aggression
A15	Shi et al. (2025b)	China	260	Structural equation modeling	Alexithymia, maltreatment, self-harm
A16	Adak et al. (2025)	Türkiye	185	Comparative	Alexithymia, resilience, self-harm

Source: own elaboration based on the included studies.

Psychopathological manifestations associated with alexithymia

In relation to the general objective, the 16 studies analyzed evidenced that alexithymia was linked to various

psychopathological manifestations during adolescence, mainly highlighting depressive symptoms, self-harming behaviors, and difficulties in emotion regulation. Associations were also identified with eating disorders, suicidal ideation, impulsivity, aggressiveness, anxiety, somatization, substance use, and problematic mobile phone use.

Depression constituted one of the most recurrent manifestations, while self-harming behaviors gained special relevance in studies conducted with adolescents who exhibited depressive symptoms or exposure to adverse experiences. Similarly, difficulties in emotion regulation emerged as a cross-cutting component, participating in the relationship between alexithymia and various psychological and behavioral problems.

Table 2. Psychopathological manifestations associated with alexithymia

Psychopathological manifestation	Frequency	Studies
Depression/depressive symptoms	6	Wang et al. (2021); Tian et al. (2025); Lahaye et al. (2025); Shi et al. (2025a); Wang et al. (2025); Adak et al. (2025)
Self-harming behaviors/non-suicidal self-injury	5	Gatta et al. (2022); Ruan et al. (2024); Shi et al. (2025a); Shi et al. (2025b); Adak et al. (2025)
Difficulties in emotion regulation	4	Sharma et al. (2024); Di Benedetto et al. (2025); Hatami et al. (2025); Iuso et al. (2022)
Eating disorders/behaviors	2	Marazzi et al. (2023); Lahaye et al. (2025)
Suicidal ideation	1	Shi et al. (2025a)
Impulsivity	1	Di Benedetto et al. (2025)
Somatization	1	Gatta et al. (2022)
Aggressiveness	1	Wang et al. (2025)
Anxiety	1	Lahaye et al. (2025)
Substance use	1	Hatami et al. (2025)
Mobile phone addiction	1	Tian et al. (2025)
Anger	1	Iuso et al. (2022)

Source: own elaboration based on the included studies.

Associated factors and mechanisms related to alexithymia

Regarding the associated factors, the studies showed that alexithymia was related to adverse experiences during development, family characteristics, sociodemographic factors, and psychological variables. Among the identified elements, child abuse, trauma, peer victimization, familial alexithymia, sex, age, emotion regulation, and resilience stood out.

In particular, the mediation models showed that alexithymia can intervene in the relationship between adverse experiences and psychopathological manifestations, especially in the context of child abuse, internalizing and externalizing problems, aggression, and self-harm. Likewise, emotion regulation was identified as a relevant mechanism for understanding the relationship between alexithymia and different risk behaviors.

Table 3. Factors associated with alexithymia in adolescents

Associated factor	Studies	Main findings
Sex	Szepietowska et al. (2023); Di Benedetto et al. (2025); Hatami et al. (2025)	Differences were identified in the levels and characteristics of alexithymia according to sex.
Age	Di Benedetto et al. (2025); Hatami et al. (2025)	Age was associated with the intensity and expression of alexithymic traits.
Family context	Marazzi et al. (2023); Hamel et al. (2024)	Family dynamics and family alexithymia were associated with greater emotional vulnerability.
Childhood maltreatment	Hamel et al. (2024); Wang et al. (2025); Shi et al. (2025b)	Childhood maltreatment was associated with higher levels of alexithymia and psychopathological behaviors.

Childhood trauma	Sharma et al. (2024)	Childhood trauma was associated with alexithymia and difficulties in emotion regulation.
Peer victimization	Ruan et al. (2024)	Peer victimization was associated with alexithymia and nonsuicidal self-injury.
Negative life events	Wang et al. (2021)	Negative life events were associated with a greater presence of alexithymia.
Emotion regulation	Sharma et al. (2024); Di Benedetto et al. (2025); Hatami et al. (2025)	Emotion regulation constituted a relevant mechanism in the relationship between alexithymia and psychological problems.
Resilience	Adak et al. (2025)	Lower resilience was observed among adolescents with self-harm behaviors and higher levels of alexithymia.

Source: own elaboration based on the included studies.

Overall, the 16 studies show that alexithymia is consistently related to different expressions of psychopathology in adolescents, especially with depression, self-harm, and difficulties in emotion regulation. The evidence also indicates that this relationship is linked to adverse experiences, family conditions, sociodemographic characteristics, and psychological mechanisms, which allows for understanding alexithymia as a multidimensional phenomenon associated with psychopathological vulnerability during adolescence. Depressive symptoms constituted one of the most recurrent manifestations. Wang et al. (2021) identified a high prevalence of alexithymia in adolescents with depression and its association with negative life events. Likewise, Tian et al. (2025) found a relationship between alexithymia, depression, and mobile phone addiction in adolescents with major depressive disorder. These findings show that difficulties in emotional processing occur alongside different expressions of psychological distress during adolescence.

Self-harming behaviors constituted another significant manifestation. Gatta et al. (2022) found a relationship between alexithymia, somatization, and self-harm, while Ruan et al. (2024) identified the involvement of alexithymia in the relationship between peer victimization and non-suicidal self-harm. For their part, Shi et al. (2025a) associated difficulties in identifying emotions with suicidal ideation, and Shi et al. (2025b) observed the involvement of alexithymia in the relationship between child maltreatment and non-suicidal self-injury. Difficulties in emotion regulation also showed a significant relationship with alexithymia. Sharma et al. (2024) linked childhood trauma, emotion regulation, and alexithymia with psychological symptoms in adolescents. Similarly, Di Benedetto et al. (2025) linked these difficulties with impulsivity and mood disorders, while Hatami et al. (2025) found a relationship between alexithymia, emotion regulation, and substance use.

Regarding eating behavior, Marazzi et al. (2023) identified a relationship between familial alexithymia and the severity of restrictive eating disorders. Likewise, Lahaye et al. (2025) analyzed alexithymia along with interoception, anxiety, and depression in adolescents with anorexia nervosa. These results show that difficulties in emotional processing are also present in adolescents with eating disorders. Regarding the

implications for mental health and behavior, Tian et al. (2025) linked alexithymia with depression and mobile phone addiction, while Wang et al. (2025) identified the involvement of alexithymia and insomnia in the relationship between child abuse and aggression. On the other hand, Iuso et al. (2022) observed that a psychoeducational intervention was associated with a reduction in alexithymic difficulties and an improvement in anger expression.

Among the associated factors, adverse experiences during development were particularly relevant. Hamel et al. (2024) found that alexithymia was involved in the relationship between child maltreatment and internalizing and externalizing problems. Sharma et al. (2024) linked childhood trauma with difficulties in emotion regulation and alexithymia, while Shi et al. (2025b) identified its involvement in the relationship between child maltreatment and non-suicidal self-injury. Social and family factors also showed relevance. Ruan et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of peer victimization in relation to alexithymia and non-suicidal self-injury, while Marazzi et al. (2023) demonstrated the importance of the family context in adolescents with eating disorders. Wang et al. (2021), for their part, related negative life events to alexithymia and depression.

Regarding sociodemographic variables, Szepietowska et al. (2023) analyzed differences by sex, while Di Benedetto et al. (2025) and Hatami et al. (2025) incorporated sex and age variables along with emotional and behavioral processes. However, the differences should be interpreted considering the diversity of samples and contexts of the included studies. In an integrative manner, the findings show that alexithymia is related to various psychopathological expressions in adolescents and that this relationship involves individual, familial, and social factors. Difficulties in emotional identification and expression are linked to both internalizing and externalizing manifestations, so their understanding requires considering the interaction between emotional processes and the adolescent's context (Hamel et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024; Ruan et al., 2024; Adak et al., 2025).

Finally, the results should be interpreted considering the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies, especially due to differences in samples, contexts, and

assessment instruments. Moreover, due to the presence of correlational, cross-sectional, and mediation studies, the findings allow for establishing associations but do not demonstrate definitive causal relationships (Gatta et al., 2022; Szepietowska et al., 2023; Lahaye et al., 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present systematic review allowed for the analysis of the available scientific evidence on the relationship between alexithymia and psychopathology in adolescents. The 16 selected studies, published between 2021 and 2025, evidenced that alexithymia is mainly related to depressive manifestations, self-harming behaviors, difficulties in emotion regulation, and problems associated with eating behavior. Likewise, relationships with somatization, anxiety, aggressiveness, substance use, and other behavioral difficulties were identified.

The findings also identified various factors associated with alexithymia, among which child abuse and trauma, negative life events, peer victimization, and certain family and sociodemographic factors stand out. In this sense, the reviewed evidence shows that alexithymia is linked to adolescent psychopathology within a multifactorial context, in which emotional characteristics, adverse experiences, and environmental conditions are involved.

Overall, the results allow us to conclude that alexithymia constitutes a relevant characteristic for understanding different manifestations of psychological distress during adolescence. However, due to the heterogeneity of the designs and the predominance of correlational research, the results should be interpreted in terms of association and not causation. It is therefore necessary to strengthen the evidence through longitudinal studies that allow for understanding the evolution of alexithymia and its relationship with psychopathology throughout adolescent development.

It is recommended to increase the detection of difficulties related to the identification, understanding and expression of emotions in adolescents who present psychopathological symptoms, especially depression, self-injurious behaviors, difficulties with emotion regulation and problems related to eating behavior. Likewise, it is recommended to include strategies aimed at developing emotional competencies and emotion regulation in the school, family and clinical contexts, taking into account the particular characteristics and needs of adolescents.

Future research should use longitudinal designs, larger and more heterogeneous samples, and aim at better establishing the development of alexithymia and its relationship to different psychopathological manifestations. It is also important to expand research to adolescents from different sociocultural backgrounds. Finally, the authors suggest the need for systematic reviews including recent and methodologically comparable evidence and clearly established selection criteria, so as to enhance the understanding of the factors related to alexithymia and its implications for mental health in adolescence.

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