The authors of this book provide an entirely new perspective on how emotions influence mental and physical health. They present recent thinking about the development and regulation of emotions and argue that several common but difficult to treat psychiatric illnesses, including drug addictions, eating disorders, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorders, are a consequence of an inability to regulate distressing emotions through mental processes. The book also advances a model in which dysregulated emotions may alter other bodily systems and thereby contribute to the development of physical illnesses and diseases. This book offers a valuable and stimulating reference for clinicians and researchers alike.
DISORDERS OF AFFECT REGULATION
Alexithymia in medical and psychiatric illness
Disorders of affect regulation
Alexithymia in medical and psychiatric illness

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To the memory of my friend and colleague Arthur H. Sohn  

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To the memory of my uncle James W. Bagby III  

RMB

For Anne and Dorothy  

JDAP
Contents

Foreword
JAMES S. GROTSTEIN xi

Acknowledgments xix

Acknowledgment of permission for use of material xxi

Introduction
GRAEML TAYLOR 1

[1] The development and regulation of affects
GRAEML TAYLOR, MICHAEL BAGBY AND JAMES PARKER 7

[2] Affect dysregulation and alexithymia
MICHAEL BAGBY AND GRAEML TAYLOR 26

MICHAEL BAGBY AND GRAEML TAYLOR 46

[4] Relations between alexithymia, personality, and affects
JAMES PARKER AND GRAEML TAYLOR 67

[5] The neurobiology of emotion, affect regulation, and alexithymia
JAMES PARKER AND GRAEML TAYLOR 93

[6] Somatoform disorders
GRAEML TAYLOR 114

[7] Anxiety and depressive disorders and a note on personality disorders
MICHAEL BAGBY AND GRAEML TAYLOR 138

[8] Substance use disorders
GRAEML TAYLOR 166
x CONTENTS

[9] Eating disorders
GRAEME TAYLOR 190

[10] Affects and alexithymia in medical illness and disease
GRAEME TAYLOR 216

GRAEME TAYLOR 248

[12] Future directions
JAMES PARKER, MICHAEL BAGBY AND GRAEME TAYLOR 267
Appendix 272
References 274
Index 351
Foreword
Alexithymia: the exception that proves the rule – of the unusual significance of affects

by James S. Grotstein, MD
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THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS THAT
REASON KNOWS NOT OF.

Pensées: Pascal

The work of these authors represents a signal contribution to the study of affects, emotions, and feelings, whether from the perspective of empirical research or for its clinical application to psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Alexithymia, the construct they have nominated to represent a cluster of deficits in the capacity to process emotions from the cognitive perspective, reveals by its cognitive processing failure its healthy, intact counterpart in the normal individual and thereby helps illuminate the unusual significance of emotional life for all of us. Advances in developmental psychology, neurobiology, infant development research, trauma research, new concepts of personality development, and newer concepts in psychoanalysis have all contributed to the evolution of a new and distinct entity, that of self-regulation in general and of affect regulation in particular. In regard to the latter it should be understood that one’s ability to regulate one’s affects is paired in turn with the need to allow these affects to regulate one’s thinking and behaviour.

The role of affects in psychoanalytic theory has evolved over time from Freud’s early discharge model and, as such, as a step-child to the instinctual drives, to its presently emerging status as subordinating the drives within the broad sweep of its new found relevance. In this new conceptual model, dysregulated emotions escape from the individual’s self-regulating, self-organizing reciprocal feed-back loop and may instead pathologically alter biopsychosocial systems at random. Implicit in this new conception is the sense of an intimate, almost
indivisible, connection between affects and their contribution to the
cognitive processing of them as the valid data of one’s own personal
experience. What had become lost sight of in Freud’s original formulation
of libido theory has now re-emerged in the more suitable garb of
affects – as the more all-inclusive entity. If we were to re-read Freud
today, I think a good case could be made for our being able to
substitute affect for libido – or, for that matter, the whole ensemble of
associated ideas subsumed under his concept of the pleasure principle.
The very concept of ‘sexualization of trauma’, for instance, or the
‘libidinization of experience’ are but other ways of talking about
personalizing one’s relationship to the event so as to claim a personal
subjective sense of agency in terms of one’s response to it. At the extreme
alexithymic individuals are virtually organismic automatons functioning
in a one- to two-dimensional world, one that is deprived of the
fullness of feeling.

Affect theory is, in other words, the study of how we were personally
‘affected’ by the event as well as being able to gauge the importance,
significance, and meaning for us in terms of cognitive evaluation,
planning, adaptation, etc. Affects, like the drives which they now are
understood to include, constitute the ‘adjectives’, the definers, of
human experience as well as the on-going reformulators of the meaning
and significance of that experience. Consequently affects, though
rooted in biology, now include a cognitive/experiencing dimension as
well as a behavioural one. As a result, affects cognitively extend to such
functions as attention, appraisal, amplification, imagination, mental
representation, defense mechanisms, dreams, and verbal communication.
Affects allow us to value, validate, and appreciate the objects we
depend on and allow them, when internalized within us, to grow in
value. This mutuality is predicated upon the idea of the sociability of
feelings. That is fundamentally how we develop and mature – from the
basis of our identifications with ever-valued and ever-valuing internal
objects – who also can be mourned – with value. The fate of the
alexithymic individual is more starkly different.
The authors proffer the concept of alexithymia as a personality
construct that reflects a significant disorder in affect regulation, one
that constitutes an important risk factor for psychological and physical
disease, and they implicate it in somatoform disorders, eating dis-
orders, substance abuse, panic disorder, and other illnesses. Drs
Taylor, Bagby, and Parker conceive of alexithymia as an affect pro-
cessing disorder that interrupts or seriously interferes with the organ-
ism’s self-organizing and re-organizing processes, all part of a hitherto
mysterious third area of involvement, one that is situated between the
physiology of the soma and the cerebral processes of the mind.
Alexithymia, as a disorder of affect regulation and mediation, finds its cognitive analogue in the thought disorders of schizophrenics. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy deal fundamentally with the emotional life of the individual, but we have begun to realize that the tools they have traditionally employed were borrowed from cognitive thinking about emotions. Analysts and therapists have long known that their patients were generally afraid of their feelings, both in experiencing them and in knowing about them. The construct of alexithymia offers a partial rationale for this fear. If feelings cannot be processed, then the feeling, as signifier of internal states automatically becomes the signified horror that it would normally signal. Thus, becoming aware of one’s feelings runs the risk in these cases of unleashing raw proto-affect avalanches. As a consequence, affect-unprepared individuals (those with alexithymia) must instigate a coerctation of the affect cascade that otherwise would inundate them. When we consider some of the symptoms associated with alexithymia, such as anhedonia, paucity of phantasy, imagination, and dream life, etc., might it be that alexithymia represents a defect of primary process, one that I have already postulated occurs in schizophrenia?

The significance of alexithymia is that it is the exception that proves the rule; that is, from its perspective a whole panorama of failed emotional processing becomes apparent, and we get a vaster perspective of the importance of emotional life in a holistic sense. We know what we have hitherto only intuited; that affects are the ‘silent service’ of our self-organizing and self-maintenance processes which interface both with soma and with mind particularly and comprises them holistically at the same time.

The authors present alexithymia in the context of a broad nosology. It not only constitutes an inherent personality aberration in its own right, but it also constitutes a secondary accompaniment of trauma, and also emerges secondarily as a consequence of attachment and bonding failures. The authors go further, however, and suggest that alexithymia may be a universal feature to one degree or another in all human beings. Fairbairn (1952) similarly conceived of schizoid nosology as comprising a unique personality type and at the same a virtually universal factor in every individual. Kohut (1971, 1977) likewise applied this double theory to narcissism. Perhaps the overall significance that the alexithymia construct offers us is as a model in those affected for the failure of affects to be regarded as valid signals for mental processing.

Now that emotions, affects, and feelings are worthy, enfranchised partners to cognitive mental life, we can evaluate how they interact with one another — from the point of view of their separate but equal status, but we must also consider that they are so intricately
intertwined that they are functionally indivisible (holistic). Yet if we were to separate them for a moment and compare abstract thought with pure feeling, an interesting feature quickly comes to light. Thoughts occupy the third to fourth dimensions of space and time in terms of length, width, breadth, and linear succession. They belong, as Bion (1962, 1965) advises us, to the sensuous domain of perception. Proto-affects, on the other hand, are non-sensuous and may be time-less, chaotic, dimensionless, unbounded, infinite. Whereas anxiety may adaptively help prepare us for anticipated dangers in the future, panic, by contrast, is dramatic in its terrifying immediacy, is direction-less in its vector, and is experienced as unbounded, infinite, and eternal, i.e. there is no past or future, and there is no space. Whereas Freud reminded us, from the hegemony of the instinctual drive perspective, that psychic trauma represented the irruption of the drives into the ego, we now see that the feared content of the unconscious is not so much the drives as it is the chaos, infinite sets, unmodified inherent pre-conceptions, and 'beta elements' (Bion’s [1962] term for the unmentaledized data of human experience [Mitrani, 1995]), all of which are under the proto-affective umbrella, that constitutes the potentially threatening agent.

In-between the experience of mild and severe emotions there exists the capacity in all of us to be both logical as well as illogical. We are born with the propensity for illogical thinking, according to the infant developmentalist, Eugene Subbotsky (1993), and that propensity is probably what Freud meant by primary process and what Klein assumed to be the basis for unconscious phantasy. Matte-Blanco (1988) refers to this dual capacity as bi-logic, which includes the asymmetrical logic of Freud’s secondary process and the symmetrical logic of his primary process. Together, they comprise what he terms the heterogenic mode of thinking. Emotions veer toward symmetry, thus their propensity to be personal, exaggerated, and seemingly irrational. Matte-Blanco (1988) states:

We know . . . that thinking is the purest expression of the heterogenic mode: the abyss of the incompatibility between the ways in which both modes of being live in the world . . . . Feeling is not normal logical thinking but also contains or expresses some type of bi-logical thinking. When Pascal said that the heart has its reasons which Reason does not understand, it seems to me that . . . he was, unawares, referring to the fundamental antinomy of human beings and world (p. 76).

Later he states:

If the whole world becomes one and indivisible, to our limited intel-lect this amounts to the complete disappearance of the heterogenic
mode; like a ferocious beast, the symmetrical or indivisible mode had 'eaten up' all that there was to eat! (p. 81).

Finally:

In the end nothing is found which leads to a clear and neat psychological distinction between emotion and the unconscious (p. 84).

In other words, Matte Blanco seems to equate the symmetry and the infinite sets of the unconscious with the existence of emotional life, the latter of which then gradually becomes modified as it interacts with the asymmetry of bivalent logic.

The matter of boundlessness or infinity, to which I alluded above, has been addressed recently by a number of different but converging contributions, which include Bion's (1965, 1972, 1992) concept of 'transformations in "O"' and his 'beta element's', Lacan's (1966) concept of the 'Register of the Real', and Kauffman's (1993, 1999) ideas about chaos and complexity theory. One must also cite the seminal ideas of Kant (1787), especially his concept of 'the thing-in-itself', the 'noumenon'. What Freud (1923) called the 'seething cauldron' was meant to be representative of the peremptory irruption of the instinctual drives into the ego. Freud was not yet aware of the probability that what 'seething' force was more apposite for the affects than the drives. Kant's, Bion's, Lacan's, Matte-Blanco's, and Kauffman's contributions help us to reinterpret the id as being characterized by symmetry (boundlessness), infinity, chaos, complexity, and ineffability. Bion's concept of 'O' and Lacan's concept of the Real each deal with the domain of the ineffable, which is Absolute Reality, Ultimate Truth, the domain that can never be embraced by imagination and symbolization. When one is unprepared to experience it, it approximates the specular catastrophe of Sodom and Gomorrah. When one is ready, it can become spiritually transcendent (Grotstein, 1996). Klein (1940), working with Freud's original model of drives and affects, made a signal contribution by formulating an epigenesis of the processing of affects. She conceived that the early infant wishes to preserve the pleasure ego by evacuating its painful feelings of persecutory anxiety into the object through splitting and projective identification in the paranoid-schizoid position. As the infant developmentally progresses, it becomes more able with the object's help to tolerate and to own its own feelings. This accomplishment is a feature of the attainment of the depressive position. One can say that the earlier infant is developmentally 'alexithymic' but, with normal maturational epigenesis, achieves lexicthymia. Bion (1959, 1962), following in Klein's footsteps, conceived of the container and contained model in which mother's emotional/cognitive processing ('alpha function',...
‘reverie’) of her infant’s raw projected feelings of distress transformed them into gentle, defused interpretations for the infant to learn about its feeling repertoire.

Silvan Tomkins (1962, 1963), amongst others, has helped to launch this new conception of the superordinating role of affects that allows for a distinction between positive and negative affects and for their being innate preconceptions that included the drives as subordinated within them. Lichtenberg (1989) completed the task by re-examining the drives in terms of complex motivational systems. In addition, we now have reason to believe that affect regulation is of critical importance for infant brain development. Recently, Schore (1994) summarized a vast array of neuro-developmental research and concluded that the mother’s skill in the proper affective attunement (containment) of her infant has a direct effect on the quantity and quality of her infant’s brain development, especially up to and including the practising subphase of separation-individuation, particularly involving the orbito-frontal cortex.

Alexithymia, the disorder of affect regulation, expression, and experience, reveals its normal counterpart in its very dysfunction, a hitherto hidden order that orchestrates affects and which unites them in some kind of synthesis with cognition, adaption, and interpersonal as well as intra-personal relationships. I should like to propose two models to embrace the new concept of affects that the authors are proposing, each of which is virtually interchangeable with the other and which together belong to the dual-track principle. One is the image of the virtual or abstract ‘Siamese-twin’, and the other is the concept of holography. In the former, one can conceive of affects and cognition as both separate and yet at the same time paradoxically connected. The putative ‘appearance’ of their separateness in the twinship is for experiential discriminatory convenience. Actually, they can never really be separated.

Holography offers yet another point of view. A hologram is created when two laser beams are directed in such a way that one beam is aimed directly at the ultimate target while the other beam is directed toward an object that is so arranged that the laser beam penetrates it and is then refracted toward the target. The resulting shimmering image represents a visual paradox insofar as it is, on one hand, holistic but, on the other, represents a virtually infinite number of minute simulacra of the holistic entity. These models are my attempts to help comprehend the complexity of this new model of affect ↔ cognition ↔ perception ↔ sensation ↔ behaviour, which can be expressed both with the reversible arrows and simultaneously without them – as if they were a holistically one.
Cartesian dualism was a product of the Enlightenment and, in its
proverbial linearity, constrained the concept of the psyche and soma
into two polarized twins which had been arbitrarily separated from one
another with the former being assigned the role of dominance. This
model is implicit in Newtonian physics. In our current century the
emergence of such new ideas as the law of relativity (Einstein) and the
principle of uncertainty (Heisenberg) superimposed another cohering
order atop the Newtonian. From a more practical standpoint we can
understand the application of this principle in our clinical work as the
emergence of such ideas as intersubjectivity, the two-person model,
contextualization theory, information theory, cybernetic reciprocal
feed-back loops, and organismic self-organizing directedness toward
self-regulation – and self-information – instead of the earlier notion of
the prime aim of instinctual drives and affects being to discharge in
order to reduce unpleasurable tension.

Alexithymia, as a construct about a defect in emotional processing in
relationship to cognition, throws a new light on the role of emotions,
affects, and feelings. Perhaps we can analogize the role that affects play
with thoughts with that of prosody and language, in which prosody
adds a critical and ineffable dimension to the overall meaning of the
narrative. Prosody in addition to timber are what allows one to
recognize the distinctive, unique features of the other’s identity on the
telephone. Another analogue for the relationship between affect and
cognition is one borrowed from neurophysiology. We now know that
the ascending and descending tracts of the reticular activating system
are situated astride the distributions of the peripheral and subcortical
nervous systems and constitute a self-instigating module for its self-
organizing and self-regulating functions.

Thanks to this seminal work and the numerous other contributions
that are summarized in it, we can now see cognition and emotions as
two sides of the same coin – fundamentally indivisible but yet appearing
to be divisible for perceptual and conceptual simplicity and conven-
ience. The same “Siamese-twinship” unity seems to be true for the
relationship between affects and the instinctual drives, whose new-
found unity is best expressed in the all but forgotten word passion.

There were many contributions that prefigured this great paradigm
shift in psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Freud’s original discharge
model for affects and drives gradually revealed its limitations.
Hartmann’s (1939) conception of adaptation represented a significant
attempt to portray the notion of the importance of the interrelation-
ship between the infant and mother. Erikson (1959) carried this idea
even farther in terms of the epigenesis of modes and modalities in the
infant and child for interaction with a reciprocally evolving cultural
environment. Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980, 1988a) codified this idea with his pivotal concepts of attachment and bonding. Ferenczi (1951, 1988), Fairbairn (1952) and Winnicott (1952) anticipated Bowlby’s contributions. Bion (1959, 1962), as mentioned earlier, simultaneously developed the conception of the container and contained in terms of the mother’s capacity to absorb, contain, process, and interpret her infant’s affect states. His contribution is especially apposite to the construct of alexithymia insofar as he specified the task of the containing mother – and the analyst by implication – to be, unlike Winnicott’s ‘holding environment’, a processing, that is, an interpretive naming of feelings function.

The authors also proffer some helpful suggestions for treatment. Analogous to Bion’s (1959, 1962) concept of maternal containment, they advocate that analysts and therapists who have primary or secondary alexithymic patients in their case load would do well to spend more time in educating them about their feelings and be able to show them the importance of appreciating the messenger service they impart, for which they ultimately would be grateful.
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The idea for this book grew out of a program of research on the alexithymia construct that we have conducted over the past 12 years. During that time, our thinking was stimulated by discussions with many clinicians and researchers in the fields of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, personality psychology, developmental psychology, and psychosomatic medicine, but we would particularly like to thank Drs Jack Brandes, Morris Eagle, John Elliott, John Flannery, Ray Freebury, Renata Gaddini, James Grotstein, Henry Krystal, Richard Lane, Mark Haviland, Joyce McDougall, John Nemiah, William Rickles, John Salvendy, Peter Sifneos, Herbert Weiner, Thomas Wise, and the late Dr Arthur Sohn.

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Interest in alexithymia and disorders of affect regulation has increased considerably over the past decade and there are now numerous investigators in many different countries who are conducting research studies on this topic. We have had the privilege of being able to exchange ideas and/or work collaboratively with several investigators in different parts of the world, and express our appreciation to Drs Marvin Acklin, Michael Bach, António Barbosa, Margarita Beresneviáté, Michael Bourke, Cinzia Bressi, Rui Mota Cardoso, Roberto Delle Chiaie, Karen Cohen, Isao Fukunishi, Giordano Invernizzi, Juhan Julkunen, Jussi Kauhanen, John Krystal, Wolfgang Linden, Carmen Loiselle, Mark Lumley, Manas Mandal, Franco Orsucci, Piero Porcelli, Michael von Rad, Hyo-Deog Rim, David Ryan, Peter Shoenberg, Jouko Salminen, Paul Schmitz, Luigi Solano, Orlando Todarello, Willem Trijsburg, Ad Vingerhoets, Colin Wastell, Paul Yelsma, Sotiris Zalidis, Sharon Zeitlin, and Michael Ziegler.

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