

Bitter for Your Mouth, Good for Your Health? The Relationship between Somatization,
Alexithymia and a Culture-Specific Behavior of Drinking Herbal Tea, and the Treatment
Effect of Expressive Writing

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Abstract

Physical symptoms usually alert individuals to seek primary care services. However, the roots of these somatic complaints may be unidentified psychological disturbances, resulting in a potential over burdening of local health practitioners (i.e., there is an approximately 2 to 1000 doctor-to-citizen ratio in Macao). Cross-cultural studies indicate higher somatic presentations of psychiatric disorders in Asia, which in some instances appear to be related to alexithymia (i.e., deficiency in understanding, processing, or describing emotions). Culture-specific behaviors of taking traditional Chinese medication, such as drinking herbal tea, might also contribute to somatic presentations of distress given their use in maintaining a healthy body, and handling physical and mental illness in Chinese culture. Relatively little information is available regarding the treatment of somatization. A general finding is that expressive writing has been reported to reduce physical symptoms. This study intended to find out the relationship between alexithymia and somatization, and their association with the behavior of drinking herbal tea, in addition to investigating the treatment effect of expressive writing on alexithymia and somatization. Results showed a positive correlation between alexithymia and somatization, and between the attitude of herbal tea drinking and somatizing tendencies. No significant treatment effect was found. Limitations of the study and further implications are discussed.