



## Attachment Styles, Alexithymia and Interpersonal Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between attachment styles and interpersonal relationships, more precisely the typologies specific to interpersonal problems, mediated by the variable alexithymia. This study involved 121 people aged between 18 and 62 years,  $M = 31.31$  and  $SD = 11.66$ , 32 men and 89 women. The scales used were the Attachment Styles Questionnaire, The Alexithymia Toronto Scale, and The Inventory for Interpersonal Problems. The results showed that the secure attachment is positively associated only with the dominant style, and the avoidant attachment is positively associated only with the dominant, conflicting, and cold styles, while the anxious attachment is positively associated with all eight styles specific to interpersonal conflicts. Regarding the role of alexithymia, it mediates the relationship between the two variables, more precisely the secure attachment has no association with these variables, alexithymia mediates the relationship between avoidant attachment and conflicting, cold and naive types, as well as the relationship between anxious attachment and dominant, conflicting types, cold, insecure and naive. Following the results, we can say that the study data are consistent and can contribute to the development of the specialized area in the field.

**Keywords:** attachment styles, alexithymia, interpersonal relationships

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The types of attachment in adults, according to the theory of attachment, help individually to form and maintain an interpersonal relationship of any kind. Depending on the

type of attachment a person possesses, they are looking for affiliation, close relationships and trust people, specific to the secure one, and those with anxious or avoidant attachment

are suspicious of others, mostly avoid contact with other people and they often do not trust themselves either, so it is important to keep this in mind when analysing interpersonal relationships. Alexithymia is a concept introduced in the literature in 1972, at first it was associated with somatization, and over the years studies have been deepened on this concept in relation to other variables, arousing a curiosity about how it is influenced. It has been observed that alexithymia is generally correlated with the types of anxious and avoidant attachment, and interpersonal relationships are also influenced due to the unavailability to be able to recognize one's own emotions or those of others, leading to a communication problem, and then to a certain relationship issue.

### **Attachment styles**

Attachment style or organization is a concept derived from John Bowlby's theory of attachment, which refers to a person's characteristic ways of relating to those around him and accepting relationships with "attachment patterns", often with parents, children and romantic partners. The concept implies one's confidence in the availability of the attachment figure used as a secure base from which to freely explore the world. Exploring the world includes not only the physical world, but also relationships with other people and reflection on their internal experience (Levy et al., 2010).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) state that attachment theorists and researchers agree with the five basic postulates of contemporary psychodynamic theory (Westen, 1998). First of all, an important part of mental life, including thoughts, feelings, and motives, is unconscious. Second, mental processes, which include affective, cognitive, and motivational processes, work in parallel so that individuals may have conflicting motives, thoughts, and feelings toward the same person or situation, which often leads to the use of psychological defense to in the face of these problems. Third, the models stable personality traits begin to form at the beginning of life, and childhood experiences play a key role in the development of adult personality, especially in shaping the way people form subsequent social relationships. Fourth, mental representations of self, others, and relationships are major components of personality and often guide an individual behavior in interpersonal or social settings and influence how they become psychologically. Fifth, the healthy development of the personality involves the transition from a socially dependent immature state to a mature, autonomous and interdependent one.

Three main styles of adult attachment have been identified (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; West & Sheldon, 1988): the secure attachment that represents a positive role model and the security of relationships with others (Shaver, 2016). Security people have a sense of worth (adorability) plus an expectation that

people are generally acceptable and receptive. Anxiety attachment is a negative model of self and relational anxiety (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Anxious individuals have a sense of worthlessness combined with a positive assessment of others and a need to accept others. Avoiding attachment is a negative pattern towards others and avoiding relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Avoidant individuals have a disposition to love combined with a negative disposition toward other people and a need to protect themselves from disappointment by avoiding close relationships and maintaining a sense of independence invulnerability.

Attachment styles are considered to be important not only for the close relationships of adults, but also for their well-being, reflecting the subjective quality of life, covering the positive mood, vitality and interest in things (WHO, 1999).

### **The quality of interpersonal relationships - Relationship issues**

From birth to adulthood, interpersonal relationships are shaped by how partners support each other's goals. Infants form social bonds with caregivers who meet their needs for food, comfort and safety. Adolescents develop social connections with their group of colleagues, teachers, and coaches who provide company, guidance, and advice. Adults establish social, romantic relationships with partners and friends who support them as they watch personal and interpersonal goals and develops relationships with teachers, colleagues and mentors that facilitate their academic and professional goals, among others. Therefore, throughout life, people build relationships with others that facilitate their progress toward goals (Orehek et al., 2018).

Interpersonal problems refer to the difficulties that individuals have in their relationship with others and that cause or are related to significant suffering (Horowitz et al., 1988).

Self-perceptions in interpersonal relationships can influence the frequency of interaction and other social behaviors. Solving interpersonal problems has been defined as a general coping strategy, the person tries to identify an effective coping model as answers to specific problem situations (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999). Solving interpersonal problems is important for psychological adaptation because it influences adaptive functioning on a large scale in a number of stressful situations. Successfully solving interpersonal problems requires the ability to define an interpersonal problem, to generate possible solutions, and to make a rationally sound choice of solutions that lead to the desired goal. Interpersonal problem solving is an area of functioning that is believed to have an impact on coping and moderate the harmful effects of stressful events life (D'Zurilla & Chang, 1995). Interpersonal problem-solving skills affect people's expectations for self-efficacy.

## **The relationship between attachment styles and interpersonal issues**

According to Deniz et al., (2005) attachment styles developed by an individual at an early age continue to influence behaviors in adulthood. It is believed that the attachment styles that an individual has could affect interpersonal relationships and the style of managing the problems experienced in these relationships.

Hayden et al., (2017), following a review of several studies, have shown that there are clear associations between attachment styles in adults and interpersonal problems and increase knowledge about human behavior in interpersonal contact. They were detected strong associations between interpersonal problems and anxious and avoidant attachment. Moreover, studies have shown a tendency towards associations between self-sacrificing behavior and anxious attachment, as well as in interpersonal problems between dominant, hostile and avoidant attachment.

A common problem in interpersonal relationships is communication, after analyzing some empirical data Sessa et al., (2020) found that those who send the message in a conversation, and their type of attachment is avoidant with a high score perceive the receiver as more collaborative during unpleasant communication compared to those with avoidant attachment with a lower score. Extremely avoidant broadcasters who chose a secretive communication style would have been more concerned if they had been in the receiver's place. We can assume that those who convey the message and have an extremely avoidant attachment and have chosen a style of communication rather secretive than honest have been able to empathize with the recipients and imagine the potentially disturbing impact of the unpleasant truth. Transmitters with high anxiety attachment would have felt sadder and more suffering compared to those with low anxiety attachment if they had been in the receiver's place. In the case of secure attachment-style transmitters, there were no concerns or sadness about the receiver.

Taking into account what has been proposed previously in the literature, we presume there is a significant association between attachment styles and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

### **Alexithymia**

The term "alexithymia" was introduced in 1972; the literal meaning is "without words for mood." It refers to individuals who have difficulty describing their emotional state and has been discussed primarily in the context of patients with psychosomatic illness. There was a considerable number of reports describing the relevance, etiology, measurement, and treatment (Sifneos, 1972). Alexithymic individuals have a striking difficulty recognizing and describing their feelings and have difficulty

discriminating emotional states and bodily sensations (Nemiah et al., 1976).

Nemiah et al., (1976) defined alexithymia as a multifaceted construct with the following prominent features: difficulty in identifying feelings and distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations of emotional arousal; difficulty to describe other people's feelings; restricted imaginary processes, highlighted by the lack of fantasy and a cognitive style related to stimuli, oriented towards the outside. Although these characteristics are conceptually distinct, they are logically interdependent and usually occur in individuals who exhibit any of the traits. As Taylor and Bagby (2000) point out, the ability to verbally communicate the feelings of others obviously depends on the cognitive ability to identify and label one's own feelings, and an outward-looking cognitive style reflects a lack of fantasy and other inner experiences, such as and a reduced range of emotional expressiveness. Krystal (1988) found that in addition to the important traits described by Nemiah and colleagues, individuals with a high degree of alexithymia have difficulty tolerating and regulating emotional states and have a limited ability to be self-reflective and introspective.

Sifneos (1967) reported that patients routinely reported anxiety or complained of depression. They talked about feeling nervous, agitated, irritable, or tense, or crying with feelings of emptiness or boredom. However, when asked further, these patients displayed limited vocabulary to describe their emotions. Similarly, Nemiah et al. (1976) showed that alexithymic individuals sometimes show occasional bouts of crying or anger, but are unable to link these emotions to specific thoughts, fantasies, or situations. That is, the emotions of alexithymic individuals are poorly differentiated and not well represented mentally. The characteristics that make up the construct of alexithymia reflect deficits both in the cognitive-experiential component of emotional response systems and in the interpersonal regulation of emotion. Unable to accurately identify their own feelings subjectively, individuals with high levels of alexithymia are not only limited in their ability to reflect and regulate their emotions, but also to verbally communicate the emotional suffering of others, thus failing to enlist others as sources of help or comfort. In turn, the lack of emotional sharing can contribute to the difficulty of identifying emotions. Restricted imaginary abilities of individuals with high alexithymia limit the extent to which they can modulate anxiety and other emotions through fantasy, dreams, interests, and play (Taylor et al., 1997). In addition, lacking knowledge about their own emotional experiences, those with high degrees of alexithymia cannot easily imagine themselves in another person's situation, consequently, they are experienced without empathy. They also tend to be devoid of affection and somewhat distant in their interpersonal relationships (Vanheule et al., 2007).

The relationship between attachment styles, alexithymia and interpersonal relationships; attachment and alexithymia; interpersonal problems and alexithymia

The study by Besharat and Shahidi (2013) examined the relationship between attachment styles, alexithymia and interpersonal problems, which found that alexithymia, avoidant and anxious attachment styles had a significant positive correlation with interpersonal problems, while the style of secure attachment had a significant negative correlation with interpersonal issues. The data analysis showed that when the level of alexithymia is increased, the level of interpersonal problems also increases.

Regarding the relationship between attachment styles and alexithymia in the study investigated by Oskis et al., (2013) conducted on 60 students aged 9 to 18 years, it was found that in adulthood, during adolescence. It was observed that higher levels of alexithymia were reported in both anxious and avoidant attachment groups compared to participants with secure attachment. Fear of separation (characteristic of the anxious attachment style) predicted both the general scores of alexithymia and the specific alexithymic trait of "difficulty in identifying feelings". Constraints on closeness (an attitude of avoidant attachment) predicted "difficulty in describing feelings." Low attachment to the primary caregiver was a predictor of "outward thinking." These findings indicate that the traits of anxious and avoidant attachment styles are differentially related to the separate facets of alexithymia in female adolescents. Specifically, findings regarding the fear of separation may reflect adolescents' struggle for autonomy and the resulting effects on the affect management system. The results also suggest that the normative differentiation of the emotional and cognitive aspects of alexithymia it can appear on a developmental trajectory.

In the study investigated by Ferraro and Taylor (2021), the results of bivariate correlations and serial mediation analyzes found that adult anxious and avoidant attachment styles were negatively associated with bodily sensation perception and positively associated with identification difficulties and description of feelings and regulation of

negative affects, these being features of alexithymia. Interoceptive awareness and alexithymia sequentially mediated the relationships between adult attachment size and emotional regulation difficulties. Therefore, these mind-body constructs may be processes by which attachment concerns contribute to emotional regulation difficulties and should be considered when addressing emotional regulation difficulties in those with attachment problems.

Regarding the relationship between interpersonal problems and alexithymia, empirical data show that patients with high levels of alexithymia had significantly more interpersonal problems than those with low levels of alexithymia, especially those who indicate hostility and social avoidance on the scale scores interpersonal conflicts. Those who had difficulty describing feelings had the greatest correlations with interpersonal problems. Even after the end of a therapeutic treatment, high-level alexithymics still had the highest score on relationship problems. The findings of the study suggest that the interpersonal style of alexithymic individuals is characterized by a cold and socially avoidant behavior, corresponding to the predominant attachment patterns avoidance encountered in alexithymia. In addition, the results indicate that group psychotherapy is as useful for alexithymic subjects as it is for non-alexithymic subjects in interpersonal problems. Finally, alexithymia involves a reduced ability to use social interactions to regulate affect (Spitzer et al., 2005). A high level of alexithymia correlating with interpersonal problems was also recorded on a sample of 155 of people diagnosed with chronic, cardiovascular or autoimmune diseases (Vanheule et al., 2010).

Taking into account the above, the objective of our study is to verify the mediating role of alexithymia in the relationship between attachment styles and interpersonal relationships.

In order to achieve this objective, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*H1. Alexithymia mediates the relationship between attachment styles and problems within interpersonal relationships.*

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### Participants and procedure

The present study involved 121 people aged between 18 and 62 years,  $M = 31.31$ ,  $SD = 11.66$ . Of these, 32 are male (26%) and 89 are female (74%), 55 have secondary education (45%) and 66 have higher education (55%). Regarding marital status 35 participants are single (29%) and 86 are in a relationship (71%). Regarding the number of friends, the participants declare a relative number of friends,  $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ .

The participants, 130 in number, were invited online through social networks: Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Of this total, only 121 agreed to participate by the end (90%). They were given a short presentation of the study and were invited to participate by completing a set of questionnaires. The first section of the online form contained informed consent. By ticking the "yes" button, people agreed to participate by completing the questionnaire set. Out of a total of 121 people, all responses were retained as complete (100%). The inclusion criterion was the age over 18 years.

## Instruments

The data collection method used in this study is the questionnaire.

*Socio-demographic variables* were collected through a list of questions about gender, age, level of education, marital status, and number of close friends.

*Attachment styles*. It was used to measure attachment styles Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney et al., 1994). The tool contains 40 items and measures attachment style, securing, avoiding, and anxious. Example of item: "I find it hard to trust other people." The answers are offered on a five-step Likert scale, where 1 - total disagreement and 5 - total agreement. Scores are obtained by summing the scores of each item. The questionnaire was translated into Romanian by Chiracu (2020), not being validated on the Romanian population.

*Alexithymia*. The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby et al., 1994) was used to measure alexithymia. The instrument contains 20 items and measures the level of alexithymia. Example item: "It's hard for me to find the right words for my feelings." The answers are given on a five-step Likert scale, where 1 - total disagreement and 5 - total agreement. Scores are obtained by summing the scores of each item. The questionnaire was translated into Romanian by us in order to carry out this research in compliance with the rules in force. Thus it was sent for retroversion to an authorized translator after which the necessary corrections were made.

*Interpersonal Problems*. The Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Horowitz et al., 2000) was used to measure

interpersonal problems. The instrument comprises 64 items measuring eight aspects: (a) hyper-control behavior, hyper-assertiveness (Dominant; PA); (b) suspicion and anger (Vindictive; BC); (c) difficulty in experiencing and expressing affection for others (Cold; DE); (d) social anxiety and social withdrawal (Socially inhibited; FG); (e) (non-assertiveness; HI); (f) difficulty expressing anger and taking advantage of oneself (Overly accommodating; JK); (g) trying too hard to help and support others, probably by paying their own price (Self-sacrificing; LM); (h) difficulties associated with being too intrusive and seeking attention (Intrusive; NO). Example item: "It's hard for me to fit into a group." the answers are given on a five-step Likert scale, where 0 - does not suit me at all and 4 - suits me very well. Scores are obtained by summing the scores of each item.

## Study design

The present study has a cross-sectional, descriptive, and correlational design.

## Data analysis

The statistical analysis program IBM.SPSS.24 (IBM Corp, 2016) and the Jamovi medmod module (The jamovi project, 2022) were used to organize the data and test the hypotheses.

## 3. RESULTS

### Descriptive statistics

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics*

	M	AS	$\alpha$	ATSE	ATEV	ATAX	ALDDE	ALDIE	ALGOE	PA	BC	DE	FG	HI	JK	LM	NO
ATSE	3.58	.72.74		1													
ATEV	2.45	.69.81		-.37**	1												
ATAX	2.52	.90.90		-.40**	.54**	1											
ALDDE	2.54	1.04.81		-.35**	.49**	.50**	1										
ALDIE	2.29	1.11.90		-.26**	.45**	.66**	.62**	1									
ALGOE	2.27	.53.59		-.30**	.38**	.28**	.34**	.31**	1								
PA	11.61	6.51.79		-.07	.51**	.38**	.30**	.52**	.29**	1							
BC	12.02	6.35.75		-.32**	.53**	.50**	.42**	.55**	.33**	.71**	1						
DE	11.73	8.86.90		-.26**	.45**	.40**	.43**	.47**	.25**	.60**	.81**	1					
FG	12.00	7.05.82		-.33**	.42**	.57**	.48**	.55**	.35**	.55**	.73**	.82**	1				
HI	13.62	6.65.79		-.14	.32**	.44**	.28**	.43**	.21*	.49**	.58**	.73**	.81**	1			
JK	13.53	6.10.70		-.16	.30**	.54**	.38**	.49**	.34**	.50**	.50**	.59**	.74**	.75**	1		
LM	15.61	6.23.74		-.11	.29**	.49**	.27**	.44**	.18	.43**	.40**	.45**	.58**	.64**	.73**	1	
NO	13.45	5.55.62		-.10	.32**	.55**	.38**	.48**	.21*	.59**	.45**	.45**	.54**	.43**	.53**	.53**	1

\*\* . p < .01, \* . p < .05.

ATSE – Secure attachment, ATEV – Avoidant attachment, ATAX – Anxious attachment, ALDDE – Difficulties in describing emotions, ALDIE – Difficulties in identifying emotions, ALGOE – Externally oriented thinking, PA – dominant, BC – vindictive, DE – cold, FG – socially inhibited, HI – non-assertive, JK – overly accommodating, LM – self-sacrificing, NO – intrusive

It is observed that the scores for secure attachment are above average,  $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = .72$ , while for the avoidant and anxious attachment they are below average, respectively  $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = .69$  and  $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = .90$ . Regarding alexithymia, the highest score was recorded in difficulties in describing emotions  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ , followed by difficulties in identifying emotions,  $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.11$  and externally oriented thinking,  $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = .53$ ,

regarding the typologies specific to the relationship difficulties, the highest score was observed for self-sacrificing type  $M = 15.61$ ,  $SD = 6.23$ , and the lowest for the dominant type,  $M = 11.61$ ,  $SD = 6.51$ .

Skewness and kurtosis are in the range  $(-1, 1)$ , which reflects a normal data distribution.

There were no missing cases and no cases were removed from any of the statistical analyzes.

## Hypothesis testing

H1. *Alexithymia mediates the relationship between attachment styles and interpersonal problems.*

In order to test this hypothesis, a series of mediation analyzes were performed having as predictors the attachment styles, as dependent variables the eight typologies specific to the problems within the interpersonal relations and as mediating variable alexithymia.

Table 2. *Mediation estimates for alexithymia in the relationship between attachment styles and dominant type*

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	LLCI	ULCI	$\beta$	z	p
Indirect	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ PA	-.24	.18	-.58	.10	-.03	-1.37	.17
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ PA	.46	.25	-.02	.94	.06	1.89	.06
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ PA	.80	.35	.12	1.49	.12	2.29	.02
Component	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL	-.33	.20	-.72	.06	-.12	-1.64	.10
	AL $\Rightarrow$ PA	.73	.30	.15	1.31	.25	2.48	.01
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL	.64	.22	.21	1.06	.22	2.92	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL	1.10	.18	.74	1.46	.48	6.02	< .00
Direct	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ PA	1.70	.66	.41	2.10	.21	2.58	.010
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ PA	2.90	.73	1.47	4.33	.35	3.98	< .00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ PA	1.18	.68	-.13	2.50	.17	1.74	.08
Total	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ PA	1.46	.67	.15	2.77	.18	2.18	.03
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ PA	3.37	.73	1.95	4.79	.40	4.64	< .00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ PA	1.98	.61	.78	3.17	.29	3.25	.00

ATSE – Secure attachment, ATEV – Avoidant attachment, ATAX – Anxious attachment, AL – Alexithymia, PA - dominant

It is observed that alexithymia mediates only the relationship between the anxious attachment and the dominant type,  $\beta = .12$ , CI95% (.12, 1.49),  $z = 2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ . Anxiety attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .48$ , CI95% (.74,

1.46),  $z = 6.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and alexithymia is positively associated with dominant type,  $\beta = .25$ , CI95% (.15, 1.31),  $z = 2.48$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Table 3. Mediation estimates for alexithymia in the relationship between attachment styles and vindictive type

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	LLCI	ULCI	$\beta$	z	p
Indirect	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ BC	-.35	.23	-.81	.11	-.04	-1.51	.13
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ BC	.68	.29	.11	1.26	.08	2.33	.02
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ BC	1.18	.36	.47	1.89	.18	3.25	.00
Component	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL	-.33	.20	-.72	.06	-.12	-1.64	.10
	AL $\Rightarrow$ BC	1.07	.28	.53	1.62	.37	3.86	< .00
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL	.64	.22	.21	1.06	.22	2.92	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL	1.10	.18	.74	1.46	.48	6.02	< .00
Direct	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ BC	-.10	.62	-1.32	1.11	-.01	-.16	.87
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ BC	1.86	.69	.52	3.21	.23	2.71	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ BC	.89	.64	-.36	2.14	.14	1.40	.16
Total	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ BC	-.45	.65	-1.73	.83	-.06	-.69	.49
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ BC	2.55	.71	1.16	3.93	.31	3.60	< .00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ BC	2.07	.59	.91	3.24	.32	3.49	< .00

ATSE – Secure attachment, ATEV – Avoidant attachment, ATAX – Anxious attachment, AL – Alexithymia, BC - vindictive

It is observed that alexithymia mediates both the relationship between avoidant attachment and vindictive type,  $\beta = .08$ , CI95% (.11, 1.26),  $z = 2.33$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the relationship between anxious attachment and vindictive type,  $\beta = .18$ , CI95% (.47, 1.89),  $z = 3.25$ ,  $p < .01$ . Avoidant attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .22$ , CI95% (.21,

1.06),  $z = 2.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , anxious attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .48$ , CI95% (.74, 1.46),  $z = 6.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and alexithymia is positively associated with the vindictive type,  $\beta = .37$ , CI95% (.53, 1.62),  $z = 3.86$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Table 4. Mediation estimates for alexithymia in the relationship between attachment styles and cold type

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	LLCI	ULCI	$\beta$	z	p
Indirect	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ DE	-.53	.35	-1.21	.16	-.05	-1.51	.13
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ DE	1.02	.44	.17	1.88	.09	2.35	.02
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ DE	1.77	.54	.72	2.82	.19	3.30	< .00
Component	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL	-.33	.20	-.72	.06	-.12	-1.64	.10
	AL $\Rightarrow$ DE	1.61	.41	.81	2.41	.40	3.94	< .00
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL	.64	.22	.21	1.06	.22	2.92	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL	1.10	.18	.74	1.46	.48	6.02	< .00
Direct	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ DE	-.45	.91	-2.24	1.33	-.04	-.49	.62
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ DE	2.84	1.01	.86	4.82	.25	2.81	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ DE	-.09	.94	-1.92	1.75	-.01	-.09	.93
Total	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ DE	-.98	.96	-2.86	.90	-.09	-1.02	.31
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ DE	3.86	1.04	1.82	5.90	.34	3.71	< .00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ DE	1.69	.88	-.03	3.40	.18	1.93	.05

ATSE – Secure attachment, ATEV – Avoidant attachment, ATAX – Anxious attachment, AL – Alexithymia, DE - cold

It is observed that alexithymia mediates both the relationship between avoidant attachment and cold type,  $\beta = .09$ , CI95%

(.17, 1.88),  $z = 2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the relationship between anxious attachment and cold type,  $\beta = .19$ , CI95% (.72,

2.82),  $z = 3.30$ ,  $p < .01$ . Avoidant attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .22$ , CI95% (.21, 1.06),  $z = 2.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , anxious attachment is positively associated

with alexithymia  $\beta = .48$ , CI95% (.74, 1.46),  $z = 6.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and alexithymia is positively associated with the cold type,  $\beta = .40$ , CI95% (.81, 2.41),  $z = 3.94$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Table 5. Mediation estimates for alexithymia in the relationship between attachment styles and non-assertive type

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	LLCI	ULCI	$\beta$	$z$	$p$
Indirect	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ HI	-.25	.19	-.63	.12	-.03	-1.34	.18
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ HI	.49	.27	-.03	1.02	.06	1.84	.07
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ HI	.85	.39	.09	1.62	.12	2.20	.03
Component	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL	-.33	.20	-.72	.06	-.12	-1.64	.10
	AL $\Rightarrow$ HI	.78	.33	.13	1.42	.26	2.36	.02
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL	.64	.22	.21	1.06	.22	2.92	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL	1.10	.18	.74	1.46	.48	6.02	< .00
Direct	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ HI	.56	.73	-.88	2.00	.07	.76	.45
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ HI	.84	.81	-.75	2.44	.10	1.04	.30
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ HI	1.56	.75	.08	3.04	.23	2.07	.04
Total	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ HI	.30	.75	-1.16	1.77	.04	.41	.68
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ HI	1.34	.81	-.25	2.92	.16	1.66	.01
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ HI	2.42	.68	1.08	3.75	.35	3.56	< .00

ATSE – Secure attachment, ATEV – Avoidant attachment, ATAX – Anxious attachment, AL – Alexithymia, HI – non-assertive

It is observed that alexithymia mediates only the relationship between the anxious attachment and the non-assertive type,  $\beta = .12$ , CI95% (.09, 1.62),  $z = 2.20$ ,  $p < .05$ . Anxiety attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .48$ ,

CI95% (.74, 1.46),  $z = 6.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and alexithymia is positively associated with non-assertive type,  $\beta = .26$ , CI95% (.13, 1.42),  $z = 2.36$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Table 6. Mediation estimates for alexithymia in the relationship between attachment styles and overly accommodating type

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	LLCI	ULCI	$\beta$	$z$	$p$
Indirect	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ JK	-.30	.21	-.70	.10	-.04	-1.46	.15
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ JK	.58	.27	.05	1.10	.07	2.16	.03
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL $\Rightarrow$ JK	1.00	.35	.31	1.70	.16	2.83	.01
Component	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ AL	-.33	.20	-.72	.06	-.12	-1.64	.10
	AL $\Rightarrow$ JK	.91	.28	.35	1.47	.33	3.20	.00
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ AL	.64	.22	.21	1.06	.22	2.92	.00
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ AL	1.10	.18	.74	1.46	.48	6.02	< .00
Direct	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ JK	.76	.63	-.48	2.01	.10	1.20	.23
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ JK	-.03	.70	-1.41	1.35	-.00	-.04	.97
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ JK	2.08	.65	.80	3.36	.33	3.19	.00
Total	ATSE $\Rightarrow$ JK	.47	.66	-.82	1.75	.06	.71	.48
	ATEV $\Rightarrow$ JK	.55	.71	-.84	1.95	.07	.78	.44
	ATAX $\Rightarrow$ JK	3.08	.60	1.91	4.25	.49	5.16	< .00

ATSE – Secure attachment, ATEV – Avoidant attachment, ATAX – Anxious attachment, AL – Alexithymia, JK – overly accommodating



It is observed that alexithymia mediates both the relationship between the avoidant attachment and the overly accommodating type,  $\beta = .07$ , CI95% (.05, 1.10),  $z = 2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the relationship between the anxious attachment and the overly accommodating type,  $\beta = .16$ , 95% CI (.31, 1.70),  $z = 2.83$ ,  $p < .05$ . Avoidant attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .22$ , CI95% (.21, 1.06),  $z = 2.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , anxious attachment is positively associated with alexithymia  $\beta = .48$ , CI95% (.74, 1.46),  $z = 6.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and alexithymia is positively associated with the overly accommodating type,  $\beta = .33$ , CI95% (.35, 1.47),  $z = 3.20$ ,  $p < .01$ .

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The present research aimed to analyze the relationship between attachment styles (secure, anxious and avoidant) and interpersonal relationships, especially the conflicting typologies specific to these relationships, as well as alexithymia as a mediating role within it.

The group of participants (non-clinical) scored above average scores on secure attachment, and on anxious and avoidant styles scores were below average. Regarding alexithymia, the highest score was observed for difficulties in describing emotions, and in the typologies specific to relationship difficulties, the highest score was observed for self-sacrificing type. Given the results we can say that most people who participated in the study face problems in describing emotions, and according to the self-sacrificing typology preponderance, most want to be liked by others, it is difficult for them to impose themselves on other people or to set boundaries and let themselves be guided by the problems of others.

Regarding our objective, the relationship between attachment styles and interpersonal relationships, the specific features of each type of attachment described previously in the first part of the research and the conflicting typologies of the relationship, we can say that secure attachment is positively associated only with the dominant style, people of this type support their independence, accept those around them as they are and tend to control/manipulate, and the avoidant attachment is associated positively only with the dominant, vindictive (distrustful, quarrelsome, conflictual) and cold (hardly showing their feelings, distant) styles, while the anxious attachment is positively associated with all eight styles specific to interpersonal conflicts. The results are in line with our assumptions, that we expect the security attachment, according to its typology of trusting people and seeking affiliation, will not correlate positively with almost any conflicting typology, instead anxious and avoidant attachments have common features with these typologies,

Taking into account these results, we can say that alexithymia manages to mediate the relationship between attachment styles and the specific typology of conflicts in interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the secure attachment has no association with these variables, alexithymia mediates the relationship between avoidant attachment and vindictive, cold and overly accommodating types, as well as the relationship between anxious attachment and dominant, vindictive, cold, non-assertive and overly accommodating types.

such as the difficulty of trusting others, their avoidance, the boundless support of independence, allow themselves to be used by others so as not to lose them, they are constantly looking for a figure to cling to as a refuge. Therefore, as the previous literature argues, there is an association between adult attachment and interpersonal suffering, showing remarkable correlations between the overall score of interpersonal problems and the types of anxious and avoidant attachment (Haggerty et al., 2009; Hayden et al. al., 2017).

The above arguments show that the type of attachment of a person is of major importance in interpersonal relationships, because it influences the behavior of the individual with others, guiding the person to a certain perspective on life and different contextual and social situations depending on the type of attachment he possesses. So, an important factor that leads to relationship problems, conflicts is attachment, a higher share having the avoidant and anxious type.

Given the characteristics of the types of attachment, the fact that the secure one is largely associated with the need for affiliation, trust in people and a large number of close relationships, the anxious with dependence on the opinion of others, the fear of not leaving and of not dealing with rejections, and the one who avoids independently, suspicion of people or their avoidance, we can say that alexithymia through the prism of the three facets through which it is measured: difficulties in identifying emotions, difficulties in describing emotions and externally oriented thinking, we can say that it is positively associated with the types of anxious and avoidant attachment, and such people have a much greater exposure to experience problems in interpersonal relationships, as they may experience problems with communication, expression or awareness of the reality of situations. Therefore, analyzing the results of this research, we can say that alexithymia manages to mediate the relationship between attachment styles and specific typologies of conflicts in interpersonal relationships. Specifically, alexithymia mediates the relationship between avoidant attachment and vindictive, cold, and overly accommodating types, as well as the relationship between

anxious attachment and dominant, vindictive, cold, non-assertive, and overly accommodating types. In the case of the interaction with the secure attachment, although there was a correlation between this attachment and the dominant type and we can say that there may be interpersonal problems, alexithymia does not mediate this relationship, because we can assume that they do not have a high level of difficulty in identifying emotions, in describing emotions and externally oriented thinking.

Other empirical data that analyzed the same variables showed that alexithymia, avoidant and anxious attachment styles, had a significant positive correlation with interpersonal problems; while, the style of secure attachment had a significant negative correlation with interpersonal issues. Recognition of emotions plays an important role in interpersonal relationships. Failure to recognize them properly causes the person to face many problems in interpersonal relationships. For example, sociability and intimate relationships with others require the ability to understand one's own emotions and those of others. The inability to recognize emotions leads to interpersonal problems in these areas. Consequently, it could be considered that alexithymia could increase interpersonal problems through deficiency and inability to recognize emotions (Besharat & Shahidi, 2013).

### **Practical implications**

The present study captured the connection between attachment styles, alexithymia and interpersonal relationships, more specifically interrelationship issues, highlighting the eight specific types of conflict. It has been found that people who have the type of anxious or avoidant attachment are more likely to experience relationship problems and have a higher level of alexithymia. The aspects that have been presented in this paper, regarding the three constructs can further support the awareness of the factors that lead to problems in interpersonal relationships, in this case the type of anxious, avoidant attachment or a high level of alexithymia. Understanding them can improve your quality of life, understanding your emotions, and your relationship with others. Thus, counseling and psychotherapy programs can lead to a better understanding of one's own and others behavior, to the identification of emotions at a certain level, and to improved communication.

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### **Limitations and future directions**

Specific to any research, there are limitations that affect the data collected. Therefore, one of the limitations of this study is that the data are obtained by self-reporting, using the Google Forms platform, which can cause some errors, because each concept used in the questionnaire can be viewed subjectively by the respondent, giving a value perhaps erroneous compared to reality. There is a possibility of underestimating or overestimating certain aspects of the structure of each respondent. In our future research, we will consider the evaluation of participants by specialists in the field in order to avoid possible over- or under-appreciated answers.

Another limitation is that the sample has not been tested before and we cannot say that it was part of a clinical population, which gave us participants with only a low or high level of alexithymia. In the future, we will consider customizing the sample to collect more specific data.

Another limitation may be that the data were collected during the SARS-CoV 2 pandemic, and this period had a negative influence on the relationship between people, people were affected emotionally and communication, which probably led to inhibition and the issue of social and interpersonal relationships. For better data collection and interpretation, new variables can be introduced in the future to compare events and emotional states before, during and after the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study provide an important perspective in awareness of the problems of expressing feelings, what people think about themselves and how they relate to those around them, taking into account the level of alexithymia that mediates the relationship between types of attachment and interpersonal relationships, being a factor in interpersonal conflicts.

Based on both the significant and insignificant relationships that exist in the present research, in the context in which people are increasingly confronted with both internal and external factors that inhibit their free expression of what they feel, we can say that the results are consistent, add to the literature and may provide new directions in future research for better accuracy of results in light of current limitations..

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