

## Introduction to NMA

Recently, male roles within the nuclear family structure have begun to shift, and there has been increased interest in Normative Male Alexithymia (NMA). NMA refers to the inability of men to put emotions into words. It has been found to result from the pressure to restrict emotional expression from a young age in order to align with traditional masculine gender roles in Western countries. Emotions which signal vulnerability and fragility are suppressed, namely fear and sadness, as well as attachment emotions such as affection and fondness. Men who have NMA often have significant difficulty describing their emotions even when they are in severe distress, lack immediate bodily experience of emotion, or respond to their feelings of vulnerability with aggression.

According to a review of developmental psychology literature conducted by Levant, cited in his and colleague's 2006 paper, boys become less verbally expressive than their female counterparts by age two and less facially expressive by age six. While parents often encourage the expression of vulnerable emotions in their daughters, they often discourage, and sometimes punish, the expression of those same emotions in their sons. The social groups of young boys often involve direct competition and expressions of toughness, with harsh punishments when members deviate from expectations of emotional expression. As a result of early childhood socialization, boys and men with mild to moderate forms of NMA (severe cases are treated as clinical and are assessed using a different scale) do not develop the awareness or vocabulary for their emotions.

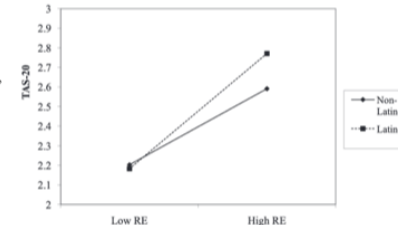
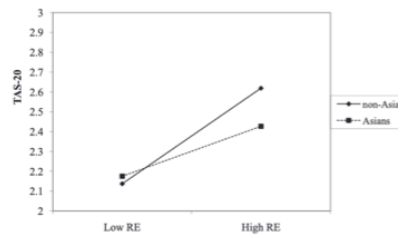
## Evolution of the field

Alexithymia was originally used in a clinical context to describe primarily male, psychosomatic, alcohol dependent, and PTSD patients. Later, it came to include men in a non-clinical setting who were, as a function of childhood socialization rather than trauma or illness, unable to process and name certain emotions. More recently, researchers have dedicated more attention to NMA as a Western-specific cultural phenomenon that does not always extend out of the Western world. Levant and colleague's 2015 paper found stronger NMA levels in white American men than Asian-American men, showing that NMA is influenced largely by culture. The study also found that Latino men experienced a cultural incongruence between white masculine norms of emotional control and a competing traditional cultural norm, causing significantly higher levels if NMA than non-Latino men. These results are seen in the graphs to the right, in which scores on the TAS-20 (Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20, typically used to measure clinical levels of NMA) are plotted against the Male Role Norms Restrictive Emotionality Subscale.

Table 2  
Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges and Coefficient Alphas for Men on the TAS-20, MRNI, and NMAS

Variable	TAS-20	MRNI	MRNI REM	NMAS
TAS-20	—			
MRNI	.34*	—		
MRNI REM	.42*	.83*	—	
NMAS	.72*	.35*	.50*	—
M	2.50	4.20	3.60	3.60
SD	.54	.86	1.04	1.03
Range	1.05–3.65	1.47–6.31	1.0–6.57	1.20–6.00
α	.84	.96	.85	.92
n	188	183	191	186

Note. TAS-20 = Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20; MRNI = Male Role Norms Inventory total score; MRNI REM = Restricted Emotionality subscale of the Male Role Norms Inventory; NMAS = Normative Male Alexithymia Scale. \*  $p < .01$ .



## What's been done

Much of the existing literature describes correlational data between NMA and other scales of behavior and profile information in subjects. The table below shows just some of the different research over the past few years.

Karakis 2012	Relationship satisfaction in men with NMA
Levant 2015	Relationship between NMA and race
Gerdes 2017	Health consequences of NMA
Jardin 2019	Differences in emotional processing
Levant 2019	Masculine ideology and health status

Current research largely focuses on the long-term health and behavioral consequences of NMA. Unfortunately, there is little causation data available, as NMA is a result of a lifetime of socialization. The next question is, what is on the horizon for NMA research? Research questions such as:

- Is there a genetic or hormonal component?
- Is parenting that encourages emotional processing enough to counteract peer influence? Is the opposite true?
- Is there a way to measure causation rather than only correlation?
- To what extent do ethnic cultural norms reinforce or conflict with masculine ideologies in the US? When transferring from one culture to another, how does emotional express change, if at all?

## References

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