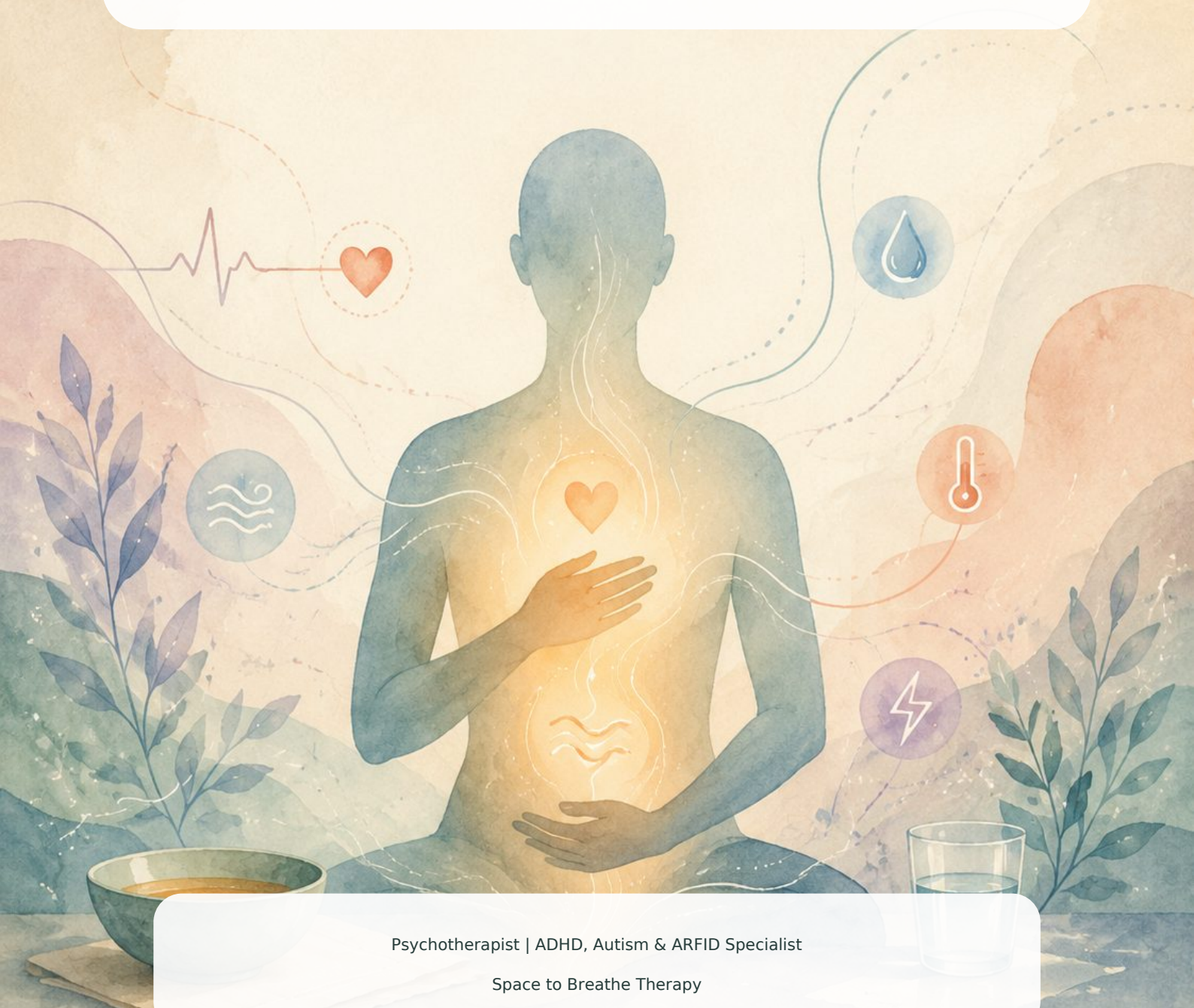


PART 1 OF 2

INTEROCEPTION

UNDERSTANDING HUNGER, THIRST,
FULLNESS AND BODY AWARENESS

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Space to Breathe Therapy

Interoception

Understanding Hunger, Thirst, Fullness and Body Awareness - Part 1 of 2

Introduction

Have you ever become so focused on a task that you suddenly realised it was four o'clock in the afternoon and you had not eaten all day?

Or perhaps you have finished an entire meal before recognising that you were already full halfway through.

Maybe you have developed a headache before realising you had not had a drink since breakfast.

For many people, these experiences happen occasionally. For others, they happen every single day.

We often assume that recognising hunger, thirst, tiredness or pain is automatic. We imagine that our bodies send clear messages and that our brains naturally understand them. In reality, it is not always that simple.

The ability to notice and interpret what is happening inside our bodies is known as interoception, and it plays an essential role in almost every aspect of our daily lives. It influences when we eat, when we drink, when we rest, how we recognise emotions and even how we respond to stress.

For many autistic people, people with ADHD and individuals with ARFID, interoception works differently. Internal body signals may be quieter, louder, delayed or more difficult to interpret. This is not because someone is ignoring their body - it is because their nervous system is processing information differently.

Understanding interoception can help explain why some people forget to eat, why others struggle to recognise thirst, why emotions can feel confusing and why eating patterns are often more complex than they first appear.

My Thoughts

When I first learned about interoception, I felt as though someone had handed me another missing piece of my own puzzle.

For years I could not understand why I would work through an entire day without eating and only realise I was hungry when I felt shaky or light-headed. I thought I simply became too busy.

Sometimes I genuinely did not notice my body asking for food. Other times I recognised something felt different but could not work out exactly what it was.

Was I anxious? Hungry? Tired? Overwhelmed?

The sensations often felt blurred together.

Learning about interoception helped me understand that recognising what our bodies are telling us is a skill our brains perform constantly, and that this process can work differently for different people.

As a psychotherapist, I now notice this in many of the people I support.

Some clients tell me they never feel thirsty. Others do not notice they need the toilet until it becomes urgent. Many describe suddenly “crashing” because they did not recognise they were hungry. Some experience intense anxiety without recognising the early physical signs that their body was becoming overwhelmed.

Understanding interoception has helped many of my clients replace self-criticism with curiosity.

Instead of asking, “Why can't I get this right?”, they begin asking, “What is my body trying to tell me?”

That question changes everything.

What Is Interoception?

Interoception is often described as our eighth sense.

While our other senses gather information from the world around us, interoception gathers information from inside our bodies.

Every second, receptors throughout the body are collecting information and sending it to the brain.

These signals include:

- Hunger.
- Fullness.
- Thirst.
- Heart rate.
- Breathing.
- Body temperature.
- Pain.
- Muscle tension.
- Nausea.
- Fatigue.
- The need to use the toilet.
- Emotional arousal.

The brain receives this information, interprets it and helps us decide how to respond. Most of the time this happens without conscious thought.

You feel thirsty. You have a drink. You feel cold. You put on a jumper. You notice your stomach rumbling. You prepare something to eat.

Interoception helps make these everyday decisions feel effortless.

How the Brain Understands the Body

Interoception relies on communication between the body and the brain. Specialised nerve endings detect changes within the body and send information through the nervous system.

One important area involved in interpreting these signals is the insula, a region of the brain that helps us become aware of our internal physical state.

Rather than working alone, the insula communicates with many other brain regions involved in:

- Emotional regulation.
- Decision making.
- Attention.
- Memory.
- Self-awareness.
- Social understanding.

This reminds us that our physical sensations and emotional experiences are closely connected. The body and brain are constantly talking to one another.

Hunger Is Not Always Obvious

Many people imagine hunger as a growling stomach. In reality, hunger can look very different.

Some people notice:

- Feeling irritable.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Headaches.
- Feeling shaky.
- Becoming emotional.
- Low energy.
- Feeling cold.
- Brain fog.

For individuals with reduced interoceptive awareness, these signals may not be recognised until they become intense.

Someone may continue working, studying or hyperfocusing without realising their body has been asking for food for several hours. By the time they notice, they may feel exhausted rather than hungry.

Understanding Fullness

Recognising fullness can be just as challenging.

Some people stop eating naturally because they notice subtle changes in their bodies. Others continue eating because they have not recognised those signals yet.

This is not about lacking self-control. It is about differences in how the brain receives and interprets information.

Understanding this can reduce a great deal of shame for people who have spent years blaming themselves.

Why Thirst Can Be Missed

Hydration is another area where interoception plays an important role.

Many people naturally notice when they feel thirsty. Others do not.

They may only recognise dehydration once they develop:

- A headache.
- Dry mouth.
- Fatigue.
- Difficulty concentrating.

- Dizziness.

Some people with ADHD or autism describe realising they have not had a drink all day because they simply never noticed the earlier signals.

Again, this reflects neurological processing rather than laziness or poor motivation.

Interoception and Emotions

One of the most fascinating aspects of interoception is its relationship with emotions.

Emotions are not experienced only in the mind. They are experienced in the body.

Think about anxiety. You might notice:

- A racing heart.
- Tightness in your chest.
- Butterflies in your stomach.
- Sweaty palms.
- Faster breathing.

These are interoceptive signals. The brain interprets them and helps us recognise that we are feeling anxious.

For some people, however, recognising those early physical changes is difficult. Instead, they only become aware once the emotion feels overwhelming.

This can make emotional regulation much more challenging.

Interoception in Autism

Research increasingly suggests that many autistic people experience differences in interoception.

Some may have reduced awareness of internal body signals. Others may experience certain sensations very intensely. Some people fluctuate between both.

This may influence:

- Eating.
- Drinking.
- Sleep.
- Toileting.
- Emotional awareness.
- Pain recognition.
- Energy management.

Understanding these differences helps explain why routines, reminders and external supports are often far more effective than simply telling someone to “listen to your body.”

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This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical, nutritional or mental-health advice. If changes in hunger, thirst, pain or body awareness concern you, seek appropriately qualified support.