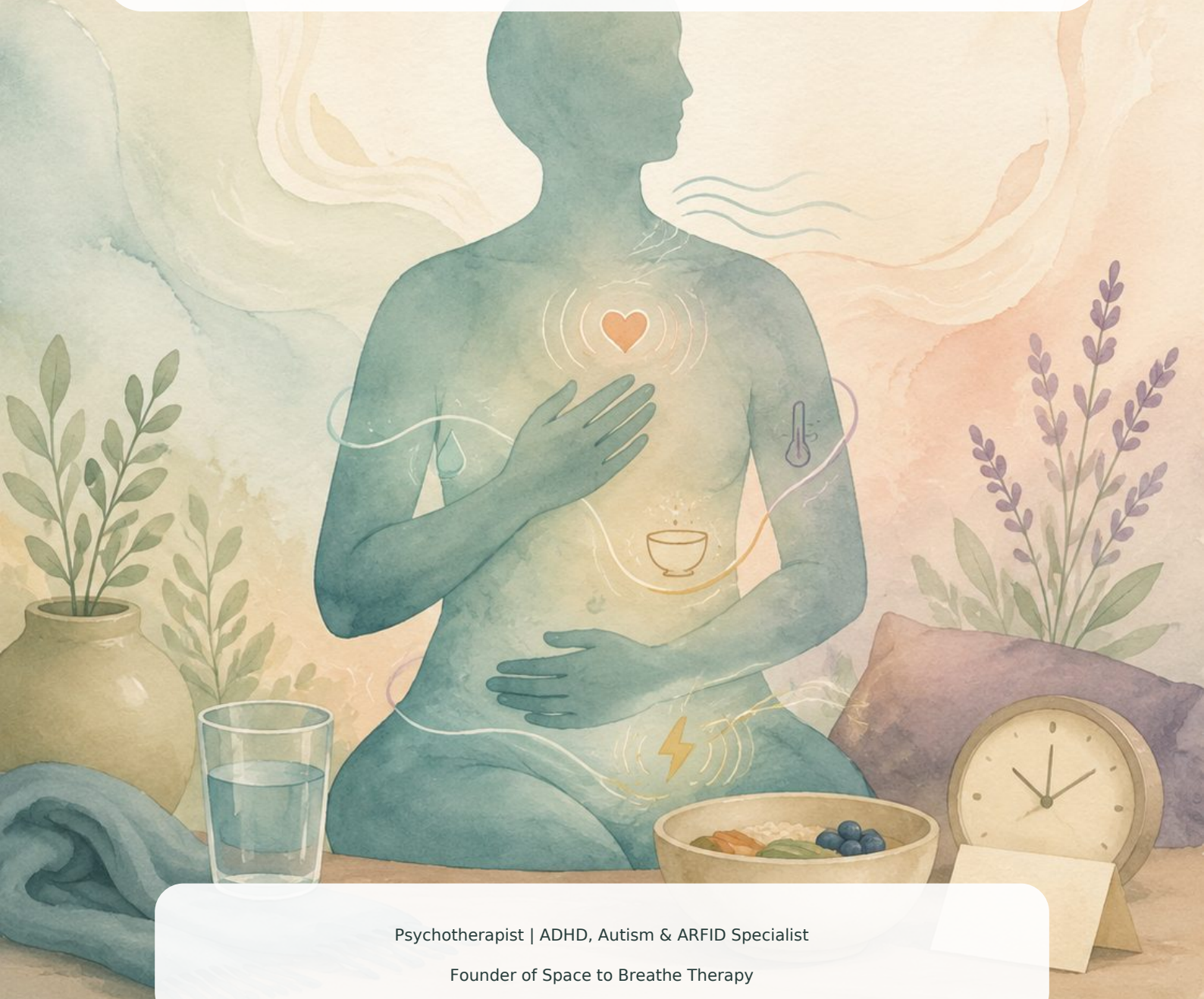


PART 2 OF 2

INTEROCEPTION

UNDERSTANDING HUNGER, THIRST,
FULLNESS AND BODY AWARENESS

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Interoception

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

Interoception and ADHD

Although ADHD is often associated with attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity, one area that receives far less attention is interoception.

Many people with ADHD describe becoming so absorbed in an activity that they completely lose awareness of what is happening inside their bodies. This is particularly noticeable during periods of hyperfocus.

Hyperfocus can be an incredible strength. It allows someone to become deeply engaged in a task, often producing creativity, productivity and problem-solving. However, it can also mean that internal body signals become much quieter than the task demanding attention.

I have worked with many adults who say things like:

"I do not realise I am hungry until I suddenly feel shaky."

"I will sit at my desk for hours without drinking anything."

"I forget to go to the toilet until it is urgent."

These experiences are often misunderstood as carelessness or poor organisation. In reality, they can reflect differences in how internal body signals compete for attention.

Executive functioning also plays a role. Even when someone notices they are hungry, turning that awareness into action involves planning, switching attention, preparing food and interrupting whatever they are currently doing. Each of those steps requires cognitive effort, and for someone with ADHD, that transition can feel surprisingly difficult.

Interoception and ARFID

Interoception also has an important relationship with Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID).

ARFID is not one single experience. Different people develop ARFID for different reasons.

For some, sensory sensitivities play the biggest role. For others, a frightening experience such as choking or vomiting creates anxiety around eating. Some people have very little interest in food at all.

Interoception can add another layer to this picture.

If someone rarely notices hunger, eating may feel unnecessary. If they struggle to recognise fullness, meals may become confusing or uncomfortable. If nausea and anxiety feel similar, they may avoid eating altogether because they cannot distinguish between the two sensations.

Understanding these differences allows support to become more compassionate and individualised.

Burnout and Body Awareness

One thing I notice frequently in my therapy room is that body awareness often changes during periods of prolonged stress or autistic burnout.

When the nervous system has been working hard for a long time, people often tell me they become disconnected from themselves.

Meals become irregular. Hydration decreases. Sleep patterns change. People continue meeting the needs of everyone around them while becoming increasingly unaware of their own needs.

Eventually the body begins demanding attention. Fatigue becomes overwhelming. Headaches become more frequent. Emotions become harder to regulate.

For many people, these are not separate problems. They are interconnected.

The body has been communicating all along. It simply has not been heard.

The Relationship Between Interoception and Mental Health

Interoception does not just influence eating. It influences how we understand ourselves.

If you struggle to recognise physical signs of stress, you may not realise you are becoming overwhelmed until you reach breaking point.

If you do not notice tiredness, you may continue pushing yourself long after your body needs rest.

If hunger feels the same as anxiety, you may misinterpret one for the other.

This does not mean interoception causes anxiety or depression. Mental health is always influenced by many interacting factors.

However, developing greater awareness of internal body signals can help some people recognise their needs earlier and respond more compassionately.

Learning to Notice the Body

One of the questions I am often asked is whether interoception can improve. The answer is encouraging.

Although everyone's nervous system is different, many people can develop greater awareness through gentle, consistent practice.

The goal is not perfection. It is curiosity.

Rather than expecting immediate awareness, we can begin asking ourselves simple questions throughout the day.

For example:

- Have I eaten today?
- Have I had enough to drink?
- How is my energy?
- Am I comfortable?
- What am I noticing in my body right now?

For some people, these questions become easier with time. Others find visual reminders, phone alarms or structured routines more helpful than relying on internal cues alone.

There is no right or wrong approach.

In My Therapy Room

One of the most meaningful shifts I see is when people stop judging themselves for not recognising what their bodies need.

Many arrive believing they are lazy, disorganised or incapable of looking after themselves. As we begin exploring interoception, a different picture often emerges.

They were not ignoring their bodies. Their bodies were communicating in ways that were quieter, delayed or more difficult to interpret.

That understanding often brings enormous relief.

Instead of forcing themselves to “try harder”, they begin creating external supports that work with their nervous system rather than against it.

For one person, that might mean setting reminders to eat. For another, it might mean keeping a water bottle within sight throughout the day. For someone else, it might involve creating predictable meal routines.

Small adjustments often have a surprisingly big impact.

Maggie's Reflection

One of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves is permission to stop comparing our bodies with other people's.

Some people naturally notice every internal sensation. Others do not.

Neither experience reflects intelligence, motivation or character. It is simply another example of how beautifully varied human brains can be.

The more we understand our own nervous systems, the less energy we spend fighting them.

Practical Strategies

If interoception feels challenging, you might find these ideas helpful:

- Eat at regular times rather than waiting until you feel hungry.
- Keep a drink where you can easily see it.
- Use phone reminders for meals and hydration.
- Pause briefly several times a day to notice what your body is communicating.
- Develop predictable routines that reduce the need to rely solely on internal cues.
- Choose nourishing foods that feel safe and manageable.
- Be kind to yourself if you miss signals - awareness develops gradually.

Remember, these strategies are supports, not tests. The aim is to work with your body, not to judge it.

Myth vs Reality

Myth: “Everyone knows when they are hungry or thirsty.”
Reality: Interoception varies from person to person. Some people experience clear internal signals, while others notice them only when they become very strong. This is particularly common in many autistic people and people with ADHD.

What Current Research Tells Us

Research into interoception has expanded significantly over the last decade.

Studies suggest that differences in interoceptive processing are common in autistic people and are also increasingly recognised in ADHD. Researchers are exploring how these differences influence eating, emotional regulation, anxiety, sleep and overall wellbeing.

Current evidence supports approaches that combine understanding, external supports and person-centred strategies rather than expecting individuals to rely solely on internal awareness.

Although there is still much to learn, recognising interoception has already changed the way many professionals understand eating behaviours and emotional wellbeing.

Key Takeaways

- Interoception is our ability to notice and interpret signals from inside the body.
- It influences hunger, thirst, fullness, pain, fatigue and emotional awareness.
- Many autistic people and people with ADHD experience differences in interoception.
- These differences can affect eating patterns, hydration and self-care.
- External supports such as routines and reminders can be extremely helpful.
- Understanding interoception replaces self-criticism with self-compassion.

Before You Go...

If there is one message I hope you take from this article, it is this:

Your relationship with your body is not a measure of your worth.

If you have spent years wondering why you forget to eat, why you struggle to recognise thirst or why your emotions sometimes seem to appear out of nowhere, I hope you now understand that there may be a neurological explanation.

Awareness is not about becoming perfect. It is about becoming curious.

Every time you pause to ask, "What is my body trying to tell me?", you are building a kinder relationship with yourself.

As both a psychotherapist and someone with lived experience, I have seen how powerful that shift can be.

When people begin listening to their bodies without judgement, they often discover something remarkable.

Their bodies were never working against them. They were communicating in the only way they knew how.

Our task is not to silence those messages. It is to learn how to hear them.

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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.