

INTEROCEPTION

Hunger · Thirst · Fullness
and Body Awareness

PART 1 OF 2

A clear guide to noticing and understanding the messages coming from inside the body.

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Space to Breathe Therapy

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? Perhaps you have finished a meal before recognising that you were already full halfway through, or 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 day. We often assume that recognising hunger, thirst, tiredness or pain is automatic: that the body sends clear messages and the brain naturally understands them. In reality, it is not always that simple.

The ability to notice and interpret what is happening inside the body is known as interoception. It influences when we eat, drink and rest, how we recognise emotions and how we respond to stress.

For many autistic people, people with ADHD and individuals with ARFID, internal signals may be quieter, louder, delayed or more difficult to interpret. This is not someone ignoring their body; it reflects differences in how the nervous system processes information.

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 work through an entire day without eating and only realise I was hungry when I felt shaky or light-headed. I thought I had simply become too busy.

Sometimes I genuinely did not notice my body asking for food. At other times I knew something felt different, but could not work out what it was.

Was I anxious? Hungry? Tired? Overwhelmed?

Learning about interoception helped me understand that recognising what the body is telling us is a skill the brain performs constantly, and that this process works differently for different people. As a psychotherapist, I now notice this in many of the people I support.

What is interoception?

Interoception is often described as our eighth sense. While other senses gather information from the world around us, interoception gathers information from inside the body. Receptors throughout the body collect information and send it to the brain.

Signals can include:

- hunger and fullness
- thirst
- heart rate and breathing
- body temperature
- pain, muscle tension and nausea
- fatigue and energy changes
- the need to use the toilet
- emotional arousal

The brain receives these signals, interprets them and helps us decide how to respond. Much of the time this happens without conscious thought: you feel thirsty and have a drink; you feel cold and put on a jumper; you notice your stomach rumbling and prepare something to eat.

How the brain understands the body

Interoception depends on communication between the body and brain. Specialised nerve endings detect changes and pass information through the nervous system. The insula is one important brain region involved in interpreting these signals and becoming aware of our internal physical state.

The insula works with networks involved in emotional regulation, decision making, attention, memory, self-awareness and social understanding. Physical sensations and emotional experiences are closely connected: the body and brain are continually communicating.

Why signals can feel unclear

A signal has several stages: the body changes, the brain notices, meaning is assigned, and a response is chosen. Difficulty at any stage can make the message feel late or ambiguous. Sensory overload, stress, pain, illness, medication, fatigue, trauma responses, hyperfocus and a busy environment may also compete for attention.

A different question

Instead of asking, “Why can’t I get this right?”, try asking, “What might my body be trying to tell me?”

That change can replace self-criticism with curiosity. Some people never feel thirsty, do not notice they need the toilet until it becomes urgent, or suddenly ‘crash’ because earlier hunger or overwhelm cues were missed.

A simple signal check

Pause and notice three things: where the sensation is, what it feels like and how strong it is from 0 to 10. You do not need to name the cause immediately. Try one supportive action, such as a drink, a snack, warmth, movement, quiet or rest, then notice whether anything changes.

Hunger is not always obvious

Hunger is often imagined as a growling stomach, but it can look very different. Someone may continue working, studying or hyperfocusing without realising their body has been asking for food for hours. By the time they notice, they may feel exhausted rather than hungry.

Possible hunger signals

- irritability or becoming emotional
- difficulty concentrating or brain fog
- headache
- feeling shaky or light-headed
- low energy
- feeling unusually cold

For someone with reduced interoceptive awareness, signals may not be recognised until they become intense. External structure - such as planned pauses, reminders or keeping an accessible safe food nearby - can support the body before it reaches a crisis point.

Understanding fullness

Recognising fullness can be just as challenging. Some people stop eating naturally because they notice subtle changes. Others continue because those signals have not yet become clear. This is not about lacking self-control; it is about differences in how information is received and interpreted.

A gentler approach is to pause without pressure and notice any change in comfort, taste, interest, breathing, stomach sensation or energy. There is no requirement to identify the 'right' signal immediately.

Why thirst can be missed

Some people notice thirst early; others recognise dehydration only after a headache, dry mouth, tiredness, dizziness or difficulty concentrating. People with ADHD or autism may realise late in the day that they have not drunk because the earlier signals never reached conscious awareness.

Again, this reflects neurological processing rather than laziness or poor motivation. Visible drinks, preferred cups, routine-based prompts and drinking alongside regular activities can provide practical support.

Interoception and emotions

Emotions are experienced in the body as well as the mind. Anxiety, for example, may involve a racing heart, tight chest, butterflies, sweaty palms or faster breathing. These are interoceptive signals that the brain interprets as part of recognising emotion.

For some people, early changes are difficult to recognise. Awareness may arrive only when an emotion has become overwhelming, making regulation much harder.

Interoception in autism

Many autistic people experience differences in interoception. Some have reduced awareness of internal signals; others experience sensations intensely. Some fluctuate between both.

This may influence:

- eating and drinking
- sleep and toileting
- emotional awareness
- recognising pain
- energy management

Routines, reminders and respectful external support can be more useful than simply telling someone to 'listen to your body'. The aim is to build a safer, kinder system around the person's actual needs.

Support that may help

- link food and drinks to predictable daily anchors
- use visible prompts, alarms, pictures or written check-ins
- keep preferred drinks and safe, manageable foods accessible
- offer choices without pressure or shame
- track patterns gently and share helpful responses with trusted supporters

A gentle starting point

Choose one neutral check-in two or three times a day. Notice temperature, breathing, mouth dryness, stomach comfort, muscle tension and energy. Record what you notice without judging it.

When to seek support

Seek qualified help if you are regularly unable to eat or drink enough, experience fainting, persistent dizziness or significant pain, or notice a sudden change in body awareness. Urgent or severe symptoms require urgent medical advice.

Message from Maggie

If your body's messages feel faint, confusing or suddenly overwhelming, you are not failing. Your nervous system may communicate differently. Curiosity, routine and the right support can help you understand your own signals without shame.

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This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical, nutritional or mental-health advice.