

INTEROCEPTION

Body Awareness · Routines
and Self-Compassion

PART 2 OF 2

Working with your nervous system through body awareness, supportive routines and greater self-understanding.

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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 become so absorbed in an activity that awareness of what is happening inside the body fades into the background. This can be especially noticeable during hyperfocus.

Hyperfocus can be an incredible strength, supporting creativity, productivity and problem-solving. It can also mean that internal signals become much quieter than the task demanding attention.

People often describe experiences such as:

“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 can be misunderstood as carelessness or poor organisation. In reality, they reflect how body signals compete for attention.

Executive functioning also matters. Even after noticing hunger, acting on it involves interrupting the current task, switching attention, deciding what to eat and preparing food. Each step requires cognitive effort.

Interoception and ARFID

Interoception also has an important relationship with Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID). ARFID is not one single experience: sensory sensitivities, fear after choking or vomiting, low interest in food and other factors may all contribute.

If someone rarely notices hunger, eating may feel unnecessary. If fullness is hard to recognise, meals may feel confusing or uncomfortable. When nausea and anxiety feel similar, a person may avoid eating because the sensations are difficult to distinguish.

Understanding these differences allows support to become more individualised, respectful and effective.

Burnout and body awareness

Body awareness often changes during prolonged stress or autistic burnout. When the nervous system has been working hard for a long time, people may become disconnected from themselves.

Meals become irregular. Hydration decreases. Sleep changes. A person may continue meeting everyone else's needs while becoming increasingly unaware of their own.

Eventually, the body demands attention: fatigue becomes overwhelming, headaches become more frequent and emotions become harder to regulate.

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

Interoception and mental health

Interoception does not only influence eating; it also affects how we understand ourselves. If physical signs of stress are hard to recognise, overwhelm may not be noticed until breaking point. If tiredness is missed, someone may keep pushing long after the body needs rest. If hunger resembles anxiety, one may be mistaken for the other.

This does not mean that interoception causes anxiety or depression. Mental health is shaped by many interacting factors. However, greater awareness of internal signals may help some people recognise needs earlier and respond with more care.

Learning to notice the body

Many people can develop greater awareness through gentle, consistent practice. The goal is not perfection. It is curiosity.

Simple questions to try:

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

These questions may become easier with time. Some people find visual reminders, phone alarms or structured routines more useful than relying on internal cues alone.

Why routines help

A routine does not replace interoception; it provides a bridge when internal cues are unreliable. Eating after a regular activity, filling a bottle at the start of work or pausing between appointments reduces the number of decisions required in the moment.

When signals conflict

Hunger, anxiety, nausea, excitement and fatigue can overlap. You do not have to identify the sensation perfectly before responding. Choose a low-pressure action that is usually safe for you, then notice whether the sensation changes.

Try a brief check-in

Name one sensation without interpreting it: warm, tight, fluttery, heavy, empty, restless or tired. Notice its location and intensity. Then consider one small supportive response. This gradually builds a personal body-language dictionary.

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 explore interoception, a different picture 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: reminders to eat, a visible water bottle or predictable meal routines. Small adjustments can 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 naturally notice every internal sensation; others do not.

Neither experience reflects intelligence, motivation or character. It is simply another example of how varied human brains can be. The more we understand our nervous systems, the less energy we spend fighting them.

Practical strategies

- eat at regular times rather than waiting for strong hunger
- keep a drink where it is easy to see
- use reminders for meals and hydration
- pause briefly during the day to notice body signals
- develop predictable routines that reduce reliance on internal cues
- choose nourishing foods that feel safe and manageable
- respond kindly when signals are missed; awareness develops gradually

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

Myth and reality

Myth: “Everyone knows when they are hungry or thirsty.”

Reality: Interoception varies. Some people notice clear signals; others notice them only when they become strong. This is common for many autistic people and people with ADHD.

What current research tells us

Research into interoception has expanded significantly over the last decade. Differences in interoceptive processing are commonly reported in autistic people and are increasingly recognised in ADHD. Researchers continue to explore how these differences relate to eating, emotional regulation, anxiety, sleep and wellbeing.

Current evidence supports approaches combining understanding, external supports and person-centred strategies, rather than expecting individuals to rely solely on internal awareness. There is still much to learn, but recognising interoception has already influenced how many professionals understand eating behaviour and emotional wellbeing.

Key takeaways

- interoception is the 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 interoceptive differences
- these differences can affect eating patterns, hydration and self-care
- routines, reminders and other external supports can be very helpful
- understanding can replace self-criticism with greater self-kindness

Build one supportive routine

Choose One need that is often missed.	Anchor Link it to something already in the day.	Review Notice what helped, without judging.
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For example: drink after opening your laptop, eat after the morning school run or pause for a body check between clients. Begin with one realistic anchor rather than changing everything at once.

Before you go...

If there is one message I hope you take from this guide, 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, struggle to recognise thirst or experience emotions that seem to appear from nowhere, there may be a neurological explanation.

Awareness is not about becoming perfect. It is about becoming curious. Each time you 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. Our task is not to silence the body’s messages. It is to learn how to hear them.

A final reassurance

Needing reminders, routines or help from another person does not make your awareness less valid. Support is part of how human beings regulate, learn and care for themselves.

Seek appropriate professional advice if changes in hunger, thirst, pain, dizziness, eating or hydration are persistent, sudden or worrying.

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