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What is Interoception? – Kelly Mahler

Have you ever felt your stomach growl? Your head pound? Your heart race? Your palms sweat? Your eyes grow heavy?

If so, do you know how you are able to feel these feels? Many people notice these feelings in their body with the help of an important sense... a sense called (*drum roll please*)... **interoception**.

Don't let the name fool you. The word interoception might not sound very sexy or important. But this sense is a *really* big deal. Interoception has a huge influence on many areas of our lives like self-regulation, mental health and social connection.

Self-Regulation: Interoception is a must!

Clear awareness of your body signals not only gives you important feedback about exactly how you are feeling (for example, feeling content, happy or anxious), it also gives you valuable information about the situation at hand. (for example, what you are doing or where you are makes you feel content, happy or anxious). In cases of dysregulation, your body signals also serve as an alert that your internal body balance is off and motivates you to take action by doing something that will restore the internal balance and help your body feel more comfortable. In other words, noticing the way your body feels is what motivates purposeful self-regulation behaviors.

Take for example, if you notice that your stomach is growling, that feeling provides you with a clue that you are hungry which then might motivate you to take action and eat. Or perhaps you notice a tight or heavy stomach which lets you know that you are full and that is what motivates you to stop eating. Or maybe you notice shivering muscles or goosebumps on your skin which gives you clues that you are cold. This might prompt you to put on a sweater. Or possibly you notice a tight feeling in your chest, a racing heart and tense muscles which might tell you that you are anxious

and urges you to seek the comfort of a loved one. In all of these cases your interoceptive body sensations are what served as your motivation to self-regulate, to do something that restored the comfort within your body.

Said in another way: interoception is the very foundation of independent self-regulation.

[Dive Deeper into Interoception](#)

An Unreliable Interoception Experience

Now, think about what would happen if your inner interoception experience was unclear or confusing. What if you were unable to feel what was happening in your body? What if you noticed feelings on the inside of your body but had no idea what the feelings meant? Or what if your internal sensations were so overwhelming that your body feels unsafe on a daily basis?

Unfortunately, this is a reality for many people. Many people with conditions or diagnoses such as autism, ADHD, trauma disorders, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, toilet training difficulties, sensory processing disorder and behavioral challenges have been found to have interoception difficulties.

For example, Chloe, an autistic young adult reports, "I was an encyclopedia of coping strategies. I could tell you over 50 strategies that people taught me to use to 'calm down.' The amount I could use in the moment? Zero. I did not feel the signs in my body cueing me to use the strategies."

Jasim, a teenager with an anxiety disorder shares, "Anxiety would slam into me with little warning. I never felt the building signals of overwhelm. Then all of a sudden, I'm in a full panic mode. Screaming, crying, doing what anyone would do when they feel that way. It was incredibly embarrassing"

However, given the fact that many of us live in a society that does not put a lot of emphasis on the importance of the body and listening to the messages it sends, many people without a specific condition or diagnoses can have interoception difficulties as well.

For example, Sanza, an adult, "I would eat all of the time. When I watched TV, when I was sitting at my desk doing work, when I was driving my kids to all of their activities. I wasn't eating when my body felt hungry. My body was numbed out and I was just going through the motions"

Ricardo, a special education teacher stated, "Previously, when my students were having a hard time—yelling, throwing, kicking—I didn't recognize the reactions occurring in my own body. I was completely unaware of how my own inner experience was contributing

to the situation. Gaining more awareness of my own interoceptive signals has allowed me to be a calming force when my students are dysregulated—a win for all of us.”

Research has found that improving the awareness and understanding of our interoceptive signals is good for all people and has many benefits.

How Interoception Can Help

For many years, I used traditional approaches to helping my clients regulate their emotions, only to fall short most of the time. Something was missing. My clients were definitely making gains, but I knew there was still something missing, something that was preventing them to achieve the level of self-regulation needed for life-long flourishing.

And then it happened one day... being a huge research geek paid off (yes—spending hours getting lost in a maze of research articles is a dream evening for me)! I read an article about a sense called interoception and my world completely changed. From this point, I had many conversations with my clients and their families only to discover that most of my clients were completely unaware or very confused about how their bodies feel. This made understanding and regulating their emotions nearly impossible. And yikes...I was missing this all along!!

Interoception Studies

Interoception has been widely studied for decades but is only now making its way into practical application. Thankfully, this information is rapidly improving our ability to understand dysregulation a little bit better which in turn is driving more effective (and kind) supports that honor each person's inner experience.

Research states that interoception can be improved and I see this on a daily basis with my clients. It is really meaningful to help my clients discover and understand their own unique body signals and emotions.

Including Mindfulness and IA Builders

Mindfulness practices have been shown to be one of the most effective, evidence-based interventions for improving interoceptive awareness. Interestingly, mindfulness is shown to activate the insula, the interoceptive center in the brain. That is why those who practice meditation often have superior levels of interoception.

Although mindfulness has many wonderful benefits, including increasing awareness of body sensations, mindfulness can be very abstract and difficult for a lot of people.

Therefore, we have worked to adapt mindfulness practices, creating strategies that work well for many different learning styles. These strategies, known as IA Builders,

modify abstract mindfulness concepts into concrete, visual, interactive and engaging activities that help people explore and understand their own personal inner experiences.

“Based on her years of experience, Kelly offers practical tools that can be used to guide attention to the messages that our bodies are constantly sending to our brains. We all need to listen to our bodies and understand its messages. Kelly knows how to listen, and she knows how to help others listen better to their bodies. Here she shares her natural understanding of interoception and her recommendations for how we can help others to improve their own interoceptive awareness.”

A. D. (Bud) Craig, PhD