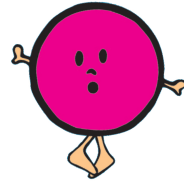


INTEROCEPTION: THE EIGHTH SENSORY SYSTEM

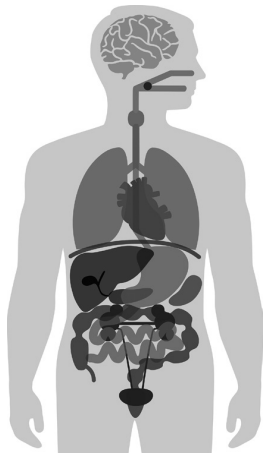
Sit back and close your eyes. What do you *feel* inside your body?

- Is your heart beating fast or slow?
- Are you breathing deeply or shallowly?
- Do you have to go to the bathroom?
- Are your muscles tense or loose?
- How does your stomach feel?



Most of us are able to *feel* all of these sensations with the help of our little-known, but very important, eighth sensory system, Interoception.

How does the interoceptive system work? There are little receptors located throughout the inside of the body, in areas such as the stomach, heart, intestines, genitals, muscles, skin, bones and even eyes. These receptors gather information from the inside of our body and send it to brain. The brain then uses this information to figure out how we feel. Interoception enables us to feel conditions such as hunger, fullness, itch, pain, body temperature, nausea, need for the bathroom, tickle, physical exertion and sexual arousal. Additionally, interoception allows us to feel all of our emotions.

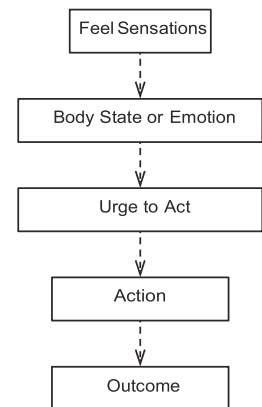


How is interoception connected to our emotions? Typically, each emotion feels differently in the body. For example, before speaking in public, your body may *feel* a certain way: your heart may race, your muscles may feel tense and shaky, your breathing may become shallow, and your stomach may feel fluttery. These sensations let you know that you are feeling a bit nervous. You are able to notice these sensations all because of interoception—therefore interoception is clearly connected with our emotions. Without clearly feeling internal sensations, it can make figuring out emotions difficult, thus leading to challenges in identifying and controlling exactly what you are feeling.

How is interoception connected to self-regulation? When our interoceptive system is working at it's best, the sensations alert us that something is not quite right and motivates us to take action, to do something that will restore our body's internal balance and help us feel more comfortable. For example, if we feel thirsty – we are urged to get a drink; if we feel full – we are urged to stop eating; if we feel cold – we are urged to get a sweater; if we feel the need to urinate – we are urged to go to the bathroom; if we feel anxious – we are urged to seek comfort; if we feel frustrated—we are urged to seek help. Interoception underlies our urge for action. If we are able to clearly *notice* our internal sensations, we are motivated to act, to seek immediate relief from the discomfort caused by the imbalance. Actively seeking this relief is called self-regulation and it is completely dependent on our interoceptive sense.

Is interoception important to any other areas? In addition to self-regulation, interoception is clearly linked to many other important skill areas including:

- Self-Awareness
- Problem Solving
- Perspective Taking
- Flexible Thinking
- Intuitive Social Skills
- Overall Health & Well-Being



The research showing just how important interoception is to many aspects of life is unequivocal. The brand-new book *Interoception: The Eighth Sensory System Practical Solutions for Improving Self-Regulation, Self-Awareness and Social Understanding of Individuals With Autism Spectrum and Related Disorders* (Mahler, 2015, aapcpublishing.net) delivers an overview of this research and describes the clear link between Interoception and these important skill areas.