

Interoception

This sensory system gives us our internal body sense. Receptors, pathways and the brain area work together to inform us of “how do I feel?”

Interoceptive awareness is directly connected to our emotions. Children who have more difficulty determining various emotions can have a variety of challenges, including:

- Difficulty identifying exactly how they feel
- The ability to recognise a general feeling of discomfort or comfort but are unable to pinpoint any specific emotion
- The ability to detect a basic emotion, like anger, but are unable to determine the intensity (little angry v’s explosive angry)
- The ability to recognise a general feeling of excitement but are unable to detect the other emotions intermingled with the excitement, such as, nervousness.

What happens when a young person experiences interoception differently?

If a young person’s body signals (receptors) are too big, (over responsive) they are noticing sensations that are really strong and overpowering, and often too many body signals happen at once. For example, a young person can feel hunger, thirst and a need for the toilet all at once which is very overwhelming. This will result in high anxiety, worry, panic, and stressful behaviours.

If a young person has body signals that are too small, their sensations are weak, muted and can sometimes go unnoticed. This can look like a young person is struggling, showing signs of frustration, but is saying they feel fine, until they can suddenly explode, or not noticing they need the toilet until their bladder is extremely full. Some children do not “feel” hungry or thirsty or do not “feel” that they are full

Some body signals can be distorted in a young person (sensory discrimination), meaning their body signals are noticeable but are not clear enough to give specific detail about the exact location or type of feeling. For example, they may feel “ill” but cannot determine what is wrong or where the problem is.

How unclear interoceptive awareness can impact on daily life

The following is a list of possible signs:

- The child/student does not notice they are becoming overwhelmed until he/she is REALLY overwhelmed
- When the child becomes upset he/she requires help to clam down
- The child can forget to eat or drink, because they do not feel hungry or thirsty
- The child can eat huge amounts of food without feeling full or eat to the extent of feeling sick/uncomfortable
- The child does not feel the need to use the toilet until it is really extreme or a last minute emergency.
- An unusually high /low pain threshold
- May feel an intense amount of pain from a small paper cut
- May have sustained a bad injury but not experienced any pain
- A child can over exert themselves beyond the point of exhaustion because he/she does not realise the signs of getting tired.
- Even small illnesses, such as a runny nose, can overwhelm some children
- The child does not notice when they are ill
- The child does not notice when they are hot until they are REALLY overheated
- The child is unaffected by cold weather
- The child can be very sensitive to feeling hot or cold