

Interoception and Trauma

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Interoception allows us to identify, understand and respond to what is happening inside of our bodies. It helps us to recognise when we're feeling hungry or tired, whether we need the toilet, and identifies other bodily sensations like aches or pains, our heartbeat, breath, and emotions. Interoception helps us to notice our internal warning signs; by recognising our basic needs, we're able to look after ourselves more effectively.

*"WE DO NOT TRULY KNOW OURSELVES UNLESS WE CAN FEEL AND INTERPRET OUR PHYSICAL SENSATIONS; WE NEED TO REGISTER AND ACT ON THESE SENSATIONS TO NAVIGATE SAFELY THROUGH LIFE."
- BESSEL VAN DER KOLK*

Interoception is all about knowing what is going on in ourselves. For those that have been exposed to chronic stress and trauma, to know or have a sense of yourself in one's core can be extremely challenging. This is because trauma distorts the sense of self, so occupying the body can feel alien, uncomfortable, and ultimately, unsafe.

Interoception also means that a person has to be prepared to prioritise their needs. This may feel very hard for trauma survivors as they are often flooded with feelings of shame and unworthiness.

Building sensory awareness

To build interoceptive skills, we must build our sensory awareness skills. The following suggestions are embodied, playful, and powerful in re-establishing bodily awareness. These exercises are brilliant at activating our parasympathetic nervous system and returning us to ventral vagal, which is when we are at a regulated, present and connected emotional state.

- *Body check-in:* sit down comfortably in one place and focus on each part of your body at a time. Notice how different parts of the body feel and tune into the sensations. For example, do you notice that some sensations are smaller or larger than others? What would the texture and temperature feel like if you were to touch the sensation? What colour, shape and weight might it be? You can then use your gingerbread person map to visually capture this experience.
- *Gingerbread person map:* can be used in lots of ways, including the above. It can also be used to look at specific emotions like anger or sadness. Using the map, mark the physiological changes that occur when you experience an emotion. For example, if, when angry, you clench your fists and jaw, you can illustrate this on the map. You might shake and sweat when you are experiencing anxiety or have a fast heart rate when excited.
- *Balloon-breaths:* imagine you have a balloon that you must fill up. Hold the balloon in your hand – really imagine the colour, shape, texture and even the sounds it may make as it fills up. Gently and slowly, breathe into the imaginary balloon. Remember, if you blow too quickly it could burst! Take your time practicing this exercise.
- *Shake and move:* practice moving around the room or on one spot in different ways. How might a slow snail move or a superfast cheetah catching its prey!? Allow your body to be imaginative and playful.

Links for further information and references:

- Bessel van der Kolk, The Body Keeps The Score
- <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Sensory-processing-coordination-and-attachment-Article-min.pdf>
- <https://mindsmithwellness.com.au/interoception/>
- Somatic Experiencing International Instagram
- Gingerbread person map: <https://www.coloringall.com/coloring-pages/gingerbread-man/gingerbread-man-outline/>