autism wellbeing

Our Senses: Interoception

Interoception is the sense of knowing how we feel internally. Everything from our emotional state – are we feeling happy, scared, or angry – and how do we know that? To noticing when our body needs to eat, sleep, or go to the toilet.

Some autistic people may only receive weak interoceptive messages, which may result in them not recognising or displaying their emotions in a conventional way. These children may not show signs of pain or of a high temperature. Other children may experience intense sensations internally and notice their own heartbeat, or every sensation they feel.

Interoceptive awareness plays an important role in social participation. People with interoception processing differences may have difficulties with tuning in to and responding to others.

Asking someone how they feel may be confusing, and difficult for them to answer because they may not know.

- Some young people may feel emotions so strongly they become overwhelmed very quickly. Others may appear unemotional. This is not necessarily a full reflection of how they are being affected by a situation. Be aware of how you respond to them. It can be understandable to make assumptions about what they are feeling based on their outward appearance or behaviour. This may not reflect their internal state.
- A child who is very sensitive to pain may respond in a way that appears disproportionate to blood tests or having cream applied.
- When other sensory systems are having to process lots of information, body signals may become harder to notice or respond to. Children could be more likely to experience incontinence or forget to eat because of processing so much other information. It may be useful to help children get into a routine or set themselves reminders on their phone to use.
- Look out for signs of discomfort or other things your child may be feeling e.g. could they be too hot? Or unwell? Help your child recognise this in themselves. They may be able to say something hurts, but not where and can't describe the quality or intensity of the sensation.
- Eating and drinking healthily is important because you are less likely to become dehydrated or constipated. This can be especially important for those children who may not recognise the sensations of hunger, fullness and needing the toilet.