A fact sheet about

# Tuning into your body signals

UnderstandingZoe

https://understandingzoe.com

Copyright 2026

Understanding Zoe

# Tuning into your body signals

**What body awareness is, how to list your own signs, and when to get checked.**



## Key points

- Body awareness (definition below) is how clearly you notice signals from inside your body and work out what they mean.
- It differs from person to person and from signal to signal. You may feel heat strongly and hunger hardly at all.
- You do not have to feel what other people feel. You can learn your own signs, including ones you can see, touch or count.
- Pain you notice late still counts. A mark, a swelling or feeling unwell for no clear reason is worth getting checked.

## What body awareness is

Someone you live with says you are shivering, and only then do you feel cold. You find a bruise on your leg and cannot remember how it got there. Or a nurse asks whether a pain is sharp or dull, and you do not know how to answer.

Advice to "listen to your body" assumes the signals are easy to hear. If yours are not, you have not failed at listening. There are other ways to find out what your body needs.

Interoception is the sense that tells you what is happening inside your body: hunger, thirst, being hot or cold, pain and feeling unwell. Body awareness is how clearly you notice those signals and work out what they mean, and its longer name is interoceptive awareness. You can read more about interoception and feelings here.

It differs from one signal to the next. In one study, about half of the autistic adults said heat affected them more than it affects other people. Some were slow to notice being too hot or too cold. About a third said pain affected them less than other people, and about a third said it affected them more. A few were slow to notice hunger or needing the toilet, and you can read more about quiet hunger and thirst cues here.

What autistic adults describe is being unsure: whether it is pain, where it is, what kind it is and how bad it is. That can make pain hard to describe to a doctor or nurse.

When a signal from inside is unclear, autistic adults say they use what they can find out from outside. Some only knew an injury was serious once they saw the swelling or the blood, or once someone else noticed and said so. Some asked for help only once pain was strong or had lasted a long time.

Most of this research is with autistic adults. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other marginalised groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

## The one thing to try: list your own signs, so you notice a need before it gets urgent

Pick one need and list two or three signs for it. Where you can, choose signs you can see, touch or count, like these:

**Hunger:** the hours since you last ate, low energy, or a short temper

**Thirst:** the hours since your last drink, dry lips, or a dry mouth

**Hot or cold:** sweat, goosebumps, hands that feel cold to touch, the weather app, or what people around you are wearing

**Pain:** a mark, a bruise or a swelling, or a part of your body you are holding or using less

Then choose one set moment each day to check your list, such as when you wash your hands.

You can also ask someone you trust what they notice first, such as you going pale or rubbing your arms. A support person or support worker can make the list with you, in words or pictures, and prompt the check. Share what you find in the way that suits you: speaking, typing, pointing or using AAC.

Then make the need easy to meet: keep a jumper on your chair, a drink in sight or a fan you control. At work or study, these are ordinary adjustments to ask for.

You can keep your list in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, typed or as a voice note. You can set a reminder there for your check too. If something hurts, a note of where and since when is ready to show a GP.

Research suggests these signals can be quiet or unclear for some people. There is much less research on what helps adults get to know them. This step comes from what neurodivergent adults say has helped them. It has not been validated in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

Some signals may stay quiet however often you check, and your list still lets you meet the need.

## Pain and illness: when to get it checked

You do not need to be in strong pain for it to count. Some autistic adults have said it is hard to tell an ordinary body feeling from one that needs a doctor. It is worth seeing a GP, or asking someone to help

you get there, if:

- you find a wound, a swelling or a bruise and do not know how it happened, or it is not getting better
- a part of your body is not working the way it usually does
- you feel unwell and cannot work out why, and it is not passing
- someone who knows you well says you do not look well

If it might be an emergency, call triple zero (000).

You can say or show a line like "I notice pain late, so please check even if I seem fine". It may be easier to point to where it hurts on a picture of a body than to answer in words.

## Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with body signals, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

## Sources


MacLennan, O'Brien and Tavassoli (2022). "In our own words: the complex sensory experiences of autistic adults." Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 52(7), 3061-3075. doi:10.1007/s10803-021-05186-3

Moore (2015). "Acute pain experience in individuals with autism spectrum disorders: a review." Autism 19(4), 387-399. doi:10.1177/1362361314527839

Kalingel-Levi, Schreuer, Granovsky, Bar-Shalita, Weissman-Fogel, Hoffman and Gal (2022). "'When I'm in pain, everything is overwhelming': implications of pain in adults with autism on their daily living and participation." Frontiers in Psychology 13, 911756. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2022.911756

Nicolaidis, Raymaker, Ashkenazy, McDonald, Dern, Baggs, Kapp, Weiner and Boisclair (2015). "'Respect the way I need to communicate with you': healthcare experiences of adults on the autism spectrum." Autism 19(7), 824-831. doi:10.1177/1362361315576221

Trevisan, Parker and McPartland (2021). "First-hand accounts of interoceptive difficulties in autistic adults." Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 51(10), 3483-3491. doi:10.1007/s10803-020-04811-x

Nicolaidis, Raymaker, McDonald, Kapp, Weiner, Ashkenazy, Gerrity, Kripke, Platt and Baggs (2016). "The development and evaluation of an online healthcare toolkit for autistic adults and their primary care providers." Journal of General Internal Medicine 31(10), 1180-1189. doi:10.1007/s11606-016-3763-6

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

**for more information, you can contact**

*hello@understandingzoe.com*

*Copyright 2026*