A fact sheet about

Interoception and big feelings

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Interoception and big feelings

Why a feeling can arrive all at once, and one signal to learn.



Key points

- You know what you feel partly by reading signals inside your body. This sense is called interoception (definition below).
- When those signals are quiet or slow, a feeling can arrive at full size with no warning. That is why a reaction can seem bigger than the moment.
- Where research does find a link, it is mostly with alexithymia, which means finding it hard to notice and name your own feelings. That is not the same as being autistic.
- You can build this sense slowly, one body signal at a time.

What interoception is

A feeling can go from nothing to everything in under a minute: a plan changes while you are getting ready, or someone asks you a question at the wrong moment. Suddenly you are in tears, or snapping, or you cannot find any words.

Most advice about big feelings assumes you felt one building and did not act in time. For some people, there was nothing to notice until the feeling was already there. What was missing was a warning, not self-control.

Interoception is the sense that tells you what is happening inside your body. It covers hunger and thirst, feeling hot or cold, a fast heartbeat, needing the toilet, and tightness in places like your jaw or your shoulders.

It is also where feelings start. A feeling shows up in your body before it has a name: your chest gets tight, your face gets hot, or your stomach drops. You read those signals without knowing you are doing it, and that reading becomes "I am getting annoyed".

So when your body signals are clear, your feelings are easier to read too.

Why quiet signals make a feeling arrive all at once

Many people feel a feeling build slowly. They notice they are a little tense, then tense, then very tense. Because they can feel each step, they have time to do something early.

But if the early steps are too quiet to feel, you do not get that warning. You feel very little, and then you feel all of it at once. The feeling was growing the whole time, but the signal did not reach you.

This can make a reaction look too big to other people, and sometimes to you afterwards. But you did not get the ten minutes that might have let you leave the room.

How well you read your body and how well you think you read it are not always the same. The gap can go either way: you may read your body better than you think, or less well.

You may have read that this is an autistic trait. That is close, but the research says something a little different.

It points to alexithymia, which means finding it hard to notice, name and describe your own feelings. Alexithymia is what goes along with finding your body hard to read.

Studies suggest about half of autistic people have alexithymia. It is much less common in other people. But it is not the same as being autistic, and many autistic people read their bodies well.

Research like this has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So it may not match your life exactly. A person who seeks out sensory input and a person who avoids it may also notice very different things in their body. Neither of them is doing it wrong. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: learn one signal

You build this sense one signal at a time. Pick one signal and leave the others for later. Choose the one you already notice most often:

- your jaw, your shoulders or your hands
- thirst or hunger
- feeling hot or cold
- your heart beating faster
- needing the toilet

Check that one signal at two moments you already pass every day. For example, you could check when you make a morning drink and when you sit down at the end of the day. You are not scoring it, you are not trying to relax it: just naming what it is doing in two or three words: "Jaw tight", "jaw fine" or "no idea".

At the start, "no idea" may be your answer most of the time. That still tells you something useful, because it shows you which of your signals are quiet.

If remembering is the hard part, you can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app. You can keep a few words in your notes there too.

Give it about two weeks before you decide if it is working. It is slow, because you are building a sense rather than learning a trick. Often the change is that the signal starts to turn up on its own during the day. Some signals may stay quiet, and that is okay, two or three clear ones are enough.

When a signal does turn up early, it can give you a few minutes. Decide now what you will do with them, because it is hard to choose once a feeling has arrived. One thing is enough:

- go outside, or into another room
- put headphones on, with or without music
- run cold water over your wrists
- say a sentence you agreed on earlier with someone you live with

You can also read more about what may help in the first few minutes of a big feeling here.

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.

If you would like support, a GP is a good place to start. It does not matter whether this happens most days or only now and then. 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 big feelings, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if what you notice is flatness rather than overload. That might mean nothing feels good, even the things you usually enjoy. It is a different pattern, and it needs its own conversation.

If you are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night.

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