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Awareness

Listening to the body from within: what interoception is

How we sense our heartbeat, hunger and tension, why this "inner sense" is linked with emotions and how it can be practised

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Close your eyes for a minute and try to feel your heart, without touching your pulse with your hand. Some people feel it clearly. Others feel nothing. This small difference shows something important: how well we listen to our body from within.

An inner sense

Interoception is the ability to sense the internal state of the body: heartbeat, breathing, hunger, thirst, temperature, muscle tension, the need to go to the toilet. Most of the time these signals are processed without awareness, but they constantly affect what we feel and do.

In 2018 a large group of researchers led by Sahib Khalsa published a summary of knowledge on interoception and mental health. They pointed out that problems in perceiving body signals are present in many conditions, such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders and addictions. But they also stressed that the field is still young and that measurement methods have limits.

The body and emotions

Many theories of emotion, since William James in the nineteenth century, have proposed that emotions are partly the perception of changes in the body. We do not tremble only because we are afraid; our fear also includes the perception of trembling. That is why two people can experience the same racing heart quite differently: one as excitement, the other as panic.

> *The body speaks constantly. Most of the time, we simply do not listen.*

How it is measured

One of the most used methods is the heartbeat-counting task: participants count the beats they feel for a few seconds, while a device measures them. This method has been criticised, because people may guess rather than feel. That is why researchers distinguish between measured accuracy, our belief that we sense the body, and awareness of how accurate we are.

Simple exercises

1. **A body check three times a day:** pause for 30 seconds and ask: how is my breathing? Is there tension in my shoulders, jaw, belly?
2. **Counting breaths:** count 10 breaths without changing them. Notice their natural rhythm.
3. **Hunger and fullness:** before and during a meal, rate your hunger from 1 to 10.
4. **Emotion and body:** when you feel a strong emotion, ask: where do I feel this in my body?

These exercises take no time, but with practice they can make the link between what

happens in the body and what we feel clearer.

Sources

Khalsa, S. S., Adolphs, R., Cameron, O. G. et al. (2018). Interoception and mental health: A roadmap. *Biological Psychiatry: Cognitive Neuroscience and Neuroimaging*, 3(6), 501–513. doi:10.1016/j.bpsc.2017.12.004

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