

Week Three Topic: Interoception or Bodysensing

We are all familiar with our five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and feel. Our external environment gives us information and we experience these sensations.

Interoception:

Interoception is sensing our internal environment (our bodies). We use interoception every day, for example it is often how we know we need to use the bathroom, or eat. We might also notice that our heart beats faster sometimes or that we have pain or discomfort somewhere in our body.

As helping professionals, we often override or ignore our own bodily sensations. This disconnect sometimes helps us do our work in the short term, but in the long term it contributes to stress or causes us to neglect ourselves.

For example, how often have you delayed or ignored the need to void your bladder because you were attending to something else at work? How often have you gone to work even though you were feeling sick, because you are essential? How often have you skipped a meal, eaten something unhealthy, or eaten very quickly and mindlessly?

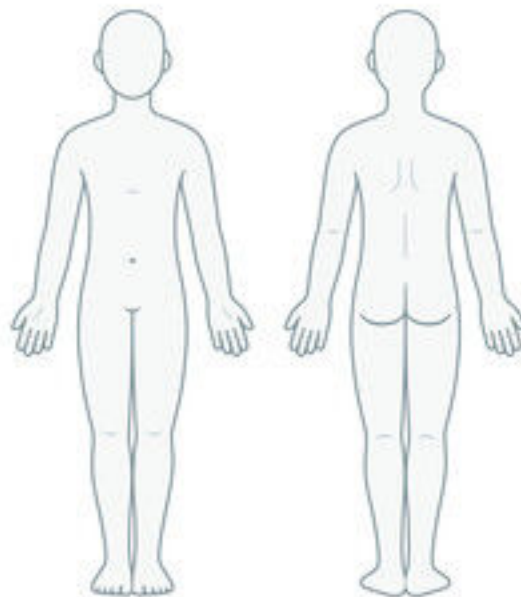
All of these behaviors occur when we are disconnected from our bodies. If we miss or neglect cues, we often end up with bigger problems like dehydration from ignoring our thirst, difficulty maintaining a healthy weight, restless/poor sleep from ignoring our exhaustion, or injuries.

We can practice interoception through guided practices such as iRest, progressive muscle relaxation, or even in little ways throughout the day by actively 'checking in' with ourselves and scanning for cues from within. When you first begin this practice, sometimes it can be uncomfortable or cause a little anxiety. It is okay to take a break and try again another time. With practice and over time, you will develop a greater interoceptive

awareness and you will also develop the ability to fully relax your body. Practice 'little and often'.

Richard Miller: “By heightening awareness of our physical body, we are able to simultaneously effect a deep relaxation in brain activity, which heightens our ability to be both alert and relaxed at the same time.”

Week Three Homework: This week, begin a practice of progressive muscle relaxation. There are many ways to do this, such as the attached written instructions that will take you through a step-by-step practice of consciously tensing then relaxing parts of your body. You might also find that you prefer audio instructions or an app, but with practice this is something you can learn to do entirely on your own. Take time to check in with yourself and your body. You can use the picture below to note any sensations or feelings you notice before or after your practice. Reflect on what you notice before versus after doing this activity.



Feelings or Sensations Before:	Feelings or Sensations After:

progressive muscle **relaxation**

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling "tense", or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you "tense up" when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

general procedure

- 1 Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2 When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3 Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- 4 When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. **Neck. !!!** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg. !!!** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.