

The Interoception Buzz

by Shoshanna Katzman



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Studies on animals were conducted that applied Pavlovian conditioning finding that interoception may be important for learned behavior and emotion. Many researchers also examined the ability for humans to gain control over their autonomic function as a way to treat various conditions. Scientific studies have most commonly investigated interoception and the cardiovascular system by evaluating sensations of the heartbeat during various tasks.

Interoception is a unifying factor of mind-body interventions and practices becoming more and more in vogue each day. Practicing deep breathing techniques helps a person to become more aware of their internal body process thereby enhancing their perception, cognition, and emotional state. We can also learn to meditate and become more mindful of our heartbeat, thereby working toward “calming our heart and spirit”.



The brain is constantly receiving signals from the body such as hunger, fear, or any number of internal sensations both positive and negative.

These signals are transmitted via a process known as interoception, whereas those coming from outside of the body are processed through exteroception. Interoception operates on both conscious and subconscious levels and has a direct impact on perception, cognition, and emotion.

Such information turns out to be critical to self-awareness, experience of emotion, and maintenance of bodily homeostasis. Interoception stems from the brain integrating signals relayed from the body via a diversity of neural pathways to subregions (including the brainstem and thalamus). It strengthens the brain’s ability to predict and anticipate internal needs as it seeks to fulfill them to regulate the body’s processes.

On the other hand, disconnect between the brain and body signal or misrepresentation of internal states are believed to be an underlying root cause of conditions such as anxiety, depression, panic, attention deficit, and obsessive compulsive behavior. This is precisely what grabbed the attention of neuroscientists prompting a multitude of research studies beginning in the 1950’s and 60’s known as the “biofeedback blip”.

The brain-gut connection is another example, whereby becoming more aware of their impact on each other opens up a whole new way of linking physical and psychological experience. Or having acupuncture which inserts thin hair-like needles into the skin activating and balancing internal energies. This most certainly increases a recipient’s awareness of the internal pro-

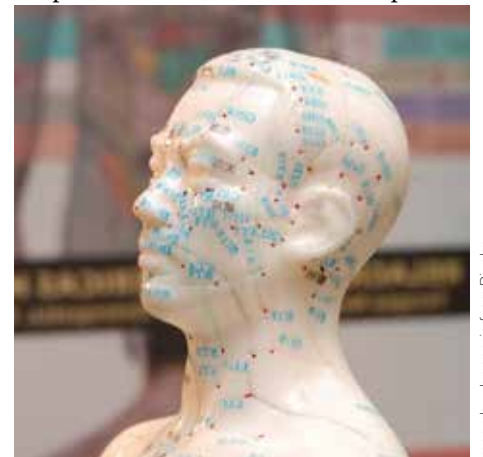


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cesses of their body. The same happens throughout performance of the ancient exercises of Taiji, Qigong, and Yoga. Not to mention the more recent attraction to opening and balancing the vagus nerve through these ancient techniques in addition to specialized breathing and meditative practices.

Interestingly, many of these practices are currently under the scientific microscope today, with experimental results in support of theories that attach selfhood to interoceptive signals derived from our internal organs. Prime examples include deeper awareness of the steady and rhythmical pace of our visceral organs or the constant repetition and regularity of respiration of the lungs, beating of the heart, and peristalsis of the gut – thereby maintaining physiological homeostasis.

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