

FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS OF INTEROCEPTIVE DEFICITS IN AUTISTIC ADULTS

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BACKGROUND

Interoception is a broad term referring to both explicit (conscious) and implicit (subconscious) processing of internal signals that impact bodily states, neural activity, and ongoing cognition (Murphy et al., 2017).

Interoception is critical for regulating bodily and mental functioning necessary for maintaining homeostasis (Craig, 2009).

Atypical interoception may be a feature of ASD (Quattrocki & Friston, 2014), but empirical findings are mixed.

Researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the need to incorporate the voices of autistic people into our research.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do autistic people experience interoceptive awareness?

DATA SOURCE

Data was collected from forum threads on Wrongplanet.net. Webpages were converted into pdf files using NCapture before being uploaded into Nvivo (QSR International v.12, 2010) for analysis.

SEARCH PROCESS

We searched for the following key terms: *interoception, interoceptive, internal signals, internal senses, bodily feelings, body feelings, and body sensations*. These searches yielded 597 posts from 91 distinct forum threads.

PROCEDURE

We applied qualitative content analysis methods to analyze firsthand accounts of self-identified autistic individuals describing their interoceptive experiences (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2009).

Texts were analyzed using an open coding method which involved breaking down texts into distinct “meaning units” then examining, comparing, and categorizing meaning units into themes and subthemes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

THEMES

Four themes emerged; *Hypo-sensibility, Hyper-sensibility/hypochondria, Poor interoceptive accuracy/confusion, and Alexithymia*

1) Hypo-Sensibility. Limited awareness of adaptive body signals, such as hunger, satiation and thirst, pain, injury, illness, exhaustion, or incontinence.

I cannot consistently tell when I am hungry. My brain doesn't alert me until a very high threshold of hunger has been reached...I am wondering if this is due to my screwed up sensory processing...maybe this is another “feature” of that. (Female, 69)

2) Hyper-Sensibility/Hypochondria. Over-sensitivity to, or worry about, internal body signals. May include stress-induced somatization.

I'm super sensitive to any little changes in how my body feels, and I always worry that I might have some serious deadly terminal scary disease. One little symptom can launch me into full blown panic, jumping to all sorts of conclusions, with words like "cancer" and "auto-immune" flashing in my mind... The thing is, the anxiety that stems from those symptoms creates new symptoms to freak out about. (Female, 45)

3) Poor Interoceptive Accuracy/Confusion. Failure to accurately distinguish or interpret the meaning of internal body signals.

At the moment there is "a sensation" in my stomach. This poses a problem. Because I can't understand what it is. I have to run possibilities, and some of them will clash - 1. Could be hungry. 2. Could just be GERD. 3. Could be something wrong with stomach, otherwise unspecified. 4. Could be a reaction to what I ate for dinner. 5. Could be autistic general GI issues. (Male, 29)

4) Alexithymia. Difficulty perceiving physiological cues of emotion and confusing emotional and physical sensations.

I think my inability to identify emotional states in myself is fundamentally [a] sensory disorder. I understand that people have specific sensations (feelings) in their bodies when they are experiencing a particular emotion. However, I have many sensations in my body that are not associated with emotional context. (Female, 39)

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Number of References
1) Hypo-Sensibility	Hunger, Satiation, Thirst	51
	Disordered Eating Behavior	8
	Pain, Injury, Illness, Exhaustion	14
	Incontinence	10
2) Hyper-Sensibility/Hypochondria	No Subthemes	15
3) Poor Interoceptive Accuracy/ Confusion	No Subthemes	18
4) Alexithymia	No Subthemes	32

CONCLUSIONS/SIGNIFICANCE

Accounts of atypical interoception were prevalent in naturally occurring discussions on Wrongplanet.net without express solicitation from researchers, indicating this phenomenon is of interest and practical concern for autistic adults.

Interoceptive dysfunction may be useful in understanding certain emotional and physical health problems, and other symptoms in autistic adults.

Increased research attention towards interoception in ASD is warranted.

LIMITATIONS

The individuals who visit Wrongplanet.net to discuss interoceptive experiences may not be representative of the ASD population. These findings may not generalize to others on the spectrum.

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