# Interoception, The 8th Sense:

The Science of How we Feel



**HELIX Conference** 

November 16, 2022

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Session 2 10:15-12:15 (Meghan & Kelly)



### Review on Traumatic Brain Injuries

- Estimated 69 million individuals are affected by TBIs each year
- Examples: concussions, epilepsy, tumors, stroke, etc.
- Areas impacted: head/brain (pain, headaches), cognitive functions, mood, ocular functions, endurance/fatigue and vestibular functions
- Recovery varies from medication to therapy
- Often times students who are impacted by a TBI need academic accommodations to participate in their roles



# Why Would Interoception Help Individuals With TBIs?

- TBI's are a traumatic event
- TBIs affected several areas of one's life
  - Neuromusculoskeletal functions, voice and speech functions, mental functions and sensory functions
- Self-regulation is a debilitating consequence of a TBI
  - Due to trauma
- Research indicates that interoception interventions can help to improve self regulation



## Interoception Strategies

# Adaptations for IA

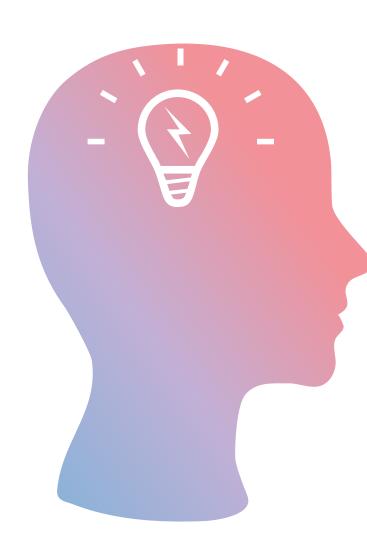
IA Builders

COMPENSATORY &
PREVENTATIVE

BODY
EMOTION
ACTION



### Can Interoceptive Awareness Be Changed?



### YES!!

Research clearly states that interoception can be improved.

And...improving interoception is good for all of us!



### What are Interoception-Based Supports?

Currently the only evidence-based intervention shown to enhance IA is Body Mindfulness



Noticing the way your body feels in the present moment



#### The Established Evidence



Why traditional body mindfulness may not work:

- Too abstract
- Requires a certain degree of cognition and attention
- Assumes a safe relationship with your internal sensations



#### What are IA Builderrs?



### IA Builders:

Adapted forms of

Body Mindfulness

- Chunked into 1 body part
- Evoked a stronger sensation that draws attention
- Visual & Language **Supports**
- Playful
- Feeling, but out of the context of emotions

Squeeze a stress ball for 10 seconds. How do your hands feel?





### The Interoception Curriculum

www.kelly-mahler.com

Section 1: Body Lessons 1-16

Build the learner's ability to **NOTICE** body signals in a concrete and slow method

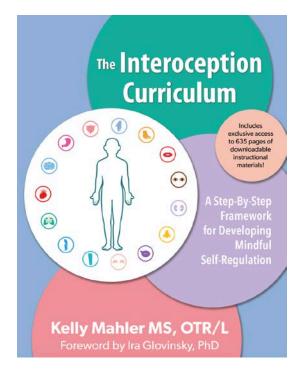
**Section 2: Emotion** 

**Lessons 17-20** 

Guide the learner to **CONNECT** body signals to emotion

Section 3: Action Lessons 21-25

Guide the learner to find a variety of feel-good actions that help the learner **REGULATE** 









### Step 1: BODY

#### Focus on one body part at a time



#### **Outside**

- 1. Hands & Fingers
- 2. Feet & Toes
- 3. Mouth
- 4. Eyes
- 5. Ears
- 6. Nose
- 7. Voice
- 8. Cheeks
- 9. Skin



### **Inside**

- 10. Muscles
- 11. Lungs
- 12. Heart
- 13. Brain & Head

The Interoception

Curriculum

- 14. Stomach
- 15. Bladder



### Step 1: BODY

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**





- 1. Hands & Fingers
- 2. Feet & Toes
- 3. Eyes
- 4. Ears
- 5. Skin





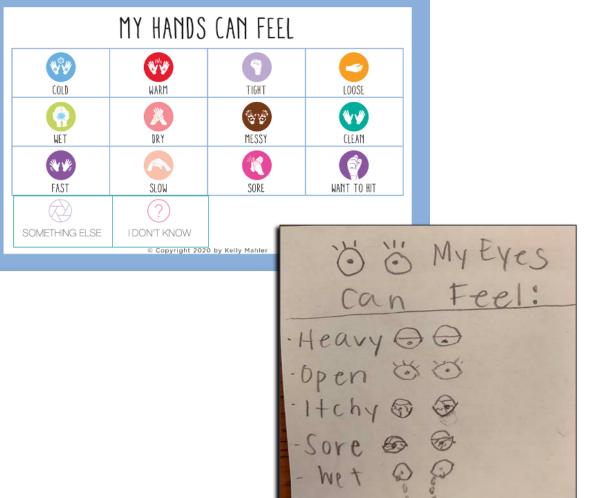
#### Inside

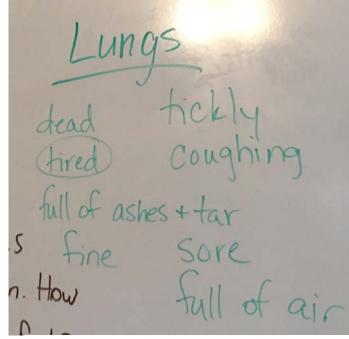
- 10. Muscles
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IA Builder: Descriptor Menu

#### A Visual & Language Support:









IA Builder: Descriptor Menu

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

- First- education and explanation
- "Feel it out"
  - Coloring and discussing
  - Talking through it with therapist writing words
  - Talking it through with patient writing words

#### Provide cueing

- Broad categories- temperature, speed
- Opposites- hot/cold, fast/slow, wet/dry
- Questions- when does that happen....how about when you.....you told me when we did the last activity that.....

#### INTEROCEPTION BRAIN

Slow	foggy	sharp	SORE	pounding	pulsating
	focused				
sensitive	active	brain-	Spinning	sharp	settled
in-tune	tender	need to take meds	scattera	overloada	buffering
tingly	pressuriza	squeezed			

#### INTEROCEPTION heart

				fluttering
shiver	crushed	stop	dropped	uneteady
	shiver	shiver crushed	shiver crushed stop	shiver crushed stop dropped



### IA Builder: Focus Area Experiments

#### FOCUS AREA EXPERIMENTS HANDS AND FINGERS

Experiment	Makes My Hands and Fingers Feel
Put your hands in warm water for 15 seconds.	
Put your hands in cold water for 15 seconds.	
Shake your hands fast for 15 seconds.	
Smear lotion on your hands, but do not fully rub into skin for 10 seconds.	
Wipe or wash the lotion off of your skin.	
Blow on the back of your hand.	
Hold an ice cube or ice pack in your hands for 10 seconds.	
Make a fist and hold it for 15 seconds.	
Clap your hands firmly five times.	
Keep your hands as still as a statue for 30 seconds.	

Cold	Warm	Tight
Loose	Squeezing	Fast
THE STATE OF THE S		* <b>*</b>
Slow	Sweaty	Dry
Messy	Clean	Sore
**		



# IA Builder: Focus Area Experiments

#### **Interoception-Informed Responding:**

- Invite participation (never a demand)
- Encourage curiosity
- Participate together, share together
- Do during periods of regulation (when the person feels safe in their body and environment)







## IA Builder: Focus Area Experiments

#### Interoception-Informed Responding:

- Don't require response (I wonder statements)
- Validate all responses, even when it is against what you might expect
- Provide various forms of communication
- Stay curious about internal sensation concepts (shapes, colors, etc.)







### IA Builder: Focus Area Experiments

#### Notes:

**Interoception:** How does your hand feel when you are holding the ice cube?

**Tactile:** How does the ice cube feel?

**Interoception:** How do your ears feel when we listen to this song?

**Auditory:** Does this song sound slow or fast?







### IA Builder: Focus Area Experiments

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

- Invite them to participate
- Have their descriptor words handy
- They become invested
- Results in additional descriptor words
- Evoke more than one feeling/descriptor word

#### Interoception- Hands and Feet Experiments

- · Rub your hands together quickly for 20 seconds
- Put your hands under hot, warm, and cold water- keep them under for 10 seconds each
- Partially rub lotion on your hands, pause for 10 seconds then rub it in completely
- Squeeze a stress ball 30 times fast
- Squeeze your hand into a tight fist and hold for 30 seconds, then release
- Rub a glue stick on one of your fingers then touch it to another
- · Clap your hands 10 times firmly
- . Hold your hand up in the air for 1 minute
- Partially rub hand sanitizer on your hands, pause for 10 seconds then rub it in completely
- · Spread your finger out as wide as you can and hold for 15 seconds
- Shake your hands quickly for 15 seconds
- Hold an ice cube or ice pack for 30 seconds
- · Hold your hand out as still as you can for 30 seconds
- Sign your name 20 times on paper
- Use a fidget spinner for 30 seconds
- Place a wet, cold towel over your foot for 15 seconds then wipe it off
- Drip warm water on your foot, keep it there for 15 seconds then wipe it off
- . Shake your foot back and forth for 30 seconds
- · Stand on your tiptoes for 30 seconds
- · Complete 20 calf raises
- · Squeeze your toes and hold for 15 seconds
- . Lightly drag a feather or tissue over the bottom of your foot 3 times
- Jump up and down 15 times
- Lift up your toes, keeping your heels on the floor then put them back down slowly 15 times
- · Curl and release you toes 15 times fast
- · Walk back and forth across the room 5 times
- · Rub your feet on the floor for 30 seconds
- Firmly massage your foot for 30 seconds
- •



### Let's Give It A Try!

## Hands

- Hot
- Cold
- Fast
- Slow
- Tight
- Loose
- Sore
- Fidgety
- Still
- Sweaty
- Stiff
- Dirty
- Clean
- Tingly
- Wet
- Dry



#### Experiments

- Rub your hands together for 20 seconds
- Squeeze your hands into a tight first and hold for 30 seconds, then release
- Hold you hand out as still as you can for 20 seconds
- Spread you fingers out as wide as you can and hold for 20 seconds
- Wiggly all your fingers for 20 seconds
- Clap your hands firmly 10 times



### Let's Give It A Try!



#### Eyes

- Sore
- Strained
- Tight
- Heavy
- Pulling
- Blurry
- Focused
- Distracted
- Sharp Pain
- Watery
- Dry
- Wet
- Burning
- Wide
- Heavy
- Twitchy

### Experiments

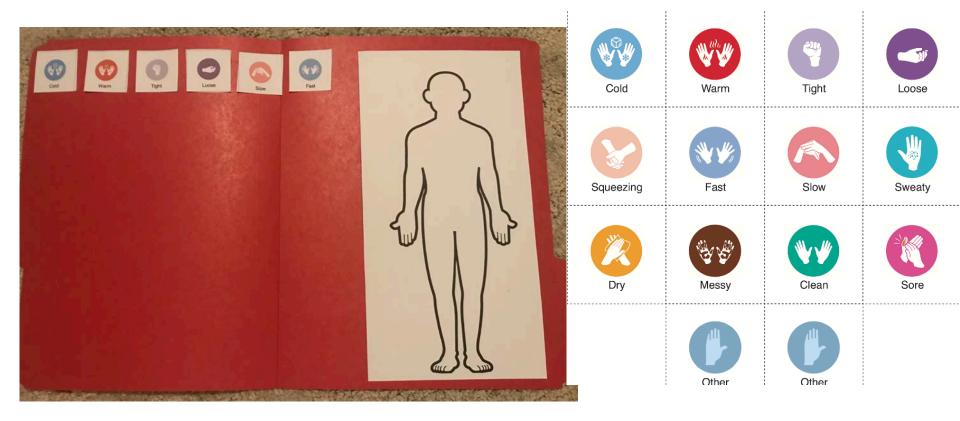
- Stare at a point on the wall then wiggle your hands in your periphery for 10 seconds
- Squeeze your eyes shut hard and hold for 10 seconds
- Squint your eyes, hold them there for 10 seconds
- Hold your eyes open wide for 30 seconds, trying not to blink
- Hold your finger up close to your nose and look at your finger, and hold for 5 seconds



### ■ IA Builder: Body Checks Daily Practice



# IA Builder: Body Check Chart File Folder Version





# IA Builder: Body Check Chart Life-sized Version



Anna Vander Haeghe, Alberta, Canada





### IA Builder: Body Check

#### Meghan's Adaptation

#### Meditations

- Completed during the session
- Sent to patient to complete at home
- Calming, personal experience
- Goal: draw more attention to the body part of the day





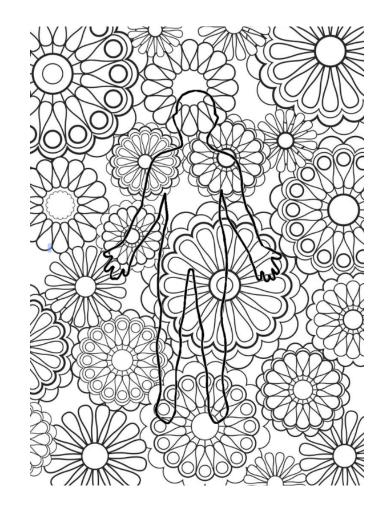


### IA Builder: Body Check

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

### Coloring Pages

- Completed during the session
- Given to the patient to do at home
- Goal: draw more attention to the entire body while completing a calming activity

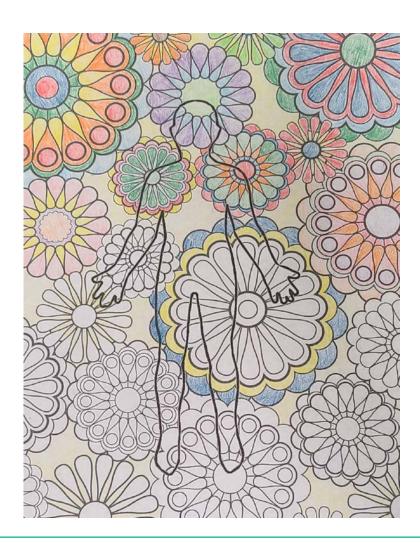




# IA Builder: Body Check

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

## Coloring Examples







### Section 1: BODY

### The Fantastic Four IA Builders

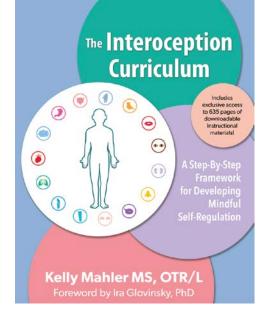
- 1. Descriptor Menu
- 2. Focus Area Experiments
- 3. Body Check Chart
- 4. IA on the Fly

A predictable learning structure used in each lesson



#### **Outside**

- 1. Hands & Fingers
- 2. Feet & Toes
- 3. Mouth
- 4. Eyes
- 5 Fars
- 6. Nose
- 7. Voice
- 8. Cheeks
- 9. Skin





#### Inside

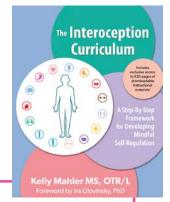
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- 12. Heart
- 13. Brain & Head
- 14. Stomach
- 15. Bladder

## Section 2: Emotion





### Section 2: EMOTION Lesson Overview



LESSON

My Body Signals are Clues to My Emotions

LESSON 18 Each Emotion has Different Body Signals

LESSON 19 What's the Cause of My Body Signals

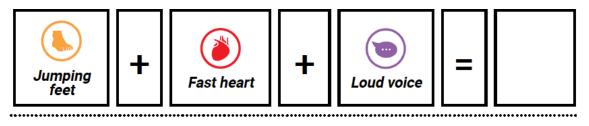
LESSON 20 Creating My Body-Emotion Chart

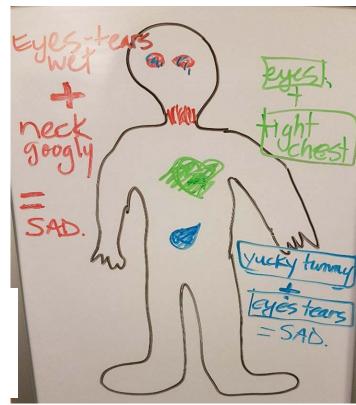


### IA Builder: Body Math



Your body signals are clues to your emotions

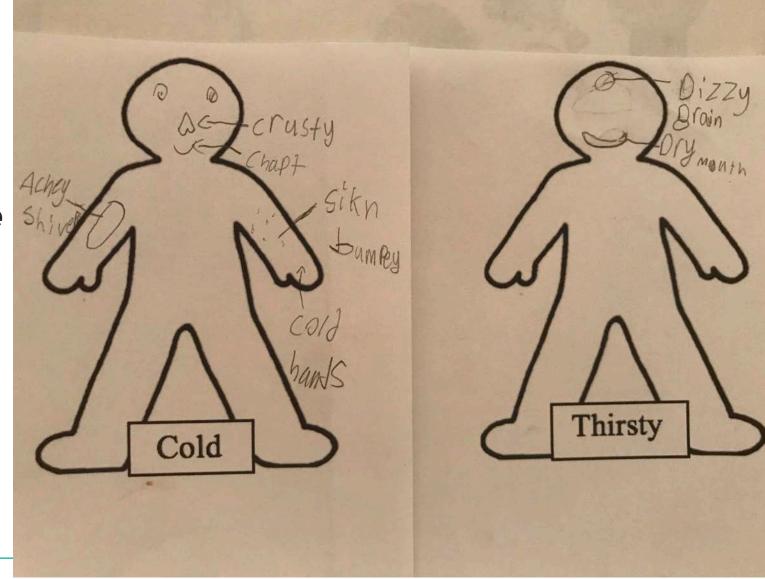






### IA Builder: Body-Emotion Charts

Your body signals are clues to your emotions



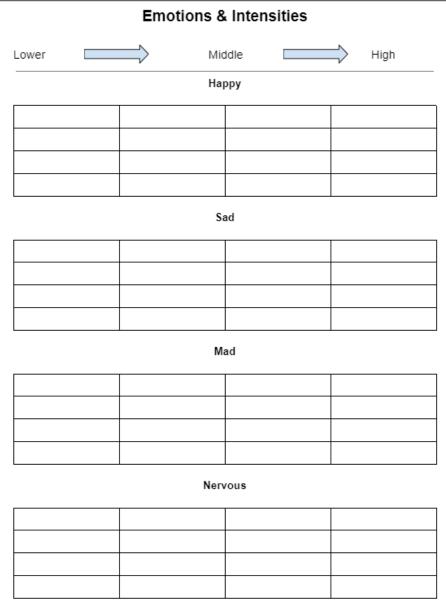


### IA Builder: Body-Emotion Chart

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

#### Emotion Intensities

- 19 general emotions
- Open discussion
- Varying intensities on a scale
  - Low to High
  - Uncomfortable vs. Comfortable
- Each emotion has different body signals
- Cueing for possible emotions



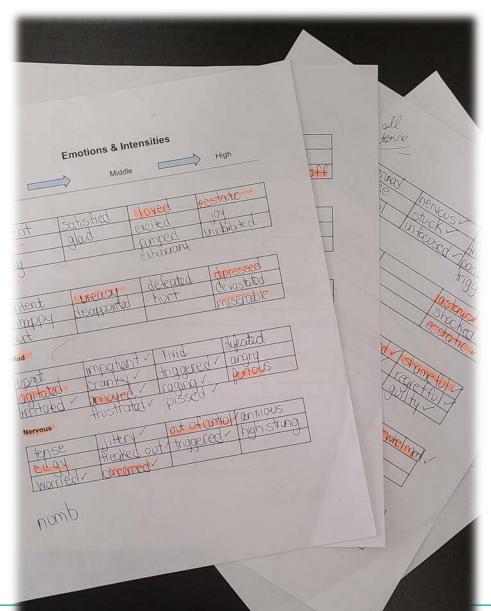


### IA Builder: Body-Emotion Chart

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

#### **General Emotions**

- Happy
- Sad
- Mad
- Nervous
- Hungry
- **Thirsty**
- **Distracted**
- Focused
- Calm
- **Anxious**
- Surprised
- **Embarrassed**
- Stressed
- Full
- Hot
- Cold
- Sleepy
- Sick
- Hurt





### IA Builder: Body-Emotion Outline

#### **Meghan's Adaptation**

### **Body Outlines**

- Highlighting 2+ emotions from each category
- Writing emotions in body outline boxes
- Working through each emotion, documenting how the body would feel with that emotion

#### **Emotions**

Happy  Hands- fidgety Feet- fidgety Ears- focused Heart- steady Lungs- steady Muscles- loose Brain- focused, settled	Depressed  Hands- numb Feet- heavy Eyes- heavy, watery, stuck, full Ears- shut off Skin- cold Muscles- frozen, heavy Lungs- heavy, collapsed Heart- slow, heavy, empty Stomach- heavy Brain- numb, blank	Anxious  Hands- fidgety, tight Feet- shaky, want to run Eyes- jumpy Ears- distracted Skin- clammy Muscles- tense Lungs- fast Heart- pounding Stomach- knotted, pit Brain- racing, distracted	
Scared  Hands - shaking Ears- focused Eyes- wide Skin- goosebumpy Muscles- shaky, tight Lungs- fast Heart- fast Brain- focused, distracted Stomach- dropped	Overwhelmed  Hands- shaky, fidgety Feet- want to run/walk away Ears- distracted, sensitive Eyes- jumpy, shut, tight Skin- creepy crawly Muscles- tight Lungs- fast, sore Heart- racing Brain- fried, racing Stomach- nauseous, knotted	Furious  Hands- tight, fisted Feet- curled Ears- shut off, hot Eyes- sharp, focused Skin- hot Muscles- tight Lungs- panting Heart- pounding Brain- jumbled	
Excited  Hands- flappy Feet- shaky, want to dance Eyes-wide Muscles- loose, wiggly Lungs- fast Heart- fluttering Brain- racing, distracted	Upset  Hands- slow Feet- want to walk away Eyes- teary, squinty Muscles- slow, tense Lungs- heavy Brain- distracted	Hungry  Hands- fidgety Eyes- wide Brain- focused Stomach- growling Mouth- watering	



### IA Builder: Body-Emotion Charts

### **Meghan's Adaptation**

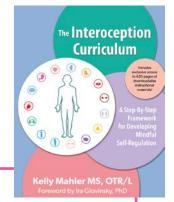
- Body Outlines
  - Open discussion
  - Unique to every individual
  - People are learning a lot about themselves
  - Provide information about what others may experience
  - Completing in sessions and/or taking home to complete as well

## Section 3: Action





### Section 3: ACTION Lesson Overview



LESSON 21 My Body Can Feel Comfortable, My Body Can Feel Uncomfortable

LESSON 22

I Can Change The Way My Body Feels

LESSON 23 I Can Change The Way My Body Feels When It Is Uncomfortable

LESSON 24 Discovering New Feel-good Actions

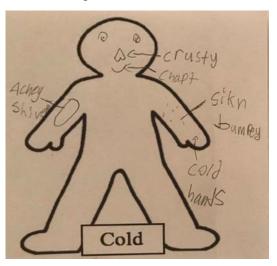
LESSON 25 Make My Own Feel-good Menu



### IA Builder: Body-Emotion-Action Chart

Body, Emotion, Action Chart (sample)

My BODY Feels



**EMOTION: COLD** 

**My Feel-Good ACTIONS:** 

\_\_\_\_\_Put on a Jacket\_\_\_\_

Wrap in a blanket\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_Ask someone to turn up the heat\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_Go inside\_\_\_\_



## **♦ IA Builder: Body-Emotion-Action Chart**

Body (what it feels like inside)	Emotion (what I am feeling)	Action (what helps me feel more comfortable)
<ul> <li>Feet- Want to run away</li> <li>Skin- Zaps all over</li> <li>Ears- Extreme Pain</li> </ul>	Sensory Overwhelm	<ul> <li>Me:</li> <li>Go somewhere quiet</li> <li>Put on headphones</li> <li>Deep pressure menu</li> <li>What I need from others:</li> <li>Quiet support (stay close, but shhhhh)</li> <li>Put headphones close to me</li> <li>Be patient</li> </ul>



### IA Builder: Body-Emotion-Action Chart

### **Body-Action**

FOR SCHOOL

When I feel the need to bite



1. I need to communicate I need help. To get help I can



SAY HELP



HOLD UP RED HAND SIGN



PRESS HELP ON AAC

- 2. Go to safe spot
- 3. Do coping skills. To cope I can:

MY FEEL -GOOD MENU



Clap hands & Count to 10



Squeeze fists & Count to 10



Stomp feet & Count to 10



Curl toes & Count to 10

Credit: www.kimclairy.com



### **Section 3: ACTION**

### **Meghan's Adaptation**

### Feel Good Toolbox

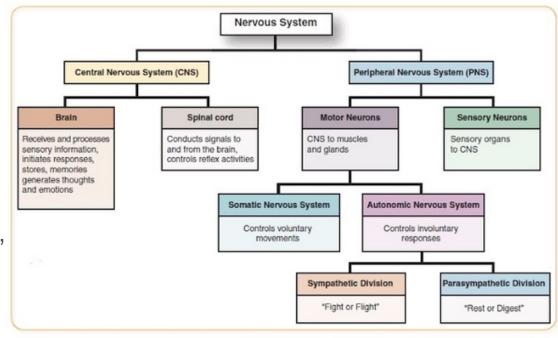
- Open discussion
- Reviewing various themes with possible ideas
- Would this make your body feel comfortable or uncomfortable?
- Coloring coding activities for weekly routine, everyday routine & in the moment
- Rooted in vagus nerve activation



### Section 3: ACTION

### **Meghan's Adaptation**

- Why Use Vagus Nerve Activation Strategies?
  - Fight or Flight
  - Rest and Digest
  - Trauma = damaged vagus nerve
  - Stuck in Fight or Flight
    - Increasing heart rate, releasing cortisol
    - Relaxes ciliary muscles, more incoming light
    - Enhances far vision
  - Difficulties with IA, only surviving
  - Hack into the vagus nerve
  - Bring the individual back to calmer state



Dana, 2020; Power, 2020 & van der Kolk, 2014



### IA Builder: Individual Feel Good Toolbox

# **Exploring even more Focus Area Experiments.**

Does this make my body feel comfortable?

### Connecting

- Expressive journalism
  - Reflecting on WHO- people in your life who make you feel safe and welcomed
  - Reflecting on WHAT- what actions make you feel alive
  - Reflecting on WHERE- tour your world, what places bring you cues of safety and happiness
  - Reflecting on WHEN- moments you have felt safe and content, revisit the experiences
- Body scans
- Walking in nature barefoot for regulation and restoring (forest bathing)
- Labyrinth walking or tracing for a return to calm (https://labyrinthsociety.org/)
- Find your safe, calming space
- Creating "If/Then" Statements
- Exposing your skin to the sunlight and moonlight (3x/day, 5 minutes)
- Meditations (loving-kindness)
  - Guided (Relief app)
- Affirmations (manifest app)
- Praying (Youversion app)
- Hugs



### IA Builder: Individual Feel Good Toolbox

## **Exploring even more Focus Area Experiments.**

Does this make my body feel comfortable?

### Deep Pressure

- Weighted blanket
- Weighted vest
- Sleeping on your right side- place a pillow in between your knees
- Baths
- Vibration (theragun, handheld massager, foot massager, back of chair massager)
- Shakti mat
- Standing in the corner of a room pushing your back and shoulders against both walls
- Roll a heavy ball over your legs when sitting down or your arms when lying down
- Therabands
- Hair elastics
- Seat cushions
- Stress balls
- Medicine balls
- Punching bag



### IA Builder: Individual Feel-Good Menus

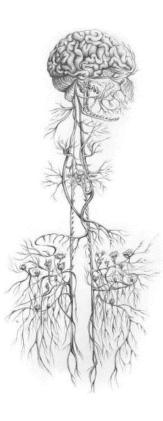
### **Exploring even more** Focus Area Experiments.

Does this make my body feel comfortable?

### Possible useful strategies to implement and to encourage

- Deep breathing
  - Vagus nerve activation is breathing in for 3 seconds, out for 6 seconds
  - Opening the heart breathing
- Body Scans- localizing type and intensity of pain
- Yoga ball as a seat
- Blowing up a tough balloon
- Cold temperatures- hands washing, splashing water on face or neck, cold packs on head/neck/eyes
- Standing to complete work
- Ear plugs/noise cancelling head phones
- Blue light filters
- Eye breaks (20-20-20 rule but use IA)
- **Expressive Journalism**
- Fidgets, smooth stones, hair elastics
- Stress balls

- Head massagers
- Proprioceptive tasks
- Vibration (theraguns, handheld massagers)
- Mints and gum
- Using a straw
- Humming/singing
- Increased salivation
- Repetition-coloring, crosswords, sudoku etc.
- Creating to-do lists/routines
- Listing 3 positive things that happened during the day
- Having a calm, safe space
- Positive affirmations
- Laughter
- Exposing skin to the sun





### IA Builder: Master Feel-Good Menu

## My Routine

To Do Everyday: deep breathing, cold shower, inversion, exposing skin to sun, singing/humming, listening to music, salt lamps, body shakes, journaling, 3 compliments, to-do lists, eye breaks, cold pack on eyes, coloring, essential oils, smooth stones, chewing gum/sucking on a mint, weighted blanket, full body scans, salivating, half-smile

In The Moment: salivating, stress balls, hair elastics, gargling, yoga ball, cold water in the shower/tub/face, theragun, body shakes, go for a run, sensory bin, putty, punching bag, yoga ball bouncing, singing/screaming, deep breathing, inversion

**Monday:** Yoga, listen to funny podcast/audiobook, taking pictures, take a bath

Tuesday: Walk, meditations, playing piano

**Wednesday:** Yoga, puzzle/crossword, sign language class/review, take a bath

**Thursday:** Walk, hanging out with a friend, looking at old pictures- sending to a friend

Friday: Yoga, milkshake, take a bath

# Evidence supporting the Interoception Curriculum





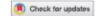


Year 1:

n=8 children with autism; school-based

JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY, SCHOOLS, & EARLY INTERVENTION https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2020.1743221





### An Interoception-Based Intervention for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Pilot Study

Kerri Hample OTD, OTR/L, FMCHC, Kelly Mahler MS, OTR/L, and Adam Amspacher MS, OTR/L Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, USA

#### ABSTRACT

The ability to notice internal sensations such as tense muscles, a rumbling stomach, or heavy eyelids and translate these internal sensations into emotional meaning such as anger, hunger, and fatigue is an important skill called interoceptive awareness. Deficits in interoception have been discovered within many conditions including autism spectrum disorders (ASD), obesity, depression, trauma, and others. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a condensed, 8-week intervention based on The Interoception Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Mindful Self-Regulation (IC) in children with ASD. Given the novelty of this intervention topic, an intentionally small pilot study was completed with eight autistic students, ages 6-13 years, enrolled in self-contained autism support classrooms. A significant increase in scores on an interoception measure were found as a result of the intervention. Interoception is hypothesized in the research as being foundational for emotional regulation and occupational performance. Therefore, these preliminary findings provide support for future, larger studies that examine the effectiveness of interoception-based interventions, such as the IC.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 October 2019 Accepted 12 March 2020

### KEYWORDS

Autism spectrum disorder; sensory processing interventions; interoceptive awareness; school based occupational therapy; emotional regulation





Year 2:

n=9 children with mixed diagnoses; school-based







Year 3:

n=150+ children with mixed diagnoses; school-based & outpatient 17 sites; 4 countries







Year 3:

n=99 children with mixed diagnoses; school-based & outpatient



- The participants in this study experienced statistically significant gains in IA and emotional regulation after only 8 weeks of The Interoception Curriculum!!!
- ASD n=54; other n=53





### Year 4:

### n=99 children with mixed diagnoses; school-based & outpatient



Elizabethtown College

Occupational Therapy

Interoception Researchers

Class of 2020 MSOT

- The participants in this study experienced statistically significant gains in IA and emotional regulation after only 8 weeks of The Interoception Curriculum!!!
- ASD n=54; other n=53





### Year 4:

### n=69 children with mixed diagnoses; school-based & outpatient



Elizabethtown College Occupational Therapy Interoception Researchers

Class of 2020 MSOT

- Participants reported IA challenges, BUT the caregivers (both educators and parents) did not score the children as having the same level of IA concerns, despite reporting significant concerns regarding the child's behavior.
- This statistically significant mismatch, improved after an 8-week use of The Interoception Curriculum, resulting in a statically significant match at the end.





Year 5:

n=17 children with ASD in a schoolbased setting Full 25 lesson Curriculum



- The participants in this study experienced statistically significant gains in IA & Emotion Regulation
- Additionally, reported statistically significant gains in the following: Eating/Feeding, Thirst Pain/Healthcare Management, Emotional Response & Emotional Awareness





### **MEGHAN**

n= 9 adults with mTBIs (concussions) in an outpatient occupational therapy facility Using an adapted version of the interoception curriculum- 6 weeks long

- The participants in this study, who have completed the curriculum, experienced statistically significant gains in interoceptive awareness and overall self-regulation (emotional control/awareness, self-monitoring)
- In addition, improvements were recorded in other areas such as working memory, attention, inhibition, initiation, shifting, planning/organizing, task monitoring and organization

## Conclusion





### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- www.kelly-mahler.com
- Facebook-Interoception: The Eighth Sensory System

