

From Chapter 7 of Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing by David A. Treleaven

(<https://www.amazon.com/Trauma-Sensitive-Mindfulness-Practices-Transformative-Healing/dp/0393709787/ref=nodl?dplinkId=1b882079-cc37-40db-a704-5ec36ae93a85>):

“There are two kinds of sensations especially relevant to understanding trauma: exteroceptive and interoceptive sensations. 9 Exteroceptive sensations are those that help us relate to what is happening outside of our body. Exteroceptors, as they’re called, are nerves related to the five senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. We use exteroceptive sensations to gather information about the temperature of a bathtub by placing our hand in the water, for example. Interoceptive sensations, meanwhile, aid our perception of what’s happening inside our bodies. Interoceptors are nerves that relate to what is happening for us internally, helping provide us with an embodied sense of self. Our guts, especially, provide us with tremendous amounts of interoceptive information that influence our entire organism. The neural network in the intestines, for instance, houses over 500 million neurons, helping to explain the terms gut feeling or gut instinct. 10

Ideally, we’re able to integrate exteroceptive and interoceptive sensations. Our internal experience lines up with our external experience, allowing us to make effective decisions about our behavior. We look out at a beautiful sunset and notice our chest warming and expanding, and in feeling this decide to take an extra minute to stop and watch it. Or we might have an uneasy feeling in our stomach when a friend walks in the room, prompting us to check in with them about their day. We depend on exteroceptive and interoceptive sensations to maneuver through the world.

With trauma, the integration between intero-and exteroceptors can go awry. Years after a traumatic event, interoceptors continue signaling that danger is forthcoming, even if exteroceptors don’t reveal any source of threat. Gina’s case is one example. Although information from her exteroceptors suggested her environment was harmless (e.g., no visual or auditory indications of threat), her interoceptors told her something was wrong (e.g., her stomach doing barrel rolls). It was a merciless dynamic that created understandable confusion, frustration, and distress.

People experiencing posttraumatic stress tend to place a disproportionate amount of attention on interoceptive sensations. They become compelled to attend to the alarming signals taking place inside their bodies. This creates problems when internal sensations are used exclusively to judge one’s surroundings. As Rothschild wrote, “[Trauma survivors] are often so overwhelmed by the disturbing interoceptive input of their internal reality that they mistake it for external reality. This results in jumping to conclusions or judgments about the environment based on interoceptive experience rather than evaluating the actual circumstances via exteroceptors” (2017, p. 57).

Consider the setup this creates in mindfulness meditation. By asking people to close their eyes and focus internally, mindfulness practice encourages survivors to pay an inordinate amount of

attention to interoceptive sensations. This isn't necessarily a problem, but it can be if one's inner world is constantly communicating threat. Gina ran into this problem when she started meditating. She'd close her eyes and discover internal cues conveying threat (e.g., a clenched stomach) but her external world didn't line up with what she was experiencing inside.

In my work with Gina, the key to resolving this dynamic was to help her develop dual awareness—a concept I covered in Chapter 2. Dual awareness means we can maintain multiple perspectives at the same time, including being able to balance awareness between our internal and external reality. 11 If I noticed that Gina was focused solely on interoceptors, I would jump in to refocus her attention to help her take in information about her surroundings (exteroceptors). One time I did this, she looked up at me, surprised. “This is exactly what I wasn't doing in meditation,” she said. “I was just continuing to focus on the threat inside, and eventually I'd just check out.”

In the initial stages of trauma recovery, survivors often require direct coaching and guidance to work with interoceptive and exteroceptive sensations. Trying to navigate them alone is an exceptionally difficult task. In the next chapter, I'll talk about the benefit—even the necessity—of working with trained trauma professionals in the context of mindfulness. At the very least, survivors require trauma-sensitive tools and modifications in mindfulness practice to ensure they are practicing safely. Without these, the basic practice of mindfulness can end up amplifying an already challenging experience, creating confusion, disappointment, frustration, and dysregulation.”

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