

FM-PTS-06

SESSION 6

INTEROCEPTION, SELF-REGULATION, AND YOUR SIGNATURE EMOTION

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WHAT IS INTEROCEPTION?

Interoception is your body's internal sense system. Most people are familiar with the five external senses — sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. Interoception is your sixth sense, and it points inward.

It is the system that tells you when you are hungry, thirsty, too hot, or too cold. It is how you notice your heart beating faster when you are anxious. It is how your gut tightens before something goes wrong. It is the physical sensation of emotion before you have consciously identified the emotion itself.

For many veterans, interoception has been disrupted by trauma. The nervous system has been on high alert for so long that the internal signals get distorted or misread. Hunger feels like anxiety. Anxiety feels like danger. A racing heart from exercise feels like a threat response. This is part of why trauma recovery is physical as well as psychological.

Interoception acts as your internal early-warning system — it registers what is happening in your body before your conscious mind catches up. Learning to listen to those signals accurately, without being flooded by them, is a key part of recovery.

Developing interoceptive awareness means learning to notice body sensations with curiosity rather than alarm. It is a skill, and like all skills, it improves with practice. Mindfulness practices, body scans, and yoga are evidence-based ways to rebuild this capacity. Even simply pausing once a day and asking "What do I notice in my body right now?" begins the process.

SELF-REGULATION: WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage your behaviors and reactions. It is the bridge between what you feel and what you do.

This is often misunderstood. Self-regulation is not suppression. Suppression means pushing the emotion down, pretending it is not there, white-knuckling through. Suppression works short-term and costs you long-term. It increases anxiety, damages relationships, and often results in an explosion when the lid finally comes off.

Self-regulation is something different. It means feeling the emotion fully — acknowledging it, understanding what it is telling you — and then choosing your response rather than just reacting. It creates space between the trigger and your behavior.

This is where interoception and emotional intelligence work together. Interoception gives you the internal data. Self-awareness lets you name it. Self-regulation lets you choose what to do with it.

YOUR SIGNATURE NEGATIVE EMOTION

Everyone has a signature negative emotion — the feeling that shows up most often, most intensely, and most automatically in their life. It is not the same for everyone.

For some people, it is shame. For others, it is anxiety, sadness, guilt, embarrassment, frustration, or anger. These are not flaws or weaknesses. They are patterns — often shaped by early experience, the demands of military service, or specific traumatic events.

- Shame: "I am fundamentally flawed or defective." Shame strikes at identity, not just behavior.
- Anxiety: "Something bad is coming and I cannot stop it." Anxiety lives in anticipation and uncertainty.
- Sadness: "I have lost something important." Sadness carries grief and disconnection.

YOUR SIGNATURE NEGATIVE EMOTION (CONTINUED)

- Guilt: "I did something wrong and I am responsible for harm." Guilt focuses on behavior.
- Embarrassment: "I have been exposed in a way that affects how others see me." Embarrassment is social and temporary.
- Frustration: "Something is blocking what I want or need." Frustration signals an obstacle.
- Anger: "Something unjust or threatening has happened." Anger signals a violation and calls for action.

Your signature negative emotion is not a life sentence. It is a pattern — and patterns can change. But you have to know the pattern before you can change it. Identifying your signature emotion is one of the most direct paths to self-awareness.

YOUR SIGNATURE NEGATIVE EMOTION (CONTINUED)

Once you know your signature emotion, you can begin to work with it rather than against it. You can learn to recognize its early signals — often in the body, through interoception — before it reaches full intensity. You can develop specific strategies for that emotion. And you can start to understand where it comes from, which is often the first step in loosening its grip.

INTEROCEPTION AND SELF-REGULATION WORKING TOGETHER

These two capacities are made for each other. Interoception gives you the early data — the physical signal that something is happening emotionally before it has risen to full conscious awareness. Self-regulation is what you do with that data.

A veteran who has built interoceptive awareness might notice a familiar tightness in the chest or a shift in breathing that signals their signature emotion is activating. Instead of being caught off guard when the emotion arrives at full force, they have a few seconds — or a few minutes — of early warning. That window is where self-regulation works.

The practices are simple, though not easy: pause when you notice the body signal, name what you are feeling, use a grounding or breathing technique to stay regulated, and then choose your response. Over time, this sequence becomes more natural. The nervous system learns that it does not have to go from zero to ten immediately.

LOOKING AHEAD

LOOKING AHEAD — SESSION 7

Next session we take a deeper look at social awareness — reading the emotional landscape of the people around you — and we begin connecting all four EQ pillars into a unified daily practice.

Before next session, try to identify your signature negative emotion. Notice when it shows up this week. Just track it — when, where, what triggered it. You are building the map.