



STIMMING – PARENTS GUIDE



WHAT IS STIMMING?

Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour) is something that people do, to channel and manage excess energy and to self soothe.

Stimming is a way to release excess, pent up energy – and bring about a feeling of calm, comfort and awareness in the body and mind. This is sometimes called ‘regulation’. Stimming can also block out unpleasant sensations such as overwhelm or anxiety. Stimming can improve mood, focus, information processing, decision making and motivation – and reduce sensory sensitivity and anxiety levels.

WHY DO PEOPLE STIM?

- **Self-regulation and emotional management:**
One of the primary functions of stimming is emotional regulation. Stimming can help individuals manage overwhelming emotions, whether it’s anxiety, excitement, or frustration. The repetitive nature of stimming behaviours can have a calming effect, helping to restore a sense of balance and control in emotionally charged situations.
- **Sensory processing and stimulation:**
Stimming can help modulate these sensory experiences. For instance, rocking or spinning might provide needed vestibular input, while humming could help filter out overwhelming auditory stimuli.
- **Anxiety reduction and stress relief:**
Stimming often serves as a coping mechanism for anxiety and stress. The predictable, repetitive nature of stimming behaviours can provide a sense of security and control in uncertain or overwhelming situations. For example, [leg shaking](#), while not exclusive to autism, can be a form of stimming that helps release tension and manage anxiety.
- **Expression of emotions: joy, frustration, excitement:**
Stimming can be a powerful form of emotional expression, particularly for individuals who may struggle with traditional forms of communication. Increased stimming might indicate excitement or joy, while changes in stimming patterns could signal frustration or discomfort. Recognising these patterns can help caregivers and loved ones better understand and respond to an individual’s emotional state.
- **Cognitive benefits and focus enhancement:**
For some individuals, stimming can enhance focus and cognitive performance. The rhythmic, repetitive nature of certain stims might help filter out distracting stimuli, allowing for improved concentration on tasks or conversations. Some individuals report that stimming helps them process information more effectively or aids in problem-solving

TYPES OF STIMMING

Oral — Oral stims are those that involve the mouth. Chewing, biting or sucking on objects are some common expressions of oral stimming. Repeated tongue and lip movements can also be a part of oral stimming.

Auditory — Auditory stimming can take on many forms linked to sounds. This could be tapping, knocking, clapping and finger snapping and also links to vocal stimming. Vocal stimming uses the voice to create repeated sounds. Sometimes these sounds can be words or phrases. Vocal stimming can manifest as humming, vocalising specific sounds and making rhythmic noises. It can also include throat clearing, excessively talking

Visual — Visual stimming is stimulating to one’s eyesight. This can involve looking at or staring at objects, lights, colours, or movement in the visual field. This might be staring at spinning objects, or colour-changing lights, moving fingers in front of their eyes, or tracking objects with their eyes. It might also be lining up objects in precise patterns or squinting and blinking repeatedly.

Tactile — Tactile stimming refers to seeking stimulation through touch. Rubbing your skin and running fingers through your hair are some ways of receiving tactile stimulation. Tapping or drumming fingers is one of the more commonly seen forms of tactile stimming. Specific textures or objects can also be particularly soothing to a person and they may seek out objects with these textures to touch.

Olfactory — Olfactory stimming can mean sniffing certain objects or taking in specific scents. **This might look like Smelling objects or people repeatedly, Seeking out specific scents, Sniffing hands or other body parts**

Physical Stimming - Physical stimming involves repetitive body movements and is perhaps the most recognisable form of stimming. Common examples include: Rocking back and forth or side to side, Hand-flapping, often seen as rapid hand movements at the wrists, Spinning in circles, Body rocking, which can involve the entire torso moving rhythmically. Physical stimming may also be leg bouncing. This type of stimming is not exclusive to autism, as it helps individuals regulate their sensory input or manage anxiety. This is also the case with hair twirling and gently pulling hair. This is a type of self-soothing and just needs to be monitored to ensure hair isn’t being pulled out.

Proprioceptive — This form of stimming relies on body awareness. Proprioceptive stimming is sometimes confused with vestibular stimming. However, these are two distinct stimming types. Proprioception involves the space our bodies occupy (such as pushing, pulling, or squeezing). **Vestibular** — The defining sensory inputs associated with vestibular stimming are those related to balance and movement. Rocking back and forth, spinning, and jumping are all vestibular self-stimulating behaviours.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE NEEDS TO STIM?

Unless the stimming behaviour is harmful or causes serious disruption (eg prevents learning or completion of important tasks) you should not hold back from stimming or attempt to discourage it.

Stimming is actually one of the most valuable tools for helping people cope in a world that to them is often overwhelming and stressful.

Suppression of stimming will likely lead to a build-up of uncomfortable energy and lead to overwhelm – which may then over time result in a meltdown/shutdown or contribute to poor mental health or burnout.

WAYS TO SUPPORT

- In an ideal world, everyone would understand, appreciate, and accept the need for stimming – and people would not be judged negatively for it. However, in reality, the more obvious stims (such as larger body movements or vocalisations) can be perceived negatively – perhaps as strange, laughable, annoying or distracting. Many neuro-divergent people may have been shamed by others for stimming – or are at least aware this could be possible. So many suppress or mask their stims in efforts to blend in with the majority and to feel safe.
- Choosing when and where to stim can be helpful if the views and opinions of others is a concern. The use of fidget aids may help or you may want to take your child off to another room or leave early so that they can stim without the fear of judgement. Having a safe space to stim is important as is ensuring this is easily accessible when needed.
- Educating others on the purpose and value of stimming, particularly those within the family and friends so that there is no “shame” or a negative response when stimming happens.

Below are a few examples of safe stims to try which may be good replacements for pain seeking stims:

- Anything involving deep pressure – squeezing an object, pressing fingertips together, a bear hug, weighted blanket
- Very loud music – preferably something repetitive or with a heavy beat.
- Spinning or swinging on a swing – any type of strong movement (if you are supporting a child who is light enough, you can try picking them up and swinging them around).
- Taking a cold shower – or even just washing hands in cold water.
- Always having a sensory or chew toy on hand.

Sometimes stims are mistaken for tics. Whilst there is some similarity in that tics can follow a build-up of an unpleasant sensation in the body – there is a difference in that tics are fast, repetitive muscle movements that result in sudden and difficult to control body jolts or sounds.

OTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/autism-space/health-and-lifestyle/stimming/>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/autism/stimming>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/stimming/all-audiences>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/autism-and-everyday-life/help-with-behaviour/>

<https://www.autismeastmidlands.org.uk/>