

'Stimming' means 'self-stimulating behaviour'. This is any action that a person performs to provide some physical or emotional input for themselves. This can be a behaviour that helps a person to process information, cope with sensory issues or to relax or de-stress. This may include things like rocking, spinning, flapping or fidgeting with different items.

Why do people stim?

Stims are actions that a lot of people with autism do. They are repetitive movements or sounds made by a person and can serve a variety of purposes.

Some people use stims to help them to feel calm and relaxed. This may be because there is something particular about that movement or sound that soothes the person. They may also feel calm because the stim is repetitive and predictable.

Sensory stress or overload can also cause people to stim. They may find the action enjoyable or they may use it to reduce the effects of some sensory input. For example, someone may make a loud noise to block out a sound that they dislike. Other people may stim to get more sensory input. People who are under-sensitive to their sense of balance may spin or rock, for example.

Other common reasons for stimming are anxiety or stress. Many people find it easier to cope with stress if they can do something that soothes them, such as fidget with a toy, make a repetitive sound or flap their hands.

Most importantly, stimming is a form of expression and is just as likely to show happiness and excitement, as something negative. Stimming should be seen as 'autistic body language'. In the same way that non-autistic people have signs for happiness (smiling) and sadness (frowning), autistic people also have signs but they just might look a bit different. It may not look the same as neurotypical body language but it is just as natural and important.

What if the stim is dangerous or harmful?

Some repetitive behaviours can be harmful to the person doing them. This can include things that hurt the person or cause physical damage to them. They may also be actions that have become habit or compulsions (things that the person cannot stop).

It is important to separate out stimming, which is a natural expression of thoughts and emotions, and self-injury or compulsions, which can be very harmful.

If the person is hurting themselves but the action seems to help them in some way, you should try to find something to replace the action. For example, if a person bites themselves, you could get them chewable jewellery or a biting ring so that they can get the same input without hurting themselves.

If the person is or appears to be doing things obsessively and in a way that they cannot control, you should speak to their GP. They will be able to talk to you about the best way to help that person.

If the person is simply stimming, expressing themselves and finding ways to feel safe and calm, then you should not try to stop them. To stop a person from doing these things can be very harmful;

I think suppressing highly visible stims was bad for me. I'm sad that it became so automatic. Stimming helps me relax, and deal with sadness and anxiety so they're less likely to overwhelm me, and get my brain in order after sensory overload. Sometimes I need to rock to get these benefits. Suppressing it meant that for most of my life I was missing out on all this.

Stimming helps me think, and suppressing it into less obvious forms takes up energy and brainpower I could use for something else.

How to support people to stim

There are various ways that you can support people to stim. There is a variety of products available, such as chewable jewellery, fidget toys and sensory items and you can buy these online.

The key to supporting people with stimming is to accept and encourage it as an expression of the person's feelings. Even when people can overcome their need to stim, this will take up their energy and concentration and may reduce their ability to cope with everyday stress.

Useful resources

1. <https://autismthroughcats.wordpress.com/2014/08/28/learning-to-stim-again/>
2. <http://musingsofanaspie.com/2013/01/03/the-high-cost-of-self-censoring-or-why-stimming-is-a-good-thing/>
3. <http://what-is-stimming.org/>
4. <http://shop.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/>