

Stimming

Advice & Support for:

Overview

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What is stimming?

Stimming - a guide for all audiences

What is stimming?

"I quickly become overwhelmed [in social situations]. Is it surprising that I then feel like blocking the world out and literally putting my thoughts back in order? That I start to rock to tell myself which feelings are mine? That I start speaking to myself or groaning to block out other sounds and so that I know which thoughts are mine? I think anyone experiencing life this way would do the same." Autistic adult

Stimming or self-stimulating behaviour includes arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head-banging and complex body movements. It includes the repetitive use of an object, such as flicking a rubber band or twirling a piece of string, or repetitive activities involving the senses (such as repeatedly feeling a particular texture).

Why do some autistic people stim?

Although stimming varies from person to person, the reasons behind it may be the same:

for enjoyment

an attempt to gain sensory input, eg rocking may be a way to stimulate the balance (vestibular) system; hand-flapping may provide visual stimulation

an attempt to reduce sensory input, eg focusing on one particular sound may reduce the impact of a loud, distressing environment; this may particularly be seen in social situations

to deal with stress and anxiety and to block out uncertainty.

Should you intervene?

Stimming is often very enjoyable and a way to reduce stress and so it shouldn't be stopped or reduced. However, stimming can sometimes be self-injurious, for example, head-banging or scratching.

Ask yourself if the behaviour restricts the person's opportunities, causes distress or discomfort, or impacts on learning? If it is causing difficulties, or is in some way unsafe, they may need support to stop or modify the behaviour, or reduce their reliance on it.

Read our strategies if repetitive behaviour causes distress or is unsafe or self-injurious.

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