

## What is stimming?

Stimming is another word for “self-stimulatory behavior.” It is something that autistic people (and sometimes other neurodivergent people) do to regulate sensory/emotional input, express emotions, communicate internal states, and engage with our environment.

Stimming often takes the form of a regular, repetitive action, such as rocking back and forth, hand flapping, or humming the same tune over and over again. Some autistic people stim more obviously than others, but most autistic people stim in some fashion. Less noticeable stims might include playing with one’s hair, tapping one’s foot, or cracking one’s knuckles.

Stims can be tactile/physical, but they can involve any of the senses, or multiple senses at the same time. Listening to the same song over and over again is a form of stimming. So is staring at shiny objects, smelling something over and over again, etc.

Some stims serve a specific expressive purpose, while others don’t. Autistic people all have our own stims, which are our own unique forms of nonverbal communication. People who know us well can learn to pick up on which stims are expressive (like happy stims) and which stims are just baseline occurrences.

Autistic people are usually culturally or “therapeutically” conditioned to suppress and restrict our stimming in most situations. Through the use of ABA therapy, many autistic people are forced to have “quiet hands” and are trained not to stim at an early age. Others are culturally and socially encouraged to stop stimming, because the movements of our bodies and the sounds we make tend to violate neurotypical social norms. Many autistic people learn to “mask” our stimming, to make it more subtle and to suppress it altogether so that we don’t suffer social consequences.

But most stimming is not harmful to autistic people, and therefore has no reason to be suppressed. The only stims that need redirection are things like intense head banging, biting, gagging, or other self-injurious behaviors. But harmless hand flapping to express joy? The only people that makes uncomfortable are neurotypicals, and that’s because of social norms, not because there’s actually anything wrong with hand flapping or things akin to it.

The process of “unmasking” for a lot of autistic people may include unlearning the ways we were taught to suppress the instinctive movements of our bodies. One way of unlearning is to engage with our bodies through music and dance- to stimdance. The term “stimdance” was coined/made popular by Agony Autie, a well-known autistic woman who creates content on social media.

Through stimdancing, autistic people can engage with music in a way that feels natural to us. And for those of us who are in the process of unmasking, it can present a good

opportunity to discover new and enjoyable ways to move, to regulate our emotions and regain sensory equilibrium.

See, stimming is necessary for most autistic people to maintain internal equilibrium. Without stimming, we are unable to adequately regulate sensory input, or express our emotions. Without the ability to do those things, we risk going into meltdowns or shutdowns. And if the suppression goes on long enough, we may enter what's known as "autistic burnout," where we lose our ability to function in everyday life without extreme levels of assistance.

Personally, I have never suppressed my stims very much. That's in large part due to my parents never doing much to suppress them, but it's also due to my extreme level of need for stimming in large and dramatic ways. I have an incredibly sensitive sensory system, and my physical threshold/tolerance for masking is much lower than some other autistic people's. My body just physically can't mask to the extent that some other people's bodies can. And in some ways that's a curse, but in other ways it's a blessing, because I don't have to deal with as much of the internal stress and overwhelm that comes with extreme masking in everyday life.

It is my hope that by sharing these stimdancing videos, you all might start re/discovering the intuitive movements of your autistic bodies; that you might unlearn the shame and stigma associated with moving in non-normative ways, and instead embrace the power of nonconformity.

~Eden 🐸