

I Give Myself Permission to Stim

A safe space to move, fidget, repeat and just be me

Stimming is communication, regulation and expression.

Stimming — short for self-stimulatory behaviour — can include repetitive movement, sound, touch, visual focus or interaction with objects. It may help a neurodivergent person regulate sensory input, release energy, express emotion, concentrate, recover from demands or simply experience pleasure.

Examples can include rocking, pacing, hand movements, tapping, rubbing textures, bouncing, repeating sounds or phrases, humming, spinning an object, chewing something designed to be chewed, watching repetitive movement, or returning to a familiar rhythm.

Not every stim is visible and not every repetitive behaviour is a stim. The meaning belongs to the person doing it.

Why permission matters

Many neurodivergent people have been corrected for movements that other people considered unusual: 'sit still', 'stop doing that', 'hands down', 'don't make that noise'. Repeated correction can create shame and can lead to suppression or masking even when the behaviour is helping the nervous system cope.

This guide is not about making stimming compulsory or treating every stim as automatically safe. It is about understanding its function, preserving useful regulation, and adapting any behaviour that causes injury or significant difficulty without removing the person's need for regulation.

What might my stim be doing for me?

A stim can have more than one purpose at once. Instead of asking only 'How do I stop this?', it can be more useful to ask 'What is this helping my body do?'

Regulating sensory input

Predictable movement or sensation can give the nervous system something consistent to focus on when the environment feels chaotic. Repetition can create rhythm when sound, light, touch, crowds or social information feel unpredictable.

Releasing emotion and energy

Excitement, joy, frustration, anxiety and anger can all create physical energy. Movement, sound or repetition may help that energy travel through the body rather than remaining trapped as tension.

Supporting concentration

Some people listen more effectively while moving, doodling, fidgeting or manipulating an object. Looking still does not necessarily mean concentrating, and movement does not necessarily mean distraction.

Communicating without words

A change in stimming can sometimes communicate rising stress, excitement, uncertainty, sensory pain or the need to leave. For people whose spoken language changes under stress, noticing these patterns can be particularly useful.

Seeking pleasure

Stimming does not always need a problem behind it. A repeated sound, texture, movement or visual pattern can simply feel good. Neurodivergent joy deserves space too.

My body does not have to look still to be regulated.

Masking and suppressing stims

A person may learn to replace obvious stims with smaller, less visible ones: moving toes inside shoes, clenching muscles, rubbing fingers together under a table, biting the inside of the mouth, or waiting until they are alone before moving freely. Some substitutions are harmless; others can become painful or exhausting.

The cost of constant monitoring

Monitoring every movement adds another cognitive demand. In environments that already require social interpretation, sensory filtering and executive functioning, this extra layer can contribute to fatigue and reduced capacity.

Before trying to change a stim, ask:

Is it actually unsafe? Is it causing pain or injury? Is the concern mainly that it looks different? Is the environment intolerant of harmless movement? Could a quieter or safer alternative meet the same sensory need? Could the environment change instead of requiring the person to suppress themselves?

If a stim is harmful

The aim should be to understand and meet the underlying need while reducing harm. Consider sensory triggers, pain, communication barriers, anxiety, demand overload and environmental factors. Persistent self-injurious behaviour deserves individual assessment rather than punishment or simple suppression.

My masking check-in

Stims I do freely when I am alone: _____

Stims I hide around other people: _____

What I fear people will think: _____

What hiding them costs me: _____

One place I might allow myself a little more freedom: _____

MY STIM PAGE

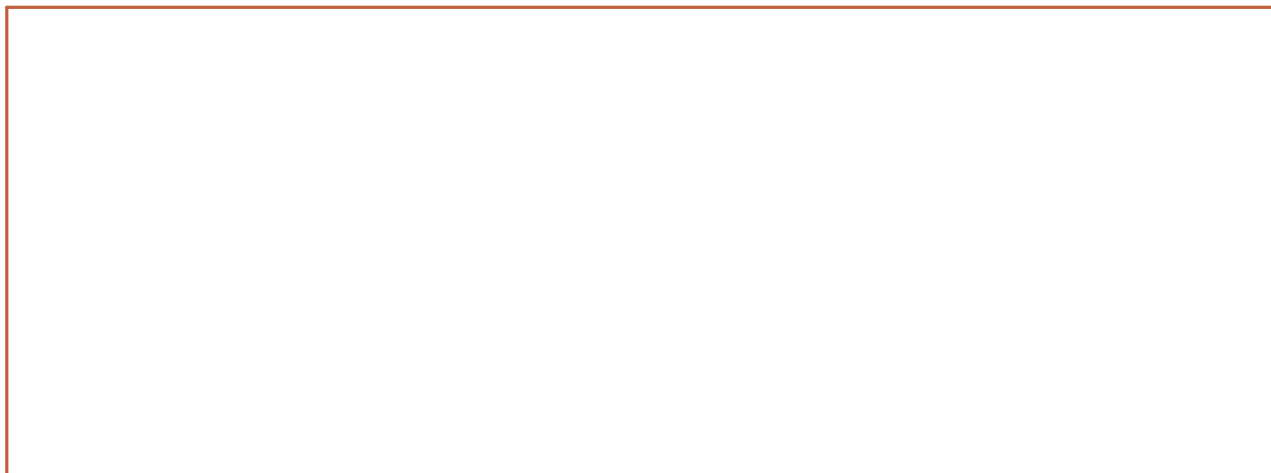
This page is for noticing what your body wants to do — not making it perform correctly.

MOVE • REPEAT • FIDGET • SOUND • FEEL • REGULATE

My body wants to...	rock / pace / bounce / shake / stretch / flap / tap / something else
My hands want to...	fidget / rub / squeeze / twist / hold / tap / something else
My mouth or voice wants to...	hum / repeat / sing / chew safely / make sounds / be silent
My senses are looking for...	pressure / texture / rhythm / movement / sound / visual repetition / less input
The emotion underneath might be...	joy / excitement / anxiety / frustration / overwhelm / uncertainty / I don't know

DRAW THE MOVEMENT

Use lines, loops, dots, waves, repeated shapes or huge marks. There is no picture to get right.



After I stim, I notice my body feels: _____

More settled / more awake / less tense / happier / still overloaded / different in another way

Building a personal stim toolkit

A useful toolkit is not a shopping list. It is a collection of movements, sensations, objects and environmental choices that match your actual sensory profile.

Movement

Pacing, rocking, stretching, bouncing, chair movement, hand movements, repetitive exercise or short movement breaks. The best option is one that is physically safe and realistically available in the setting.

Hands

Fabric, putty, smooth objects, textured objects, rings, doodling, folding paper or another familiar item may provide repetitive hand input. Some people need resistance; others need light touch or tiny repetitive movements.

Sound and rhythm

Humming, repeating a phrase, tapping a rhythm, familiar music or rhythmic breathing may help. If sound itself is overwhelming, a silent movement stim may work better.

Oral sensory needs

Some people seek chewing, crunching, sipping or strong oral sensation. Choose options that are safe for the individual and consider professional advice where chewing creates injury, dental concerns or swallowing risk.

Work, school and public spaces

Useful adjustments might include permission to move, flexible seating, movement breaks, camera-off time where appropriate, a quieter workspace, sensory objects, reduced expectations around eye contact, or allowing repetitive movement that does not create a genuine safety issue.

My three go-to stims

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Where I feel safest using them: _____

Reading changes in my stimming

Rather than judging a stim in isolation, look for changes. A sudden increase, a new intense movement, or a stim becoming much harder to interrupt may tell you something about stress, sensory load, pain, excitement or unmet needs.

My pattern tracker

Situation	What I was doing	What I felt	What happened after
Busy / noisy / demanding			
Waiting / uncertain			
Excited / happy			
Tired / depleted			
After social masking			

Questions to ask afterwards

Did the stim help? Did I need more or less sensory input? Was I trying to stay regulated in an environment that was too demanding? Was I suppressing movement earlier? Was I in pain, hungry, tired or anxious? What adjustment might make the next situation easier?

The goal is not fewer stims. The goal is better understanding, greater safety and more access to regulation.

A message from me

If you have spent years being told to sit still, stop fidgeting, keep your hands down or behave 'normally', you may have learned to watch your own body constantly. You may not even notice how much energy goes into appearing still.

I want this resource to offer you permission to become curious about your movement instead. What does your body do when it feels safe? What changes when you are excited? What happens when the environment becomes too loud, too demanding or too unpredictable? Which movements help you come back to yourself?

You do not have to make yourself uncomfortable simply to look more comfortable to somebody else.

Books and useful reading

Devon Price — *Unmasking Autism*. Explores masking, identity and the effects of suppressing autistic traits.

Barry M. Prizant with Tom Fields-Meyer — *Uniquely Human*. Encourages understanding autistic behaviour in context and as communication.

Luke Beardon — *Avoiding Anxiety in Autistic Adults*. Considers anxiety and the importance of changing environments rather than locating every difficulty within the autistic person.

Evidence-informed references

NICE CG142: Autism spectrum disorder in adults: diagnosis and management. NICE CG170: Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: support and management. National Autistic Society information on stimming, sensory differences, meltdowns and shutdowns.

This guide is educational and supportive. New, painful or self-injurious repetitive behaviour, or behaviour associated with significant distress, should be considered individually and may warrant professional assessment.