

Understanding self-stimulatory behaviour

Self-stimulatory behaviour, otherwise known as 'stimming', is when someone repetitively completes a movement such as flapping their hands, spinning an object close to their eyes, rocking or humming the same rhythm over and over.

What self-stimulation might look like

You may see the following behaviours:



Rocking from side to side



Flicking fingers or items close to eyes



Biting nails



Flapping hands and arms



Making repetitive vocalisations

Why does someone self-stimulate?

Whilst there are many hypotheses for why autistic people engage in self-stimulating behaviours, commonly it is to support sensory regulation and help keep calm through stimuli that can be overwhelming. For autistic people overwhelming stimuli can occur whilst participating in day-to-day tasks. For example, the different noises that can unexpectedly occur whilst on a train, the flashing lights of an emergency vehicle, or the feel of people brushing past you in a busy area. It may also occur when someone is enjoying a stimuli, for example, watching a cartoon or listening to music they like.

How you can best support your child

Step back and look at the bigger picture – how did they sleep? How has their morning been? How many unexpected things have occurred and what have they just been doing? It can seem that a particular situation, for example sirens nearby, has caused someone to engage in self-stimulating behaviour, however, it is often a multitude of things combined that enhance the need to stay regulated. Therefore, if you know they're going to experience stimuli that they may find difficult or exciting and if they've had a poor night's sleep then factor in periods throughout the day where they can engage in behaviours as needed and participate in sensory strategies. It is important to participate in sensory strategies regularly to try and prevent over-stimulation and potential crisis point rather than implementing them as a reactive strategy.

You should never intervene or try to stop or prevent self-stimulatory behaviour unless there is a risk to the person, those around them or significant damage to property. Rather, support with sensory strategies and a clear schedule of when they're going to have time to engage in specific behaviours and regulate throughout the day.

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Replacement strategies for self-injurious behaviours (SIB)

When self-stimulating becomes self-injurious, we should try to replace the behaviour with one that gives a similar type of input but isn't harmful. For example, if someone is biting themselves, we might give them a chew or wrist chew. If someone is scratching themselves, we might give them a piece of material to scratch instead that feels similar.

It is important to try and remain calm during periods of SIB and support the person to regulate. It may be that you need to leave an area and find a calmer space to regulate.

Regulation strategies

Every person is unique, and different strategies work for different people. Here are a range of strategies that might help your child to self-regulate:



Wall push-ups: Stand near a wall and put arms out to touch the wall, bend elbows to lean towards the wall and push body away from the wall. Repeat 5-10 times



Body sock: Can be purchased from a sensory website. Should be used whilst being supervised at all times



Ball roll outs: Lay over an exercise ball and support shoulders by placing arms on the floor. If able walk arms forward and backwards



Tightly hugging self: Place hands on opposite shoulders and squeeze. A cushion or teddy could be used to hug as well



Squeezing hands together:

Link hands together and squeeze



Rocking in a linear motion: Sit on the floor or a bean bag and rock back and forth or side to side but not both, encouraging slow rocking



Listening to white noise: Trial white or brown noise and see if this has a calming effect whilst in a quiet space. It can be used in noisier environments once they're used to the noise if it has a calming effect



Sitting in a quiet space: Have a space with low level noise and distractions that they know can be accessed at regular intervals. If you're going to a busy place (e.g. an arena, shopping centre or stadium) then you could enquire about whether they have a sensory room.



Ear defenders (only to be used in environments with a high level of noise): Trial ear defenders for times of high levels of noise or noise that is particularly overwhelming. It is important to encourage taking them off when the noise is no longer there to avoid becoming reliant on them.