

Exploring the Art of Stimming

This is a short summary of what we will be doing and how we will do it. This is an exploration, not a lesson so everyone is encouraged to offer examples, views and speculations. If you want to just sit and listen, that's cool too – whatever feels comfortable for you. Needless to say you are encouraged to stim away throughout!

Structure

What and Who

We begin with a short chat about what stimming is. We will discuss the 'textbook' definition and explore its shortcomings.

Next we will consider just how wide and deep the world of stimming really is, and mention other human communities that use stims.

This will include talking about different types of stims in two groups:

Repetitive, Continuous and Reboot stims

– stims can serve lots of purposes

Sensory, Cognitive, and Emotional stims

– stims can play a role in every aspect of living

When and Where

We will start thinking about the situations that prompt stimming, and what kinds of stims people use for different purposes.

Here we will talk about actual situations we encounter and how stims help us deal with stresses, express ourselves, and maintain focus

How

One curiosity of stims is the question of where they come from – how do we learn stimming? There is a surprising consistency in how people stim right across the world, and we will think about what the significance of that is. Here we will also ask whether there is – or could be – a ‘language of stims’

Why

Here we will discuss what stims do, how they feel, and what functions they fulfil for us. We will also consider what practical functions they can serve as useful tools. We will also talk about whether stims could actually play a role in promoting inclusion, even though they have been mostly treated until now as barriers to inclusion.

Wow

A bit of free-form fun and chat about just how utterly cool stimming is and hopefully lots of imaginative speculations about the future!

respect the stimmer, respect the stim!

Welcome

to

Exploring the Art of Stimming

with

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A 'textbook' definition of Stimming:

Stimming (or stereotypy) is self-stimulatory behaviour characterised by repetitive movements of the body or of objects.

How far off the mark is that?

Is stimming always

Repetitive?

Stimulation?

Physical?

What do you think? Or feel?

Repetitive? Sometimes... but there are other ways

Continuous stims like stroking skin in a circle, spinning or humming allow us focus on a single sensation

'Reboot' stims are once-off stims like clapping, head-banging, stamping or shrieking to mark or create points of transition

Stimulation? Sometimes... but there are other ways

Calming or regulating stims actually do the opposite to stimulation, such as rocking or stroking or squeezing

'Maintenance' stims can help keep us ticking along, stay focused on a task, and help us work through a series of steps in a process

Physical? Sometimes... but there are other ways

Cognitive stims like playing a rhythm or beat in the mind can stand in for physical stims or help regulate our thinking processes

Emotional stims... aren't they all emotional?

Are there non-emotional stims?

A little diversion - Autistics and emotions

The Autistic Experience is loaded with emotional intensity

Physical sensations are described using emotions

eye contact hurts, pressure is calming, light touch is irritating, spinning is joyous...

Even studying can be deeply pleasurable, our memories vividly distressing, and imagining terrifying or ecstatic

We live lives charged with emotion – perhaps this is why stims are so often cherished?

It seems that old definition falls short of the mark
What else have they missed?

Stims are communication

not just communicating how you feel but...

responding to and interacting with the world

Stims are a skillful art and always appropriate

Stims are self-taught skills

The origins of stimming

Where do these stims come from anyway?

- a natural response!

Who even taught you to stim like that?

- you taught yourself!

But the same stims turn up all over the globe...

- the natural language of Autistics?

So... what do stims actually do for you in daily life?

How do they feel?

When do you like to stim?

What do you get from stimming?

and...

How do they actually work?

We mentioned emotion earlier...

Think about all the words Autistics use to describe their stimming...

calming joyous balancing focusing thrilling

Stims are fundamentally emotional in nature

And its just the same for non-Autistic people too

Think a bit about common stims others use...

Jumping, cheering and clapping

Wringing hands, rocking, wailing and pulling hair

Fidgeting, pacing, and clenching hands

Tapping, doodling and twirling hair

When do you stim?

Times of distress or anxiety

Moments of relaxation

Periods of thoughtfulness

When we need to be grounded and balanced

In states of deep focus

When we need to communicate

Any others...?

What do you get from stimming?

We know stimming is deeply important for Autistics because otherwise why bother?

When we stim the world feels better

When we stim we feel better

When we stim we think better...

...and when we feel good we stim just because!

Okay... we taught ourselves to stim

We created a beautiful expressive art form

And our lives are richer for it

So, can we use stimming deliberately as a tool?

Can we look at how stimming works for us

And design stimmy things to improve learning

or to analyse problems?

I think we can

About 'Conlon's Metronome'

Frank Conlon was a biology teacher

He used the tapping of a ruler as a signal

Separating information into clear units

At a calm, controlled pace

Making it easy to follow

Easy to digest

Easy to remember

Are there other stims or stim-based techniques we can use as tools to facilitate learning?

or thinking?

or working through decision-making?

or stepping through a series of tasks?

or overcoming an executive function blockage?

Can we imagine ways to actually use stims
to make the classroom or the workplace better?

Or as a performance art?

Hey, could we even maybe teach stimming?

Y'know... to non-Autistics?

What does the future offer for the art of stimming?

Thanks for taking part and...

Exploring the Art of Stimming

this is not the end,
the adventure is just beginning...

Some more to read

A discussion of stimming from 2017 in three parts published on the Autistic Union Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/AutisticUnion/photos/a.458305877541751/1430481056990890/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AutisticUnion/photos/a.458305877541751/1430478603657802/>

<https://www.facebook.com/AutisticUnion/photos/a.458305877541751/1430477416991254/>

A recent paper from Leif Ekblad and Gerit Pfuhl discussing the relationship between stimming and emotions:

“Autistic self-stimulatory behaviors (stims): Useless repetitive behaviors or nonverbal communication?”

<https://psyarxiv.com/4xyc2/>

The mind-bogglingly huge online database of stims

<http://what-is-stimming.org/>