

Welcome to the third episode of The Podcast of ADHD! This week we're talking about The Stimulatory Needs of ADHD.

Last week, we touched briefly on overstimulation and sensory processing difficulties and sensitivities, which are definitely things that make day-to-day life difficult with ADHD. Today, I'm going to explain overstimulation, understimulation, stimming, and self-regulation.

Stimulation is a large part of working with instead of against your ADHD. With a dopamine deficiency, we are constantly searching for a new and stronger source of dopamine, and this is often found in some sort of stimulation, whether it be mental, visual, auditory, tactile, verbal, taste and smell, vestibular, or proprioceptive. This state of constantly searching for new and stronger sources of stimulation is called understimulation. The brain is looking for a way to fill that under-met state of optimal stimulation, and therefore we get distracted or sidetracked by brighter, louder, more interesting things than the decidedly more boring thing we're meant to be doing.

On the flip side, there's also overstimulation, where one of two things- or both in some cases- can be happening. Either there's too much sensory input to handle in the first place, or there's another factor causing your brain to be less able to handle sensory input, such as being stressed about something else, not having enough sleep, or symptoms worsening for a variety of external reasons. Adding in the inability to comprehend and process this sensory information only makes the situation worse, and this can lead to overstimulation and sensory overload. Sensory overload is most often characterized by difficulty concentrating, extreme irritability, restlessness or discomfort, the urge to shield yourself from the overloading sensory input such as covering your eyes or ears or removing a piece of clothing that has an overwhelming texture, feeling tense and wound up, heightened stress, anxiety, or fear, and heightened sensitivity to sensory input. It can cause migraines if left unchecked and is an immensely stressful and unpleasant experience.

Unfortunately, most of us with ADHD exist in a state of being either overstimulated or understimulated a majority of the time. This is where stimming and other self-regulatory behaviors come in. Stimming is short for self-stimulation. This means intentionally introducing specific stimulatory behaviors as needed to increase the levels of sensory input or to drown out other, more painful sensory experiences. The second version is one that is harder for others to grasp, but it's commonly done in the form of wearing headphones and playing music loud enough to block out all other auditory input. This simplifies the amount of sensory information by limiting all auditory input to a single source that we are in control of. Visual stimming can be things like "satisfying" videos and glitter jars, tactile stimming may be things like stim toys or playing with hair, zippers, or clicking pens. Verbal stims like subconsciously beatboxing or making random sounds are common, even singing is frequently used as a stim. Taste and smell stims can be specific foods or smells, though these types of input are some of the more frequently overwhelming and overloading types of sensory input. However, this category also includes chewing stims that are made of sturdy silicone and are safe to be chewed on. Finally, Vestibular and Proprioceptive stimming are the two categories most people don't know about off

the top of their heads. Vestibular stimming refers to repetitive motions to do with balance, such as rocking, swinging, spinning. Proprioceptive stimulation has to do with the awareness of the body and where each limb is. Things like throwing, jumping, pacing, exercising, and drumming are often used as proprioceptive stims. Weight-based stims are also common, such as a weighted vest or shirt or a weighted blanket.

In the case of overstimulation, removing all sensory input is a good first step, such as moving to a dark, quiet room, removing harshly textured clothing, regulating the temperature to a more neutrally comfortable level, etcetera. Some people find pressure comforting after a sensory overload, while some find any touch to be overwhelming- it's different for everyone. How much sensory input you need in a given scenario to be comfortable will be different for everyone, and triggers for sensory overload will be different, and even how much sensory input you can comfortably handle will be different. And it won't only be different person to person- it will be different from day to day, situation to situation, even hour to hour sometimes.

Stimming is useful for a variety of reasons, not just to be comfortable in everyday situations, but to help improve focus and productivity. When I'm working on research and writing these episodes for the podcast, I need some extra stimulation to keep my brain engaged in the task at hand, a sentiment shared by many others. Having music or ambient sound adds an auditory element to the task at hand and provides extra dopamine to make the task easier to stay on task for. Fidgeting or doodling while listening to a long lecture or watching a video or movie helps provide an outlet for the hyperactivity and provides some extra movement and stimulation for what is a very stationary activity.

However, not all stimming is good or safe. There are harmful stims, such as body-focused repetitive behaviors. These are small, repeated actions done with and to your own body that hurt or harm you, though this is not the intent. Things like pulling out eyelashes or hair, biting the skin around your nails or knuckles, biting the inside of your mouth or cheeks, picking at scars, popping zits, scratching back and forth over the same patch of skin, and many others. Sometimes these behaviors don't hurt you, like biting your nails for example, but would be better to focus the energy elsewhere, such as to a safer and more sustainable stim with a toy or another outlet that you enjoy.

Stimming can also play an important role in self-regulation. While regulation is something that ADHDers struggle with in nearly every aspect of their lives, stimming can help. Things like taking the time to ground yourself with a tactile stim can help in moments of high stress, using a high-energy proprioceptive or vestibular stim to help work through frustration and anger, and allowing yourself to stim comfortably when possible to help yourself process emotions as they come up are all ways that stimming can not only help you feel better physically but also to feel better emotionally.

And you know what, that's a pretty good overview of stimming, so we'll stop here for now. That's it for this week on The Podcast of ADHD! Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next week when we'll be talking about The Myths of ADHD. Bye!