



Understanding Stimming, Masking, and Sensory Overload: A Guide for Supporting Neurodivergent Ministers-in-Training

Introduction

This guide helps incumbents understand and respond to key neurodivergent experiences: **stimming**, **masking**, **sensory overload**, **shutdowns**, and **meltdowns**. These are common among individuals with Autism, ADHD, AuDHD, and other neurodivergent profiles. By recognising and responding to these experiences with empathy and informed care, incumbents can create safer, more inclusive environments for ministers-in-training.

What Is Stimming?

Stimming (short for self-stimulatory behaviour) refers to repetitive movements, sounds, or actions that help regulate emotions, manage sensory input, or express excitement or distress.

Examples of Stimming

- Hand-flapping, rocking, tapping, humming, pacing, hair twirling
- Repeating words or phrases
- Using fidget tools or repetitive gestures

Benefits of Stimming

- Helps manage anxiety or sensory overload
- Provides comfort and emotional regulation
- Enhances focus or grounding
- Expresses joy or excitement

Harmful or Risky Stimming

Some stims may be physically harmful (e.g., head-banging, skin-picking) or disruptive in certain contexts.

What I Can Do

- Accept and normalise stimming unless it is physically harmful
- Encourage the use of safe alternatives (e.g., fidget tools, quiet spaces)

- Avoid drawing attention to stimming unless support is needed
- If stimming is harmful, gently ask what helps and collaborate on safer strategies

What Is Masking?

Masking is the act of hiding or suppressing neurodivergent traits to fit in socially or meet expectations. It often involves mimicking neurotypical behaviours, suppressing stimming, or overcompensating in communication.

Why People Mask

- To avoid judgment or misunderstanding
- To meet social or professional expectations
- To feel safe in unfamiliar or non-inclusive environments

The Cost of Masking

- Exhaustion and burnout
- Loss of identity or authenticity
- Increased anxiety or depression
- Delayed recognition of support needs

What I Can Do

- Create safe spaces where authenticity is welcomed
- Avoid pressuring conformity to neurotypical norms
- Affirm neurodivergent expressions and communication styles
- Check in privately if someone seems withdrawn or overwhelmed

Sensory Overload, Shutdowns, and Meltdowns

Sensory Overload

Occurs when sensory input (light, sound, touch, smell, movement) becomes overwhelming.

Some Signs:

- Covering ears or eyes
- Withdrawal or irritability

- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical discomfort or panic

Shutdowns

A shutdown is a protective response to overwhelm, where the person may become non-verbal, withdrawn, or unable to respond.

Some Signs:

- Silence or stillness
- Avoidance of interaction
- Emotional numbness or fatigue

Meltdowns

A meltdown is an involuntary emotional release due to extreme stress or overload. It is not a tantrum or behavioural choice.

Some Signs:

- Crying, shouting, or physical agitation
- Loss of control
- Need for space and recovery

What I Can Do

During Sensory Overload

- Reduce stimuli (dim lights, lower noise, offer quiet space)
- Allow breaks or movement
- Avoid sudden changes or demands

During a Shutdown

- Give space and time
- Avoid pushing for verbal responses (try asking yes no questions where they can nod or shake their head or, presenting your hands as two different options for example: left hand out “you like me to leave” right hand “you would like me to stay with you”)
- Offer gentle reassurance without pressure

During a Meltdown

- Ensure safety and privacy
- Stay calm and non-judgmental
- Avoid physical contact unless requested
- Support recovery with quiet, low-demand environments