Your Unmasking Toolkit

Practical tools to support neurodivergent children in your care



connections in mind

Keep calm & ‘stim’ on: unpacking stimming



Stimming, short for self-stimulatory behaviour, refers to repetitive actions that help neurodivergent (ND) individuals manage sensory input, reduce anxiety, and regulate their emotions.

Stimming is a natural way for ND individuals to self-soothe and cope with overwhelming sensations, like excitement or loud noises. It’s often a signal that a child is trying to keep calm and manage sensory overload.



Healthy stimming can look like...

- ☐ **Repetitive movements:** rocking, twirling hair, flapping hands, spinning, joint cracking, fidgeting, pacing, or swinging
- ☐ **Making sounds (echolalia):** humming, whistling, or repeating words or phrases
- ☐ **Biting or chewing:** objects, cheeks, or nails
- ☐ **Sniffing or licking objects**



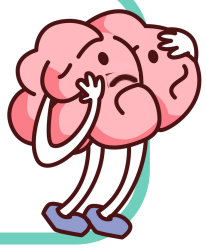
How do you manage sensory overload?



In a study of 100 adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), 72% reported being told to stop stimming at some point in their lives! (Stewart, 2015).

What is masking?

Masking, or camouflaging, is when ND individuals hide their neurodivergent traits or stims in social settings to avoid neurodivergence-related stigma and seek acceptance.



Holding in thoughts and suppressing habits that might annoy others is exhausting! Prolonged masking can lead to...



Anxiety triggers reflection exercise

An anxiety trigger is something that makes you feel really worried or scared. Use the scale below and rate out of 10 how anxious the triggers make you feel. Add yours if they're not listed!

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

CALM A BIT ANXIOUS ANXIOUS VERY ANXIOUS

_____ loud noises or sudden sounds

_____ crowds and busy places

_____ changes in routine/schedule

_____ new environments

_____ bright lights

_____ strong smells

_____ meeting new people

_____ talking in front of a group

_____ conflict at home

_____ not being with parents

_____ homework and exams

_____ being called on in class

_____ making mistakes

_____ feeling tired or hungry

_____ disappointing others

_____ thinking about the future

_____ specific textures

_____ new foods

_____ change in room temperature

_____ being teased or bullied

_____ difficulty understanding work

_____ someone being too close

_____ physical touch

_____ being alone

_____ specific visual patterns

_____ scary or violent movies

_____ hearing bad news

_____ starting the school term

_____ not having time to play

_____ .....

_____ .....

_____ .....

_____ .....

_____ .....

_____ .....

_____ .....



Unwritten social rules

Unwritten social rules are the guidelines that help us navigate social situations smoothly. Sometimes, we might accidentally do or say something that breaks these rules, without realisng it, making others feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. Here are some examples of going against these unwritten rules:

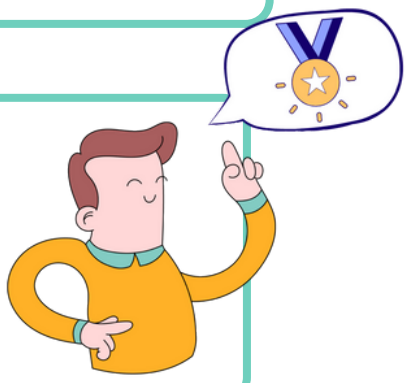


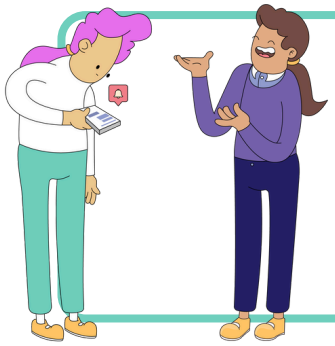
Not introducing yourself:

This might make others feel ignored or unsure of who you are, which can make it harder for everyone to feel comfortable and start a conversation. Try to smile, say hi, say what your name is and ask for theirs.

Humble-bragging:

Humble-bragging is when someone brags but pretends they're not. It can seem insincere. If you want to share something you're proud of, it's better to just be straightforward and honest.





Constantly on your phone...

... when someone's talking to you. It can make them feel like what they're saying boring or unimportant. Try to give them your full attention by looking at them and listening and putting your phone away.

Oversharing with someone new:

This can make them feel overwhelmed. They might not know how to respond because you haven't built a close relationship yet. Rather start with topics like hobbies, favourite movies, or school.

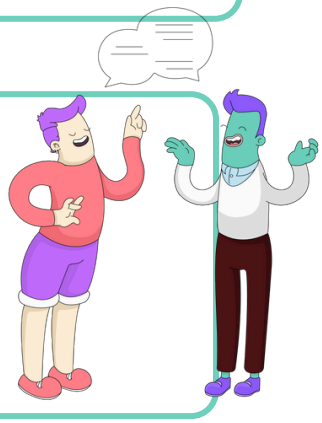


Unwritten social rules (cont.)



Forgetting to repay someone:

When you forget to repay someone who lent you money, it can make them feel unappreciated or taken advantage of. Make a note or set a reminder to repay them. If you forget, apologise and repay them as soon as you can.



Interrupting and talking over them:

This can make the other person feel like their thoughts and opinions don't matter to you, which can hurt their feelings. Practice active listening by letting the other person finish their thoughts before you speak.



Arriving too early/overstaying your welcome:

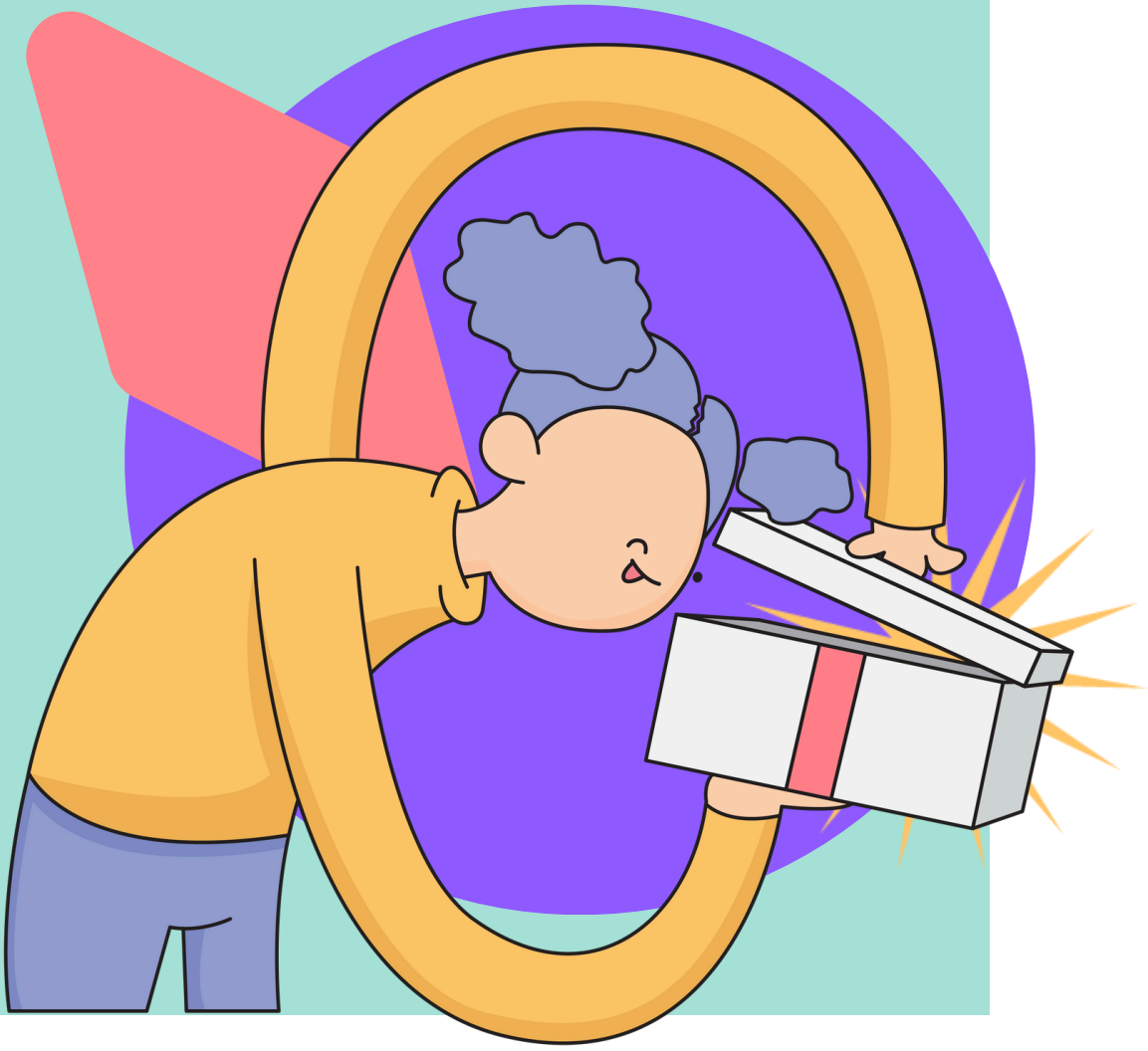
Showing up too early or staying longer than expected can disrupt someone's plans or make them feel a bit uncomfortable. If you're unsure about how long to stay, pay attention to cues - like if they start tidying up or mentioning how late it's getting.

Arriving at a party empty-handed

When you show up to a party without bringing something, it can seem like you're not acknowledging the effort your host put into the event. Bring a little something to share, like a snack, a drink, or a small gift for the host.



Here are some great strategies you can use to support the people you work with - let us know which are your favourites!



Where do I feel my anxiety?

Body check-in! Circle the symptoms around Jenny that you also feel when you're anxious.

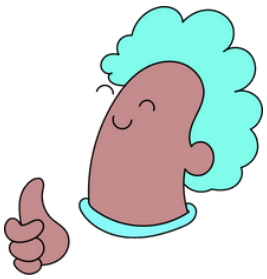


Communication cards

Cut these cards out to help express feelings.

"I feel..."

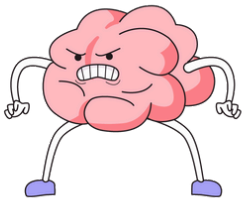
happy



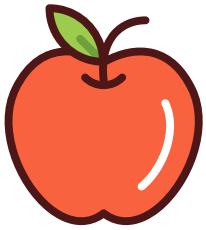
sad



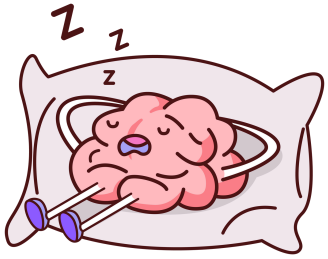
angry



hungry



tired



excited



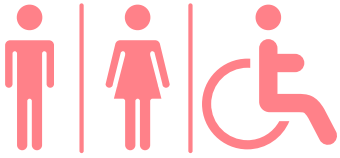
cold



hot



I need to use the toilet



Communication cards

Cut these cards out to help communicate actions.

“It is time to...”

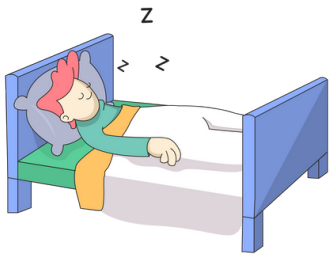
eat



play



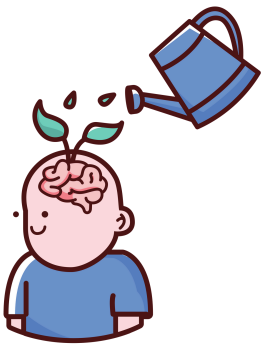
sleep



sit still



learn



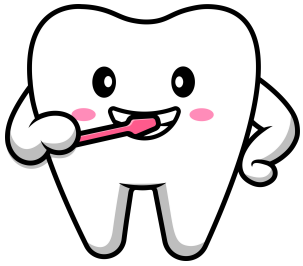
wash



clean up



brush teeth



exercise



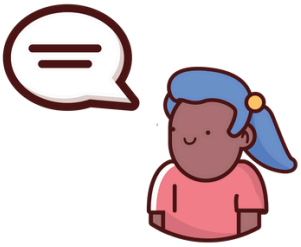
Communication cards

Cut these cards out to help communicate routines.

“First this, then that”

listen

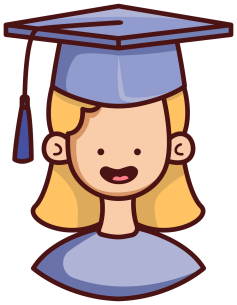
speak



meal



lesson



breaktime



shoes

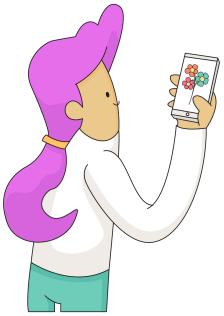
go outside



worksheet



screentime



Communication cards

Cut these cards out to help communicate feelings, needs, and actions.

Add your own:

The art of compromise

1. HOW COMFORTABLE ARE YOU WITH COMPROMISE?

Rate the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

- I'm happy giving up something I want to reach an agreement. **_/5**
- I find it easy to see things from another's perspective. **_/5**
- Compromise is necessary for healthy relationships. **_/5**
- I often feel frustrated when others don't see things my way. **_/5**

Your total score:

- **16-20:** You're very comfortable with compromise.
- **11-15:** You're generally open to compromise, but it depends on the situation.
- **6-10:** You find it challenging to compromise.
- **1-5:** You rarely feel comfortable compromising.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER PERSON

Choose the statement that best describes the person you're dealing with:

- ☐ They are very attached to their ideas or preferences.
- ☐ They feel anxious about losing control or being wrong.
- ☐ They don't feel heard or understood.
- ☐ They are unaware of how their behavior affects others.
- ☐ .....

3. ALTERNATIVES TO COMPROMISE

- **Trade-Offs:** Instead of a 50/50 compromise, agree to fully support each other's preferences at different times.
  Example: "I'll support your idea for this project, and next time, we'll go with mine."
- **Third-Party Input:** Involve a neutral person to suggest a fair solution.
  Example: "Let's ask our teacher or a mutual friend for their thoughts on what we should do."
- **Time-Limited Trials:** Agree to try one person's approach for a set time before reassessing**.**
  Example: "Let's do it your way this time, and if it doesn't work, we'll try mine next week."

4. REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Instead of focusing on the conflict, try to emphasise mutual goals. For example:

Original: "You never listen to my ideas."
Reframed: "I'd love for us to find a solution that includes both of our ideas."

Original: "It's always your way or the highway."
Reframed: "I think we can find a way to meet in the middle so that both of us are happy."

Now, reframe this statement: "Why can't you just agree with me for once?"

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5. SETTING BOUNDARIES

When compromise isn't possible, it might be necessary to set clear boundaries. This ensures your needs are respected without escalating the conflict.

Draft a boundary statement:
"In situations like [describe situation], I need [describe your need or expectation]. I hope we can respect each other's needs to find a solution that works for both of us."

Managing conversations when others talk over you

STEP 1: UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION

Write about a time when someone talked over you or changed the subject - how did it make you feel?

Why do you think they did that?

STEP 2: RECOGNISE THE PATTERN

Sometimes people talk over others or go off-topic without realising it. Is this a common behaviour with this person?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Do they do this with others, or just with you?

☐ With others ☐ Just with me

Why do you think they behave this way?

Social stories

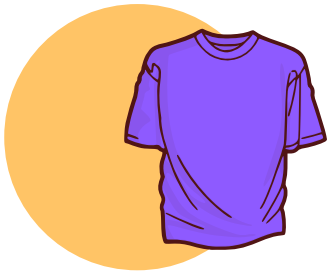
Read these aloud to better understand and feel safe & prepared for daily social situations, routines, and concepts

Getting ready for school



First, I get up

I get out of bed and use the toilet, wash my hands with soap and water, and brush my teeth.



After, I get dressed

I choose my shirt, pants, socks, and shoes. It's important to dress warmly if it's cold outside.



Then it’s breakfast time!

I eat a healthy breakfast to give me energy for the day. Yummy!



I pack my backpack...

I pack my backpack with my lunch, books, and homework.

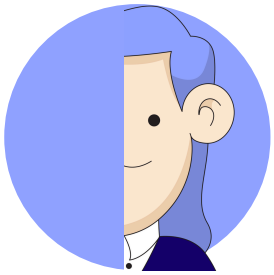


... and wait at the door

I wait by the door for my mom or dad to go to school. I like knowing what to do each morning.

Social stories

Starting a school lesson



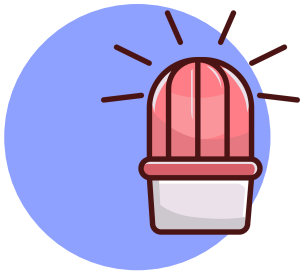
I listen to the teacher

When it's lesson time, my teacher will let us know. I need to stop what I'm doing and pay attention.



I find my seat

I sit down quietly. I put away any toys or items that might distract me.



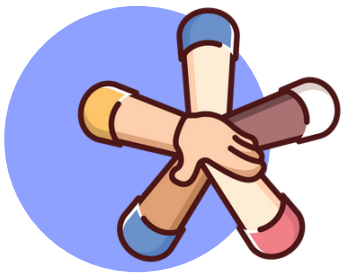
Look and listen

I look at the teacher and listen carefully. The teacher will tell us what we are going to learn about today.



I raise my hand for help

If I have a question, I raise my hand and wait for the teacher to call on me. This way, everyone gets a turn.

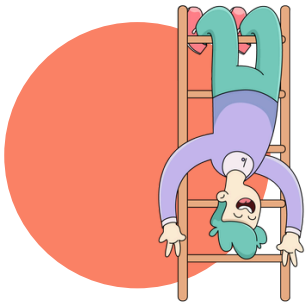


I'm kind in groups

Sometimes, we work with partners or in small groups. I try to be kind and helpful to my classmates.

Social stories

Playground at break



I like the school playground

I go during break time. I like the swings, slide, and jungle gym. Sometimes I can go to my favourite one.



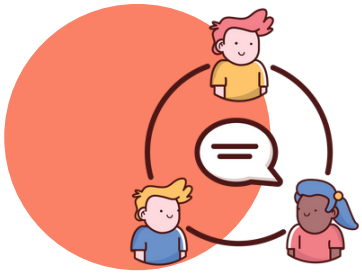
Sometimes I wait my turn

Other children enjoy the playground too. If someone is on the swing, I don’t push them off. I wait my turn.



I use kind words

If someone does something I don't like, I can say, "Please don't do that”. If I need help, I’ll ask a teacher.



When I play with others...

I can listen to their ideas and share my own. We can decide on games to play, like tag or hide-and-seek.

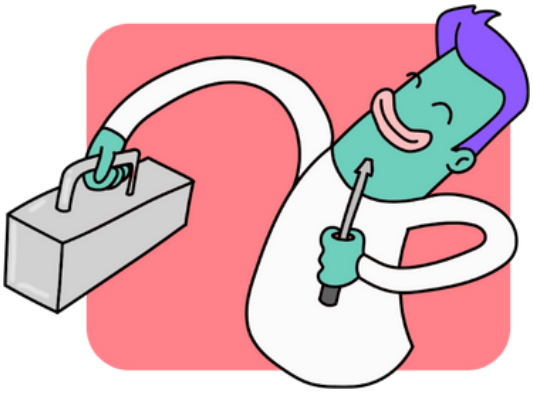


When it’s time to go

I listen to my teacher or the school bell. I might feel sad, but I know I can play again another time.

Sensory Toolbox

Fill a box with the following items to keep in the back of the classroom or living room to provide support and stimulation in times of dysregulation.



- Bubbles to blow
- Weighted blanket
- Essential oils
- Elastic bands
- Fidget toys
- Eye mask
- Ear muffs
- Stress ball
- Bubble wrap
- Blank notepad & colours

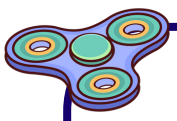
Zones of regulation

What do I need to feel calm?

	Blue Zone	Green Zone
How I Look Or Act	I slouch and sigh. I yawn with eyes half-closed. I move slowly.	I am fairly relaxed in my body. I can engage with others in a fairly confident manner.
Needed Action	Sounds like you're low on energy - You need to get up and move, and/or rest!	Fabulous! Keep going - you are regulating well!

	Orange Zone	Red Zone
How I Look Or Act	I've gone very quiet.. I can feel tension and anxiety in my body. I feel self-conscious and self-critical.	I feel hot/flushed, I'm gritting my teeth and my muscles are tensed, and. I feel frustrated and/or angry.
Needed Action	Use your self-regulation tools, and examine the evidence for your critical voice.	Use your self-regulation tools to calm your nervous system.

Below are things you can do when you are in a specific zone.
Read them carefully and colour each box based on the zone where they belong.



I can be a support to others who need help.

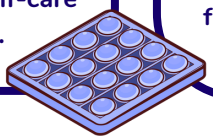
I can list why I feel regulated to help cheer me up when I'm not okay.

I can tense and relax my muscles.

I can drink some water.

I can tell someone that I am feeling anxious.

I can choose a soothing activity from my self-care menu.



I can use my deep breathing exercises.

I can go to my safe, calm place in my head.

I can close my eyes and count to 20.

I can choose a soothing activity from my self-care menu.

I can go for a walk, or exercise.

I can take a power nap.

I can set a 'wind-down' alarm to go to bed earlier.

I can play with my fidget toys

