Kassandra Clemens' Zoom Meeting 26th March – Summary

Neurodivergence & Stimming – Why This Conversation Matters

Host –

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Panellists

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31 attendees. Several spoke up while others contributed via a very lively chat (only available to attendees).

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Introduction to the panellists

Monika Labich

Monika is a therapist with experience across the NHS, the charity sector, and private practice, specialising in alcohol dependency and domestic abuse. She facilitates the Own My Life course for women who have experienced domestic abuse, and is a Trauma Release Exercise practitioner, using body-based approaches to help the nervous system release stress and regain its natural resilience. A Devon Autism Ambassador and late diagnosed autistic herself, Monika is a passionate advocate for autistic adults being properly heard and included in decisions that affect them.

Monika opened with a disarmingly simple question: what does your body do when no one is watching? Whether it's doodling, clicking a pen, pacing, or making a sound, she invites the audience to recognise that stimming — repetitive movements, sounds, or actions used to self-regulate — is not an exclusively neurodivergent behaviour. It is fundamentally human. The distinction, she argued, is not whether people stim, but how visible, intense, and socially acceptable that stimming appears.

She explained the concept of a "window of tolerance" — a state of relative steadiness in which thinking, connecting, and responding feel manageable. Stimming, she said, exists to help us return to that window when we've moved out of it, whether through overwhelm, anxiety, or under-stimulation. It is, in her framing, an attempt to solve a problem, not a problem in itself.

The difficulty for neurodivergent people is that their stimming tends to be more visible and less aligned with social norms, meaning the response they most often receive is not

understanding but correction. Over time, being told — directly or indirectly — that their stimming is unwelcome leads to suppression, masking, shame, and eventually burnout. Crucially, Monika pointed out that shame doesn't just change behaviour; it changes a person's relationship with their own body, causing them to disconnect from the very things that help them function.

Her call is one of reclamation. Rather than framing stimming as something to be erased or endured, she encourages people to approach it with curiosity and awareness — noticing when it arises, what precedes it, and what follows. From that foundation of self-knowledge, stimming can become a deliberately used resource: a way to support focus, manage stress, and recover from overwhelm more quickly. The goal, she concluded, is to restore the connection between mind and body — and to ask what might change if some of that didn't have to disappear the moment someone else walked into the room.

Susan Fitzell

Susan Fitzell, M.Ed., CSP, is an international speaker, neurodivergent educator, and author of over sixteen books, including one on neurodiversity in the workplace.

Susan opened by reflecting on how the concept of stimming only entered her awareness relatively recently, despite having spent decades as a trainer, speaker, and author working predominantly with schools. Throughout that time, she had routinely recommended what she carefully called "focus tools" to teachers — avoiding the word "fidget" entirely, knowing it would trigger resistance from educators who felt students ought to have outgrown the need to move. Rocking in chairs, handling objects, keeping hands busy — these were tools she championed in presentations and books for years, long before she understood them as stimming.

Her deeper personal reckoning came when she reconnected with a half-sister she had not known growing up. Her sister, who is intellectually disabled, stimmed visibly and loudly in ways that Susan, by her own admission, initially found mortifying. In public, she would gently discourage her sister's animal noises and hand movements, not yet understanding what she was asking her to suppress. As her knowledge of autism grew, that early response gave way to guilt — and to a crucial insight: when one stim was discouraged, her sister simply found another, sometimes one that drew even more attention, like grabbing the back of her clothing after a caregiver took away the lanyard charm she had relied on.

Looking back at her own childhood, Susan recognised the same patterns in herself. She recalled a strong, unexplained urge to press her chin hard into her hand when stressed — a

stim she never identified as such, and which eventually disappeared without her ever knowing why. Leg shaking and constant movement were familiar companions too, but because they sat within the range of socially acceptable behaviour, she had masked without ever realising that was what she was doing.

She closed by reflecting that watching her sister, and understanding the harm done by well-meaning attempts at suppression, had ultimately taught her more about stimming than examining her own experience ever had. It reframed everything — not just her understanding of neurodivergence, but her relationship with her own body and behaviour.

Discussion

Growing Up Without Understanding

Steven reflected on his own childhood stimming, which primarily took the form of tapping and leg bouncing. In the 1970s, these behaviours led both teachers and classmates to assume he was unintelligent, and he was told as a seven-year-old that his dream of becoming a pilot was beyond him. Monika shared a contrasting memory — that school breaks, far from being a relief, were overwhelming. Rather than running around, she would find a corner, make herself as small as possible, and try to disconnect from the noise and sensory overload around her. Whether hugging her knees counted as stimming in any clinical sense, she wasn't certain, but her body clearly needed it.

Recognising Stims We Never Named

Susan reflected on how surprised she had been, when she first encountered a comprehensive list of stimming behaviours, to find doodling among them. She had doodled compulsively throughout school — always the same flowers, the same leaves — and was grateful her teachers had never tried to stop her, because it allowed her to focus and absorb information far more effectively. She noted that there is still no definitive explanation for why particular stims help particular people, and that the effects are likely different for everyone.

Kassandra observed that for many people, awareness of their own stims only arrives at the point of a late diagnosis, when they begin looking back at lifelong habits with new eyes. She reflected that leg bouncing and the need to move constantly might be entirely misunderstood as restlessness, when in fact they could be expressions of quite different needs.

Some Neuroscience Behind Stimming

Steven offered a neurological perspective, suggesting that autistic people tend to have a more developed prefrontal cortex from very early in life — the area of the brain associated with regulation and communication. As a result, the brain builds stronger and faster sensory connections, leading to heightened sensory perception. This, he argued, is precisely why managing sensory input through stimming becomes not just helpful but necessary. He also proposed that self-hugging functions in exactly the same way as seeking a hug from another person — the nervous system receives the same soothing signal regardless of the source.

Stimming in the Language of Care

Annie brought a different perspective, noting that in her work supporting people with special needs, the term used is not stimming but self-soothing — language that, she felt, better captured what is actually happening emotionally. Drawing on her own childhood in a children's home, she described how she had learnt to hug herself for comfort when there was no one else to do it and still reaches for a teddy bear when stressed as an adult. She observed that for many of the people she cares for, stimming serves as an emotional outlet when verbal expression is not available — it can signal anger, happiness, fear, or simply the need for security.

The Cost Of Suppression

Monika returned to a theme running throughout the discussion: the pressure placed on neurodivergent people to intellectualise and justify their behaviour. She argued that stimming is as natural as breathing or laughing, and that demanding explanations for it only forces people into a defensive posture. The real need, she said, is not understanding but acceptance — from others and from oneself.

Susan built on this, reflecting on how many things she had simply stopped doing over the years because of social pressure or ridicule. She posed the question directly to the panel: if you suppressed your stimming, what did that do to your internal world, and where did all that energy go?

Stimming as Stress Management

Steven gently challenging Susan's earlier description of pressing her chin into her hand as an early form of stimming, suggesting it sat closer to stress management than stimming in the traditional sense — though he acknowledged the boundaries between the two are blurred.

June, arriving from a corporate background, described the pen-clicking she had relied on throughout her working life, her instinctive reach for a pen whenever anxiety spiked, and the way running had more recently replaced it as her primary means of finding calm.

Joyful Stims and Reclaiming Them

Susan's most vivid example of a joyful stim came in the form of swinging. After long days presenting to teachers, she would seek out a park and wait — sometimes impatiently — for a child to vacate a swing. Her husband eventually surprised her one Mother's Day by building a full-sized adult swing set in their garden, and she described it as one of the most genuinely restorative things in her life. Kassandra noted that many adults seem to lose their joyful stims over time, retaining only the protective or coping behaviours, and wondered how much of this was simply the accumulated weight of social expectation.

Steven pushed back warmly on this, saying he actively performs joyful stims in front of colleagues and young people precisely because he wants to demonstrate that growing older does not require abandoning the things that make you feel good. He had noticed that it almost always provoked a smile.

Ros offered a charming example of her own — an unconscious skipping motion she sometimes falls into in supermarkets, prompted by the bright lights and high ceilings. She had never been stared at for it, but was once approached by a young neurodivergent man who recognised the behaviour immediately and became visibly worried on her behalf, having assumed something was wrong. It was only when she reassured him that she was simply doing a little dance that he relaxed.

Music, Humming and the Body

Several speakers touched on sound as a form of stimming. Kassandra admitted to humming, sometimes loudly, when she needed to stay present and focused — and noticed she was growing louder precisely when concentration was most demanding. Monika connected this to Chinese medicine, noting that humming is thought to stimulate the vagus nerve and help regulate the emotions through the vibration it creates in the body — something she had begun practising herself in recent months with a marked sense of calm as a result. Steven added that playing his guitars, sometimes without making any recognisable music at all, served the same purpose for him after meetings.

Susan recalled singing at full volume all the way to and from the shops as a child — joyfully and unselfconsciously — until family reactions gradually silenced her. Kassandra shared a

similar loss: her family had sung constantly together when her children were young, but when they grew out of it, she stopped entirely and found she had forgotten nearly every song.

When Stimming is Misunderstood as Something Dangerous

Natalie offered the most sobering contribution to the discussion. She described being identified as strange from a very young age — capable of reading the Financial Times at four, experiencing synaesthesia with music, and stimming in ways that deeply unsettled the adults around her. The response was not curiosity or support but hostility, and her stimming behaviours were ultimately misread as symptoms of psychosis, leading to a misdiagnosis of schizophrenia and antipsychotic medication that made her profoundly unwell. She was not correctly diagnosed as autistic until she was 38, after a process requiring psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists and a full review of her lifelong care records. She connected this to the broader mental health crisis in the UK, noting that rising rates of late diagnosis among adults were accompanied by rising rates of suicide, and that many parents were carrying significant grief at not having understood their own neurodivergence sooner.

Closing Reflections

Susan closed with a thought that felt like the heart of the whole conversation: that discussions like this give people permission to be who they are, to stim as they need to, and to stop measuring themselves against expectations that were never built with them in mind. Kassandra offered a quietly joyful final reflection, that she had come into the evening hoping to learn more about stimming and had left with something she had not expected: a reminder that stimming can be a source of pure delight.