

NATURAL FIXES

A Sensory Cure

Discover ASMR, a type of stimulus that can calm your nerves and help you sleep.

BY HANNAH CHENOWETH

We've all heard of stomach butterflies, but what about brain tingles? ASMR, short for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, refers to a relaxing, tingly sensation that can be stimulated by gentle triggers and personal moments. Since the term was coined in 2010, ASMR has been reported to help with issues like stress and insomnia. Here, **Craig Richard, Ph.D.**—a professor of physiology at Shenandoah University and founder of ASMR University, an online resource—explains how.

First, what is ASMR?

It's a deeply relaxing feeling accompanied by sparkly, pleasurable brain tingles. Some people describe it as a subtle "brain-gasm" or "brain massage"; the sensation is both physical and psychological. ASMR is stimulated by one

or more triggers, which can be auditory (such as hearing someone whisper or slowly crinkle paper), visual (like seeing someone gaze at you in a caring way), or tactile (someone lightly touching your hair, for example). However, the context is just as important: What sets the stage for ASMR is a gentle, trusting moment between two people. You're most likely to feel this sensation when a kind person, such as a hairdresser, is giving you positive personal attention.

How can someone tap into the experience of ASMR at home?

Some people use ASMR to reduce stressful moments, or nightly at bedtime. If you're in a place where you feel comfortable, ASMR can be much easier to experience. You can have a loved one play with your hair, make light sounds with an object, or whisper to you. You



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can also try ASMR videos or podcasts. Paris ASMR and WhispersRed ASMR are two helpful YouTube channels, or you can check out my podcast, *Sleep Whispers*. Headphones can help to focus your attention and make the sound more realistic and immersive.

How does ASMR encourage relaxation?

One of our published research studies showed that some areas of the brain that respond to the relaxation-inducing brain chemical oxytocin

were active during ASMR. Additionally, a 2018 U.K. study found that heart rates were reduced during ASMR. So it's likely that positive moments of personal attention stimulate the release of oxytocin to induce the calming and relaxing feeling of ASMR.

Does research show that it's effective?

We have data from more than 20,000 people who have experienced ASMR, and most of them describe it as relax-

ing, calming, or soothing. They also say it helps them de-stress and fall asleep more easily, which other studies have confirmed. That said, there is still a lack of clinical research, so most health care providers are not yet recommending it as an evidence-based treatment.

Why do only some people experience ASMR?

We don't know. Factors involved could be genetic, developmental, cultural, environmental, or a mix. It could be about finding the right stimulus for you.