

Have you ever heard something that just makes your spine tingle? Perhaps you've encountered a video or an audio track that gave you an odd, calming sense of well-being, and wondered what it was about that sound that impacted you emotionally and physically. You might have gotten goosebumps, or a tingling sensation in your scalp or spine, or just felt relaxed and mellow seemingly out of nowhere.

This sensation is known as ASMR, or "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response." While scientists are still working to learn more about the physiology of why ASMR has this reaction on some- but not all- individuals, and how this effect can be used to benefit those who suffer from stress, sleep, and mood disorders, there is sufficient evidence to get us started on understanding what ASMR is, and how it can be incorporated into your daily routine for relaxation and de-stressing.

What Is ASMR?

A quick Google search will turn up hundreds of different types of videos and audio tracks labelled as "ASMR." These tracks vary in length, from a few minutes, to several hours, and the captions often label them as "calming ASMR for sleep," or "ASMR sounds for relaxation." The videos may feature people doing something very simple and quiet, such as brushing their hair, chopping and peeling vegetables, or applying lotion to their hands and arms. Audio samples can include whispering, tapping, the sound of rain, or crinkling different textures of paper.

For some people, these videos and sounds have absolutely no appeal. Other individuals find that only certain sounds and actions create the ASMR reaction. It turns out that ASMR is based on both the context and the triggers contained in the scenario presented.

"Context" refers to the overall physical and emotional situation. Generally speaking, people are more likely to experience ASMR from a situation that is calm, pleasant, and focused. For example, many people describe having their hair brushed by a close friend or relative as a common trigger for ASMR. In viewing ASMR videos, you'll often notice a very minimal, neutral set, as well.

The "triggers" are the specific cues that stimulate ASMR. A low, whispering voice, a slow, deliberate movement of the hands, the sound of soap curls crunching, the gentle clacking of an old fashioned typewriter- all of these and many more are potential triggers for ASMR. There are several different types of triggers:

- Tactile- these are triggers that are felt, such as in the example of having your hair brushed
- Auditory- these triggers are heard, and may or may not require any visual to create a relaxing response
- Visual or Observed- these triggers come from things that you see, including watching a pair of hands complete various simple tasks, such as unwrapping a gift, cutting soap, playing with sand, and more

Many people respond to compound triggers. For example, a video of a pair of hands crunching soap curls will have an amplified audio track to allow for auditory and visual stimulation. Some individuals will also experience a sort of tactile response to these videos as well, as they can imagine the crunch of the soap under their fingers, and almost smell the pungent perfume released as the soap curls turn to dust.

What Does ASMR Feel Like?

If you have not experienced ASMR, it can be difficult to understand what the sensation is like, and why it would be so pleasurable to listen to hours of typing, or watching video after video of someone peeling vegetables!

For those who are subject to ASMR, the sensation is usually two-fold. First, there are the physical aspects. Typically, there's a tingling or "fuzziness" on the scalp, much like light goosebumps. Some people describe "sparkles" or waves of relaxation that travel through the arms and legs, and up and down the spine.

Individuals also experience psychological sensations from ASMR, such as deep feelings of calmness and relaxation, which can often transform into overall feelings of comfort or safety, and develop into restfulness or sleepiness over time.

Can ASMR Really Help People?

Many individuals swear by ASMR to help them relax and find calm in a stressful world, but is it all in their heads? Technically, yes. Recent studies have found that a significant amount of the response that makes ASMR so pleasant is our innate psychological response, though there's equal argument that the physical response can be helpful.

A [study published in 2018 by Poerio](#), et al, studied the physiological elements of ASMR to determine what, if any emotional and physical responses people had to various triggers. Their studies found that, while not everyone has the ability to experience ASMR, those who do reported an increase in emotional well-being. Additionally, ASMR could also be associated with lowered heart rate and increased skin conductance levels, a potential indicator that ASMR can benefit both overall mental and physical health.

[Another study by Lochte, et al](#), used an fMRI-based study to determine how the brain reacts to ASMR stimuli. This study found that regions of the brain respond to ASMR with feelings of "reward" and "emotional arousal." While researchers are continuing to understand the mechanics of ASMR, the results of this study help us understand that those who do feel relaxation and pleasant sensations from ASMR are truly feeling an involuntary physiological response.

As stated earlier, experts are still working to determine how ASMR works, and to what extent it can help those who suffer from conditions that are related to or worsened by environmental

stressors, such as insomnia, anxiety, depression, and panic disorders. Still, many individuals claim anecdotal benefits of ASMR in their personal lives.

Due to their current prevalence, some people actively seek ASMR trigger videos via YouTube or social media as a manual “reset button” during a hectic day. Short clips can provide an instantaneous response that might be an ideal “chill out” factor for those who might be feeling extreme stress or pressure. Others find that the longer sound-based reels are great for helping them relax and fall into a pleasant sleep, eliminating the tossing and turning that can come with being overly stressed.

For those who can experience ASMR, the tingling, relaxing sensations can be a welcome relief from a stressful day or even a panic-inducing situation. The combination of quiet, predictable sounds or actions and a calm, positive environment has been found to trigger feelings of well-being in recent studies. While we are still working to understand the science behind why and how ASMR works, many individuals find a short ASMR video or sound clip welcome respite from a hectic day, helping to dissipate negative feelings of stress and discomfort and allowing for comfort and relaxation.