

Annoyance with other people's fidgeting or finger-tapping is common: Misokinesia affects one in three

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Are you bothered by seeing someone else fidget? Do you ever have strong negative feelings, thoughts or physical reactions when viewing

other peoples' repetitive movements such as foot shaking, finger tapping or gum chewing?

Well, if you do, you aren't alone.

In [a new study](#) we ran as attentional neuroscientists, we put that question to a sample of over 2,700 undergraduates and found that more than one-third said yes. And it wasn't just students who had such sensitivities. When we went out and asked people in the general population about how they feel when others around them begin to twiddle, tap or jiggle, they too reported [negative reactions](#) at a similar rate.

Many of us humans, it turns out, are challenged by fidgeting.

'Hatred of movement'

Termed misokinesia, or "the hatred of movement" in Greek, these reactions can have [serious social impacts](#) for those who experience them. As our findings confirmed, it can reduce peoples' ability to enjoy social interactions, impair one's ability to learn in the classroom and create difficulties at work.

There was a lot of individual variability in the range of challenges people reported: some had a lot of difficulties, some just a few. We also discovered that these negative social impacts seem to increase with age—the older you get, the more intense and widespread your misokinesia reactions may be.

And perhaps even more surprising? We're only learning this now.

For several decades there has been growing scientific recognition of a similar challenge associated with hearing the sounds other people make. If you are bothered by sounds like slurping, lip-smacking and gum

chewing, you may have a disorder called misophonia. It's defined, in a paper that has not been peer-reviewed, as a [decreased tolerance to specific sounds, in which such sounds evoke strong negative emotional, physiological and behavioral responses.](#)

Misokinesia, on the other hand, has remained in the scientific shadows. [Originally mentioned](#) in a study of misophonia by the Dutch psychiatrist Arjan Schröder and his colleagues in 2013, it had never been the focus of a peer-reviewed study until our paper was published in August. So for now, we have a lot more questions than answers.

Most prominent among these is, why are so many of us bothered by fidgeting?

Why we fidget

We think the answer might tie back to why we fidget in the first place. In addition to evidence suggesting that we often fidget as a way to mindlessly burn [extra calories](#), another clear reason is that we do it when we are feeling [nervous or anxious](#). And that's where the problem may be for those who have to see it.

The trouble is, our human brains are equipped with an exquisite capacity to mimic the actions we see others perform. This is the function of our so-called "[mirror neuron system](#)," which helps us understand the actions and intentions of others by "mirroring" their actions in the same brain areas that we would use to make similar actions of our own.

While this can be critical to normal human [social interactions](#), if we start mirroring actions that we associate with anxiety and other negative emotional states—actions like nervous fidgeting—that very well may trigger those negative states as we observe them. While this is speculative for now, we will soon be exploring it as an explanation for

misokinesia in a new set of experiments.

But importantly, there is also a lot more to misokinesia's immediate impacts than just the potential rush of negative emotions whenever fidgeting is encountered, and this raises another pressing question we've been pursuing.

Fidgeting and attention

In a new experiment we have yet to publish, we recently asked people to watch a pair of short instructional videos that showed a person talking, and then after each video we gave them a memory assessment, to determine how much information they retained from each one. The critical manipulation was that in one video the person talking occasionally fidgeted with their hand, and in the other they did not.

In interviews we've had with misokinesics, a common report is that beyond the aversive reactions fidgeting can trigger, it also impedes peoples' ability to pay attention to whatever else may be happening around them. And so this raised another question for us—does misokinesia distract people from their surroundings?

The answer, our preliminary data suggest, is yes.

For those with higher levels of misokinesia, their memory performance was worse relative to both those not reporting any sensitivities, and those with lower sensitivity levels. And the effect wasn't just due to overall poorer memory systems in those with higher levels of misokinesia; they performed equally well on basic assessments of memory.

While this second study is still awaiting peer-review, what it helps to confirm is that misokinesia isn't just an experience of negative emotions. It alters how people can engage with the world around them, impacting

what they see, hear, or might otherwise simply enjoy.

This also helps to explain something else we've recently found.

In unpublished interviews we've had with misokinesics, they have reported adopting a variety of strategies to help them cope with these negative emotions and attentional distractions, including leaving rooms, blocking individuals from view, seeking out cognitive behavioral therapy and even physically mimicking the observed fidgeting behavior.

Given what we're now learning about misokinesia, this shouldn't be surprising—the impacts can be serious, people need support, and we need to be more aware of this widespread social challenge.

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