



SIKH HUMAN
RIGHTS GROUP

Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Sikh Neurodiversity Network



SIKH
NEURODIVERSITY
NETWORK

Website: shrg.ngo

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Who are the Sikh Neurodiversity Network?

The Sikh Human Rights Group (hereafter referred to as SHRG) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with Special Consultative Status at the United Nations.

Following his successful completion of the Bar Professional Training Course, Mr Carlos Arbuthnott began his role as a Human Rights Officer and Project Coordinator for the SHRG in November 2020.

Amongst various other projects, he established and maintains the SHRGs Sikh Neurodiversity Network project. The aims and objectives of which are as follows:

- To address and raise awareness of the issues that neurodiverse individuals (as well as their families, friends, carers, etc...) face whilst accessing their local community and religious institutions.
- Host Special Educational Needs (hereafter referred to as SEN) engagement events at religious and community institutions, in the United Kingdom, for neurodiverse children and adults and those who are close to or care for them. The primary objective is to listen to the aforementioned parties' concerns and to upskill the concerned organisation on what they could be doing to make their buildings and programmes more welcoming and nurturing environments for neurodiverse children and adults.
- To establish a nationwide support network for families with neurodiverse children and adults.



Who are the Sikh Neurodiversity Network?

- Run practitioner-led SEN training days for those in positions of authority within their religious or community institutions.
- We are hoping to run SEN training days for UK police officers and support staff.
- After talking to the parents and carers who are engaged in our network we are subsequently going to run neurotypical and neurodiverse youth engagement events. The primary objective is to forge genuine and subsisting relationships between neurotypical and neurodiverse youth.
- Finally, we also prepare informative literature and videos for parents and nonprofessional carers on but not limited to the following topics:
 - (i) Advice for parents on how best to safeguard their child or themselves against negative interactions with the police or the criminal justice system in England and Wales.
 - (ii) Advice for police officers and support staff on what behaviours or personal characteristics might be indicators that an individual has a lifelong neurodivergent characteristic, what verbal and other communication techniques seem to work best with those with lifelong neurodivergent characteristics, and a myriad of other best practice suggestions...
 - (iii) We are also producing training programmes, literature and videos to enhance employment opportunities. Both for those with neurodivergent conditions and employers alike.



Neurodiversity & Autism

Neurodiversity is a broad term used to describe the variety of mental abilities, capacities and approaches that can be found within human beings. One form of neurodiversity is called Autism.

Autism is a lifelong neurological characteristic that affects how a person communicates and understands the world around them.

It is estimated that 1 in 100 people have Autism, meaning that there are approximately 700,000 children and adults in the United Kingdom who possess Autism.



What challenges do people with Autism face?

Individuals on the Autism spectrum typically have a hard time with social interaction and communication.

Those with Autism often find it difficult to interpret both verbal and non-verbal communications, like hand gestures, someone's tone of voice, or reading other people's facial expressions during a conversation.

They may also face challenges with social cues, resulting in them taking things literally, not understanding sarcasm, or having difficulty understanding abstract concepts or ideas.

This can result in difficulties recognising or understanding other people's feelings and intentions, as well as expressing their own emotions.

What challenges do people with Autism face?

Due to these difficulties, those with Autism may appear insensitive (when they are not) due:

- To the need to seek out time alone when they are overloaded by other people or by situations.
- Not attempting to seek comfort in other people.
- Needing extra time to process information or to answer questions.
- Repeating what others say.
- 'Shutting down' or having a 'meltdown' when overwhelmed.
- Appearing to behave strangely or in a way that is thought to be socially inappropriate (such as repetitive or restrictive habits). Such behaviours can also be labelled as naughty in children.

This can make it extremely difficult for those with Autism to build relationships and navigate the world around them.



Differences Amongst Autistic People

However, it is important to remember that Autism can range from severe (low functioning Autism) to mild (high functioning Autism).

Therefore, although individuals with Autism may share similarities, no two people with Autism are the same, and their Autism will inevitably affect them in different ways. For example, some individuals with Autism:

- Are unable to speak or have limited speech, whilst others have very good language skills but struggle to understand certain social interactions.
- Some may do very well in school, while others get overwhelmed and can't concentrate.
- Some find it straightforward to find, obtain and retain employment whilst others face many barriers and challenges along the way.
- Some can live independently, whereas others may need full-time care.



Autistic Persons: Wants & Needs

Like all of us, those with Autism want:

- Acceptance and understanding.
- The right support at the right time.
- Inclusion in our local communities and friendship groups.
- Choice and control over their day-to-day lives.
- Good health and emotional wellbeing.

However, it is important to remember that Autism is a spectrum condition and therefore it will inevitably affect people in different ways. Like all people, those with Autism have their unique strengths and weaknesses.



Sikh Neurodiversity Network Ethos

The doctrine of pluralism underpins the Sikh Neurodiversity Network. Pluralism is the recognition and affirmation of diversity, which is seen to permit the peaceful coexistence of different interests, convictions, and lifestyles.

According to GuruSikhi, every life is an expression of Waheguru, in a diversity of forms, abilities, temperaments and characters.

Therefore, in the Sikh Neurodiversity Networks' opinion, neurodiversity is simply another manifestation of mental pluralism in human life.

In other words, not all of us are the same, not all of us behave the same way and not all of us have the same mental approach towards life, education, learning new skills and social interactions. However, society often seeks uniformity and in some instances demands conformity.

However, with so much neurodiversity within our general society, this inevitably results in misunderstandings, tensions, and sometimes sadness when those who want conformity seek to change those who may be perceived as different. This in turn further marginalises those who may not be perceived as neurotypical.

Nevertheless, with a little bit of understanding these tensions can easily be overcome and society, groups and people can function extremely well as supportive and cohesive communities.



Achieving Our Aims and Objectives

The greatest Sewa of those serving the Guru in Gurdwaras is to ensure that the doors of the Guru are always open, welcoming and accommodating for all people so that they feel embraced by the Guru.

Therefore, it is extremely important that no one feels marginalised or excluded simply because they think differently or behave differently or prefer silence or feel uncomfortable with strangers.

In our collective experience, Sikh religious and community leaders have consistently demonstrated vast amounts of empathy and sympathy towards those from diverse backgrounds including neurodiversity.

However, Gurdwaras and other Sikh community institutions often lack the formal infrastructures (systems and policies) necessary to support those with lifelong neurodivergent characteristics such as Autism.

It is also extremely important to note that this issue is prevalent across our global societies and is by no means solely applicable to Gurdwaras and other Sikh community institutions.

Therefore, through the aims and objectives of our project, we are confident in our mission to overcome the difficulties faced by neurodiverse individuals both within Gurdwaras and the Sikh community, as well as within our wider UK communities, to ensure that everyone feels accepted and supported, irrespective of their backgrounds, beliefs and abilities.



Achieving Our Aims and Objectives

To fulfil our aims and objectives, the Sikh Neurodiversity Network is currently working with multiple Gurdwaras across the United Kingdom to make their buildings and programmes more welcoming and nurturing environments for neurodiverse children and adults.

This has included hosting SEN engagement events, parent and carer coffee mornings and after-school drop-in sessions. These events are an opportunity for those with lifelong neurodivergent characteristics of any age and those who care for them to come together to discuss how the relevant institution can best support them and their families.

At these events, we have food and drink, musical instruments, arts and crafts supplies and sensory toys for the children to play with.

This also provides our network volunteers with an opportunity to listen to the experiences of those with lifelong neurodivergent characteristics and those who are close to them. Specifically, regarding the problems and issues that they may have encountered and how these identified problems and issues can be redressed.



Achieving Our Aims and Objectives

We are also seeking to establish a network of experts of all ages within the Gurdwaras who will be charged with increasing Sangat understanding, engagement and support for those with lifelong neurodivergent characteristics.

After their training, these ambassadors will go on to advise the Sangat about the different forms of emotional and related communications that seem to work best with neurodiverse children and adults.



We have also been working with local community leaders and representatives of authority to ensure inclusivity for children and adults with Autism and other lifelong neurodivergent conditions, such as Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha Southall's Friday night youth club.



Further Information

If you are interested in learning more about the Sikh Human Rights Group and the work that we are currently engaging in via the Sikh Neurodiversity Network project, or would like to get involved, you can find us via:

Website: shrg.ngo

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