

Safeguarding Neurodivergent individuals from spiritual abuse

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Introduction

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Spiritual needs are the basic human needs for **meaning, purpose, belonging** and **connection to something greater than oneself**. These needs are deeply individual and can vary widely from person to person.

Spiritual needs are not limited to religion but encompass a broader 'sense of spirituality', which can include a connection to nature, a longing for inner peace, or being able to contribute, feeling like we fit in, and being seen, heard, and valued within community.

What are some common aspects of spiritual needs?

- **Meaning & Purpose:** We all seek meaning and purpose in our lives, hoping to understand our place in the world and the value of our existence.
- **Connection & Belonging:** Spiritual needs might include the urge to build meaningful relationships, fit in, feel a part of a community, family, or social group, and connect with others.
- **Awe & Wonder:** Many individuals seek experiences that go beyond the ordinary and mundane aspects of life, looking for moments of awe and wonder that can provide a sense of the 'divine'.
- **Peace & Balance:** Spiritual needs can include a desire for inner peace, calm, and balance, both within oneself, with the surrounding world and with other people.
- **Hope & Optimism:** Spiritual beliefs often provide a source of hope and optimism, helping individuals cope

with challenges and uncertainties in life.

- **Trauma Resolution:** Some people have spiritual needs related to finding meaning in experiences of loss, grief, or trauma.
- **Creativity & Self Expression:** Engaging in creative activities, or other forms of expression can fulfil spiritual needs by allowing individuals to explore their inner self and connect with a deeper sense of purpose and meaning.
- **Ethical & Moral Values:** Spiritual needs can involve the search for ethical and moral values, such as compassion, empathy, justice, and a 'right way' to live.

Spiritual needs are subjective, individual, and can also evolve over time, in response to circumstances and events. Meeting these needs can significantly contribute to a person's overall well-being and quality of life.

What is safeguarding?

“Safeguarding means protecting a citizen's health, wellbeing and human rights; enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. Safeguarding children, young people and adults is a collective responsibility.”

— <https://www.england.nhs.uk/safeguarding/about/>

What is spiritual abuse?

Spiritual abuse is a form of psychological and emotional harm, often involving misuse of spiritual authority, manipulation, exploitation, coercion, shaming, isolation, and obedience.

Spiritual abuse encompasses different forms of manipulation within religious or spiritual (and sometimes wellness and personal development) contexts. It includes actions like asserting 'divine' or 'absolute' authority, distorting texts or literature to justify abuse, imposing harsh practices, demeaning, or ridiculing individuals for their beliefs, isolating them from support, limiting critical thinking, and demanding blind obedience to leaders or doctrines.

Victims of spiritual abuse can experience significant emotional and psychological trauma, guilt, shame, and confusion. This form of abuse can happen anywhere but especially in religious, spiritual, wellness or personal development settings and may involve leaders, clergy, or community members. Educating about and identifying spiritual abuse is vital for prevention and offering necessary intervention and supported for those impacted.

Why might neurodivergent individuals be more at risk of spiritual abuse?

- **Social Exclusion:** Neurodivergent individuals may face social exclusion due to social processing and communication difference, making them more susceptible to manipulation and coercion by others, including spiritual leaders or authority figures.
- **Challenges in Discernment:** Some neurodivergent individuals may struggle with recognising manipulative or abusive behaviour or teachings due to differences in understanding social cues and intentions, making it harder for them to identify and resist spiritual abuse.
- **Desire for Belonging:** Neurodivergent individuals, like everyone else, have a natural need for belonging and connection. Predators can exploit this need, drawing them into abusive religious, wellness, self-development, or spiritual communities where they might face manipulation.
- **Reliance on Authority Figures:** Neurodivergent individuals might tend to trust authority figures, spiritual or religious leaders implicitly, making them more susceptible those who misuse their position of trust and authority.
- **Difficulty in Advocacy:** Advocating for oneself can be challenging for some neurodivergent individuals, particularly in situations involving complex social dynamics and power imbalances. This difficulty can be exploited by those perpetrating spiritual abuse.
- **Sensory Processing Differences:** Certain spiritual practices, rituals or environments might be overwhelming for neurodivergent individuals with sensory sensitivities, making them more susceptible to coercion or manipulation to cope with, fit in or comply with expectations.
- **Lack of Understanding and Acceptance:** Societal lack of understanding and acceptance of neurodivergence can lead to isolation and vulnerability, making it easier for predators to exploit their need for belonging through religious or spiritual manipulation.

Society must recognise and protect neurodivergent individuals from abuse, including spiritual abuse, through education, awareness, advocacy, and safeguarding. Belonging needs can be fulfilled in supportive, inclusive, and safe environments.

What are the red and green flags when navigating religious, spiritual and wellness communities?

Red flags

Participating in religious, spiritual or wellness communities can be a positive experience, but it's important to be aware of potential red flags that might indicate an unhealthy or manipulative environment. Here are some red flags to watch out for which could be signs of a potentially harmful group or community:

- **Authoritarian Leadership:** Leader demands unquestioning obedience and discourages critical thinking or questions being asked.
- **Isolation from Others:** Community isolates members from friends, family, or the 'outside world', limiting contact with people who might offer different perspectives.
- **Financial Exploitation:** Significant financial demands are made, such as compulsory donations, expensive

memberships or fees for courses or services.

- **Promises Miracles:** Miraculous healing, cures or 'guaranteed' solutions to complex physical or mental health issues are promised.
- **Secrecy and Lack of Transparency:** About the group's beliefs, practices, or finances, which can't be shared externally.
- **Shaming or Guilt-Tripping:** Compliance with what is being taught, rather than encouragement of personal growth, preference, and self-expression.
- **Undue Pressure:** To recruit new members, donate money, or participate in activities when uncomfortable.
- **Lack of Respect for Boundaries:** Regarding physical touch, privacy, or personal beliefs.
- **Dismissal of Mental Health Needs:** Mental health needs are dismissed, diminished, or discouraged and there can be disdain around seeking professional help.
- **Dismissal or Disapproval of Diversity and Difference:** including neurodivergence, gender identity and sexual orientation.
- **Cult-Like Behaviours:** Excessive control over members' lives, discouragement of questioning or exploring alternative world-views, and a sense of us-versus-them mentality.
- **Rapid Personality Changes:** In individuals who have been part of the community.

Always trust your gut instinct and take time to research, critically assess and ask questions. If something feels 'off' or uncomfortable, it's essential to prioritise your well-being and consider stepping away from the community. Additionally, talk to trusted friends, family, or professionals about your concerns as they can provide valuable outside perspectives.

What is predatory behaviour?

Predatory behaviour in communities, whether they are spiritual, wellness, or any other social group, refers to actions that exploit, harm, or manipulate individuals for personal gain, often at the expense of the victims' well-being and safety. Recognising and addressing predatory behaviour is crucial for maintaining a safe and supportive community environment. Here are some signs of predatory behaviour:

- **Grooming:** Predators often use grooming techniques to build trust and emotional connection with potential victims, making it easier to exploit them later.
- **Manipulation and Deception:** Predators may use manipulation, lies, or deceit to exploit vulnerable individuals, often taking advantage of their trust, empathy, or personal struggles.
- **Isolation:** Predators may isolate their victims from friends and family or other communities, making it harder for the victims to seek help or support.
- **Exploitation of Power Imbalances:** Predators may hold positions of power or authority within the community, using their status to manipulate or coerce others.
- **Financial Exploitation:** Predators might exploit others financially, taking money or resources under false pretences or through coercion.
- **Sexual Exploitation:** Sexual predators use coercion, threats, or force to exploit others sexually. This includes non-consensual activities, harassment, or any form of sexual misconduct.
- **Emotional and Psychological Abuse:** Predators may engage in emotional abuse, belittling, gaslighting, or manipulating emotions and thoughts to control victims.

- **Online Exploitation:** In the digital age, online predators may use social media, apps, or other online platforms to exploit vulnerable individuals, often under the guise of forming connections or relationships.
- **Impaired Consent:** Predators might exploit individuals who are not able to give informed consent, such as those under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- **Failure to Respect Boundaries:** Predators often disregard personal boundaries, ignoring the preferences, requests, or autonomy of others.
- **Multiple Victims:** If there are multiple reports or instances of similar predatory behaviour, it could indicate a pattern of exploitation.

It's important for communities to be vigilant, create safe spaces, and foster an environment where individuals feel comfortable reporting predatory behaviour. Whistle blowing and Safeguarding policies need to be in place, alongside procedures for reporting concerns. Open communication, education about predatory tactics, and support for victims are essential in preventing and addressing predatory behaviour within any community.

Green flags

In contrast to red flags, green flags indicate a healthy and supportive group or community. Here are some green flags to look for positive signs to look for:

- **Respect for Individuality and Diversity:** Diversity is celebrated and there is acknowledgment that everyone's life-path and world-view is unique.
- **Encouragement of Critical Thinking:** Members are actively encouraged to question, learn, and grow intellectually, plus be part of other communities and groups. Discussion and diverse viewpoints are welcomed.
- **Transparent Practices:** Clear communication about beliefs, practices, and finances, with an open-door policy and willingness to answer questions indicate honesty and integrity.
- **Emphasis on Personal Growth:** Focus on individual and collective growth, self-awareness, and personal choice and empowerment.
- **Inclusivity:** People from all backgrounds, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, and belief systems, welcomed and a sense of belonging for everyone is cultivated.
- **Promotes Mental and Physical Wellbeing:** Support for seeking professional help for support with mental health needs and physical wellbeing practices are encouraged.
- **Respect for Boundaries:** Members' privacy, physical space, and emotional comfort are respected.
- **Emphasis on Choice and Consent:** Options are given and there are opportunities to say no, pass or opt out.
- **Focus on Service:** Engagement in charitable activities, volunteering, or service to the broader community demonstrate a commitment to making a positive impact beyond their immediate group.
- **Encouragement of Creativity:** Encouragement of creative expression, whether through art, music, writing, or other forms of self-expression.
- **Community Accountability:** Constructive criticism is welcomed, and efforts are made to rectify mistakes, repair, and learn from them.
- **Promotes Empathy and Compassion:** Empathy and compassion are encouraged, both within the community and in interactions with the broader world.

- **Celebrates Achievements:** Achievements and milestones of their members are celebrated, fostering a supportive and uplifting environment.

Remember that a healthy spiritual or wellness community will enhance your well-being, provide support, and encourage your ongoing personal growth and self-discovery. Trust your instincts, do your research, ask questions, take your time and if a community aligns with these green flags, it may be a positive and enriching environment for you.

Background resources and further reading

Dr Steven Hassan BITE Model of Authoritarian Control <https://freedomofmind.com/cult-mind-control/bite-model/>

Lissa Rankin Sacred Medicine: A Doctor's Quest to Unravel the Mysteries of Healing

Dr Devon Price Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing Our Hidden Neurodiversity

Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse

Kay Louise and Dan Aldred Embodied Education: Creating Safe Space for Learning, Facilitating and Sharing

Marianne in Conspiracyland BBC Sounds