



Aditya Ahluwalia, chairman, *Life Positive*, Merry Barua, Aarti Khurana and Dr Mahalakshmi Rajagopal enlighten the audience on the enigma of autism

Under- standing autism

Amrit sat flipping pages of *Life Positive* magazine in the buzzing Gulmohar Hall of the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. Once the discussion started, her attention seldom wavered from the panel sitting in front of her. Amrit Khurana is a 23-year-old artist who happens to be on the autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

"Autism is not a problem, or a disorder. It is just a divergence from what is considered 'normal'. People on the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are not abnormal or mentally retarded; they can very well understand what is being said to them but are unable to respond in a 'normal' way," said Merry Barua, Founder Director of Action for Autism, while speaking at the open-to-all monthly session organised by the Life Positive Foundation.

An autistic person's brain is wired differently than that of a person considered normal. And since it is a spectrum, every autistic person's symptoms and level of severity varies. Difficulty in social communication is the only common thread running across people on the ASD. The purpose of holding a session on autism was to bust common myths associated with this condition, and to find

ways to create awareness, acceptance and sensitivity.

"There is low acceptance of people who are different, because of the fear of the unknown. Ignorance creates fear in our minds against people who are different. This is true of not only people with mental afflictions but also of people belonging to different creeds, religions, sexual orientations, even skin colour," said Merry.

Dr Mahalakshmi Rajagopal, an integrative psychologist and founder of Sahayam Intervention Centre, points out, "There is insufficient sensitisation; either we are over-compassionate towards them or too rude. The first step is to get comfortable with the term 'autistic,'" she said.

Aarti Khurana, Amrit's mother, shared their combined journey with autism. "We found out about her keenness for drawing when she was four. By the time she turned eight, she was expressing herself freely through her sketches," said Aarti, a teacher at the Pathways School, Noida, which also happens to be the platform that gave Amrit a much-needed support to spread her wings. Aarti recounts how her daughter's early years were fraught with challenges for the parents as well as the child. For instance, it took them

two years to teach her to rinse after brushing her teeth.

But what happens when their primary care-givers pass on? "The only solutions, as of now, are to impart them with as many basic life skills as possible, and to form lifelong support groups or care homes for them. There is no support offered by the state in this regard. I still worry about Amrit's future after we are gone," said Aarti, anxiously.

As someone with impaired communication and sensory limitations, Amrit has trodden a long path towards social integration, all thanks to her art. Over the years, she has bloomed from an autistic child into a fairly independent adult with a distinct identity. She has come a long way in this journey - from washing her hands every next second (as the clay would unsettle her), to imprinting her thoughts steadily on a clay-ware and turning it into a piece of art. Some of her works have also travelled to the Beijing International Art of Autism Exhibition held last year.

Dr Rajagopal explained how energy healing therapies like Pranic healing and EFT can positively impact an autistic person's progress, offering a ray of hope for families with an ASD offspring.